On *Savitri*

On the Composition of the Poem  
Letters of 1931 – 1936

You once quoted to me two lines written by yourself:

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

Where do they occur? They produce such a wonderful impression of a slow, majestic widening out into infinity.

The lines I quoted from myself are not in any published poem, but in the unfinished first book of “Savitri, A Legend and a Symbol” which was in intention a sort of symbolic epic of the aim of supramental Yoga! I may send it to you for typing when I have completed it; but in view of my abundant absence of leisure, the completion seems still to lurk in the mists of the far-off future. 15 September 1931

As to *Savitri*, there is a previous draft, the result of the many retouchings of which somebody told you; but in that form it would not have been a magnum opus at all. Besides, it would have been only a legend and not a symbol. I therefore started recasting the whole thing; only the best passages and lines of the old draft will remain, altered so as to fit into the new frame. No, I do not work at the poem once a week; I have other things to do. Once a month perhaps, I look at the new form of the first book and make such changes as inspiration points out to me — so that nothing shall fall below the minimum height which I have fixed for it. 19 September 1931
I humbly pray that you may send me some quotations from your Ilion and, if I may dare name it, Savitri.

It is quite impossible for me to do it just now. If the sky clears a little, I shall see. 28 September 1932

What of the first version of Savitri? Do you consider it surpasses Love and Death, and if so in what respects? Is it less than crying for the moon to ask for a few passages from it? If it is in an untyped or ill-typed condition, I would deem it the seventh heaven of rapture to dedicate as many as possible of my bedridden hours as are needed to produce the neatest typed copy of it imaginable.

What is the first version of Savitri? What I wrote at first was only the first raw material of the Savitri I am evolving now. I made about ten versions of the first cantos and none were satisfactory — it is only now I have arrived at a stable something out of the nebula, — only for the first Canto — but it is still not au point. 4 July 1933

Will you be able after all to give quotations from Savitri? Possibly — but in this world certitudes are few. Anyhow in the effort to quote I have succeeded in putting the first few hundred lines into something like a final form — which is a surprising progress and very gratifying to me — even if it brings no immediate satisfaction to you. 1 August 1933

If the first hundred lines or so of Savitri have attained their final form, it is indeed an occasion for great rejoicing — even for me, as you won’t now be averse to quoting from it. If you like, I shall very carefully type out for you whatever you think does not need further improvement. In any case, please do send me the toes of the Hercules if not his whole foot.

The difficulty is that I had always an instinctive shrinking from
amputation or any other surgical operation of the kind in matters of art as well as the body.

2 August 1933

Dash it all! if you don’t write for your disciples as well as for the Divine that is yourself, whom do you write for? I wonder if you realise how passionately I long to be in contact with the visions and vibrations that are the stuff of your highest poetry. Of course, anything you have written will be most welcome, but to get quotations from Savitri, if not all of it, is the top of my aspiration.

Well, I tried to do it — but the condition of timelessness = not enough time to do anything in which I am and have been for a long time, made it impossible. My box is full of things that ought to be done and are not done and, the box being insufficient, they are trailing all over the table and everywhere else — wherever there is a superficies capable of holding papers. Important correspondents are waiting for months for an answer. If I have a moment’s leisure stern Duty, daughter of the voice of God, (or something of that kind) insists on my dealing with this labour of Sisyphus and if I even think of poetry she becomes as raucous and anathematous (don’t consult Oxford — this is my own) as a revivalist preacher thundering about sin and hell-fire.

Once I promised you that I wouldn’t send you any letter for a week if only you would employ the time thus saved in picking out a few things for me from your Savitri. I stuck to my part of the bargain and you did look at Savitri and even managed to give its first book a form that could at last satisfy you — but I got nothing! . . . You will say that you don’t like sending fragments, but that excuse won’t wash, for you have sent fragments: what about the opening lines of the Ilios which you sent Dilip?

A form that would at last satisfy me? No sir, that is a mistake. Part of the first book only and then also only “almost satisfy”. “Fragments”? yes, but they should be perfected fragments. Perhaps some day I shall be able to throw a few lines at your head
from time to time which you can carefully collect? Oh, I promise nothing — it is only a wild, wandering idea. 5 October 1936

I shall consider it such a great favour if you will give me an instance in English of the inspiration of the pure Overmind — I don’t mean just a line (like Milton’s “Those thoughts . . .” or Wordsworth’s “Voyaging . . .”) which has only a touch of it, but something sustained and plenary. . . . Please don’t disappoint me by saying that, as no English writer has a passage of this kind, you cannot do anything for me.

Good Heavens! how am I to avoid saying that when it is the only possible answer — at least so far as I can remember. Perhaps if I went through English poetry again with my present consciousness I might find more intimations like the line of Wordsworth, but a passage sustained and plenary? These surely are things yet to come — the “future poetry” perhaps, but not the past.

22 October 1936

I think the favour I asked was expressed in perfectly clear language. If no English poet has produced the passage I want, then who has done so in English? God alone knows. But who is capable of doing it? All of us know. Well, then why not be kind enough to grant this favour? If difficult metres could be illustrated on demand, is it impossible to illustrate in a satisfying measure something so natural as the Overmind? I am not asking for hundreds of lines — even eight will more than do.

I have to say Good Heavens again. Because difficult metres can be illustrated on demand, which is a matter of metrical skill, how does it follow that one can produce poetry from any blessed plane on demand? It would be easier to furnish you with hundreds of lines already written out of which you could select for yourself anything overmindish if it exists (which I doubt) rather than produce 8 lines of warranted overmind manufacture to order. All I can do is to give you from time to time some lines from Savitri, on condition you keep them to yourself for
On Savitri

the present. It may be a poor substitute for the Overmental, but if you like the sample, the opening lines, I can give you more hereafter — and occasionally better. E.g.

It was the hour before the Gods awake.
Across the path of the divine Event
The huge unslumbering spirit of Night, alone
In the unlit temple of immensity,
* Lay stretched immobile upon silence’ marge,*
Mute with the unplumbed prevision of her change.
The impassive skies were neutral, waste and still.
Then a faint hesitating glimmer broke.
A slow miraculous gesture dimly came,
The insistent thrill of a transfiguring touch
Persuaded the inert black quietude
And beauty and wonder disturbed the fields of God.
A wandering hand of pale enchanted light
That glowed along the moment’s fading brink,
Fixed with gold panel and opalescent hinge
A gate of dreams ajar on mystery’s verge.

There! Promise fulfilled for a wonder. 24 October 1936

On the Composition of the Poem

Letters of 1936–1937

Sorry to impose on you this labour of Penelope, but new lines — unless the lightning-footed comes through whole-bodied, — generally need three or four revisions before I am reasonably satisfied, so again these scratchings and trans-shipments. I hope the latter won’t baffle you. 10 November 1936

* When shall I see more of your Savitri? It has been six days since you have sent anything.

It is because the Asuras refuse to enter into any harmonious expression; they are too jagged and discordant altogether. There are also the worlds of Mind and the Mind is always a cause of
trouble. But I haven’t got so far yet. As soon as I have traversed this gulf I shall resume.  27 November 1936

Are the “Asuras” ready?

Not yet — the first part of them has got into some kind of form, but the latter half has still gaps to be filled etc. etc. and the whole thing has to be given its final revision.  5 December 1936

As for what awaits you on your return, I mean the typing work — Hell and the Asuras have been dealt with in a sort of way, I am now labouring in the mental worlds and trying to negotiate a passage through the psychic regions — beyond that things are more easy.  22 December 1936

Since I wrote to you I have been once more overwhelmed with correspondence, no time for poetry — so the Mind Worlds are still in a crude embryonic form and the Psychic World not yet begun. The remainder of the vital worlds is finished but only in a way — nothing yet final and a line missing here and there, but that last defect can be filled up ambulando. The revision of the last preceding section is also done, but that too in a way — not many changes, but a good number of lines added, and I shall have to wait and see whether all these will stand or not. But the whole thing has been lengthening out so much that I expect I shall have to rearrange the earlier part of Savitri, turning the Book of Birth into a Book of Beginnings and lumping together in the second a Book of Birth and Quest.  5 January 1937

Any climbing done in Savitri of the “mountains of mind”?

Not quite reached the summit yet — the lower heights are negotiated, but the tops are still too rough, have to be made more practicable.  27 January 1937
Is it possible to proceed with *Savitri*? Today is Sunday, so please try to do something, or at least let me have the third section, revised.

I have not had time to think even of *Savitri* or of poetry at all: so none of these things are ready. 28 February 1937

May I dare to hope that tomorrow you really will send me an instalment of *Savitri*?

Physically, mentally, psychologically and temporally impossible. 29 March 1937

But why is *Savitri* impossible — and in so many ways?

Physically, I have to expend too much energy continuously on other things to have any left for poetry. Psychologically, I have no push to poetry just now even if I had the time, which I haven’t. Poetry needs time and space to be born and neither exists for me now. Temporally, your undeniable decrease in correspondence means only that instead of having no time to finish the correspondence except by a breakneck hurry — and even then not — I have just time to do it. Even so outside letters pile up in a neglected heap. Of course, if I give up the little time I have for concentration, I might by slaving all the day make all other ends meet — but that I have no intention of doing. 30 March 1937

If at present you can’t get any further in *Savitri*, please do me the favour of sending back the third section, finally corrected. Surely you can find some time for that on Sunday. May I send you a big empty envelope on Sunday evening?

There is no surety about it. On Sunday I try to decrease the ever increasing mountain of unanswered outside correspondence. You can always send a big empty envelope, but God knows when you will get it back. 2 April 1937
If you have time please look at the third section of *Savitri*.

I have gone over it once more and made some more changes, but now I have to keep it in a drawer for some time and then look again to see whether new and old are all right. 24 April 1937

* When shall I get the third section of *Savitri*? I’ll be much obliged if you will give it a final luminous look kindling up all that remains a little below the mark. But are you sure anything does remain unkindled?

God knows. I am trying to kindle, but each time I find something that could be more up to the mark; I have some hope however that today’s revision is the penultimate. Let us see. When you get it you will find yourself in an awful tangle and I can only hope you will see your way through the forest. 9 May 1937

* When will you continue *Savitri?* Your bucking-up seems to take a long time.

No time for the buck to appear — I mean inner, not outer time. 25 May 1937

* Don’t you think it’s a pretty long time since you touched *Savitri* last? You wrote to me once that if those psychic and mental worlds could be captured, the rest would be smooth sailing. Can’t you put yourself in the right mood and have done with the obstacle for good and all?

It is not a question of mood at all but inability to take up any poetry till certain preoccupying things have been done. 4 July 1937

On the Composition of the Poem
Letters of 1938

Is it not possible to send me, as you used to, new instalments
of Savitri as they get written? I'll send you the next day a typed copy to revise. Why not file this sheet?

Nothing quite ready yet. If “Mind” gets ready before you go, I shall send it. 12 February 1938

I have been kept too occupied with other things to make much headway with the poem — except that I have spoiled your beautiful neat copy of the “Worlds” under the oestrus of the restless urge for more and more perfection; but we are here for World-improvement, so I hope that is excusable. 12 March 1938

I have not been able to make any headway with Savitri — owing to lack of time and also to an appalled perception of the disgraceful imperfection of all the sections after the first two. But I have tackled them again as I think I wrote to you and have pulled up the third section to a higher consistency of level; the “Worlds” have fallen into a state of manuscript chaos, corrections upon corrections, additions upon additions, rearrangements on rearrangements out of which perhaps some cosmic beauty will emerge! 9 October 1938

I have done an enormous amount of work with Savitri. The third section has been recast if not rewritten — so as to give it a more consistent epic swing and amplitude and elevation of level. The fourth section, the Worlds, is undergoing transformation. The “Life” part is in a way finished, though I shall have to go over the ground perhaps some five or six times more to ensure perfection of detail. I am now starting a recasting of the “Mind” part of which I had only made a sort of basic rough draft. I hope that this time the work will stand as more final and definitive. 1938
Can’t you send some of your poems? You owe me one, you know.

What poems? I am not writing any, except occasionally my long epic, *Savitri*, which cannot see the light of day in an embryonic state.1

15 May 1938

On the Composition of the Poem
Letters of 1945–1948

Don’t wait for any poems for your Annual, I think the Pondicherry poets will have to march without a captain, unless you take the lead. I have been hunting among a number of poems which I perpetrated at intervals, mostly sonnets, but I am altogether dissatisfied with the inspiration which led me to perpetrate them, none of them is in my present opinion good enough to publish, at any rate in their present form, and I am too busy to recast, especially as poetically I am very much taken up with *Savitri* which is attaining a giant stature, she has grown immensely since you last saw the baby. I am besides revising and revising without end so as to let nothing pass which is not up to the mark. And I have much else to do. 18 March 1945

Your inference that ten books have been completed is unfortunately not correct. What has been completed, in a general way, with a sufficient finality of the whole form but subject to final changes in detail, is the first three books of the second part, *The Book of Birth and Quest, The Book of Love, The Book of Fate*; also in the same way, two books of the third part, *The Book of Eternal Light and The Book of the Double Twilight*. But a drastic recasting of the last two books still remains to be done and only a part of the eleventh has been subjected to that process. Worse still, the original Book of Death has not only to be recast but has to be split into two, *The Book of Yoga and The Book of Death*,

1 This letter was written to a different correspondent from the one who was the recipient of all the other letters in this section. — Ed.
On Savitri

and the first of these exists only in its first canto and a confused multi-versioned draft of the second, while all the rest, and that means many long cantos, has still to be written quite new, no draft of them yet exists. 22 April 1947

The first reason [for not writing] is my inability to write with my own hand, owing to the failure of the sight and other temporary reasons; the sight is improving but the improvement is not so rapid as to make reading and writing likely in the immediate future. Even Savitri is going slow, confined mainly to revision of what has already been written, and I am as yet unable to take up the completion of Parts II and III which are not yet finally revised and for which a considerable amount of new matter has to be written. 10 July 1948

I am afraid I am too much preoccupied with the constant clashes with the world and the devil to write anything at length even about your new poems: a few lines must suffice. In fact as I had to explain the other day to Dilip, my only other regular correspondent, my push to write letters or to new literary production has dwindled almost to zero — this apart from Savitri and even Savitri has very much slowed down and I am only making the last revisions of the First Part already completed; the other two parts are just now in cold storage. 1948

On the Inspiration and Writing of the Poem

I have gone through your article. I have struck out “like that of Savitri” and changed “will be” into “would be”. Don’t make prophecies. And how do you know that Savitri is or is going to be supramental poetry? It is not, in fact — it is only an attempt to render into poetry a symbol of things occult and spiritual. 1933
You wrote to me the other day that *Savitri* is not supramental poetry, but I suppose there are lines in it which can be considered supramental. And why have you refrained from making it all supramental? . . . As everything in the universe, including human language, is derived at the highest from the Overmind, I wonder if it will not be necessary to introduce some radical change in language to express supramental idea and rhythm. Can supramental speech be understood or appreciated by those who haven’t any glimmering of the influence of its source? Of course if it has a special symbology, one who is not supramentalised will find it very hard to grasp it, until explained, but will even its rhythm be incomprehensible?

All these are questions for the Supermind to settle when it has got down and settled into power. 2 August 1933

We have been wondering why you should have to write and rewrite your poetry — for instance *Savitri* — ten or twelve times.

That is very simple. I used *Savitri* as a means of ascension. I began with it on a certain mental level, each time I could reach a higher level I rewrote from that level. Moreover I was particular — if part seemed to me to come from any lower level, I was not satisfied to leave it because it was good poetry. All had to be as far as possible of the same mint. In fact, *Savitri* has not been regarded by me as a poem to be written and finished, but as a field of experimentation to see how far poetry could be written from one’s own Yogic consciousness and how that could be made creative. I did not rewrite *Rose of God* or the Sonnets except for two or three verbal alterations made at the moment. 29 March 1936

In *Savitri* there is no attempt — as in the poetry of us lesser fry — to make things specially striking or strange or new, but a simple largeness of gesture which most naturally makes one surprising revelation after another of beauty and power.

Well, it is the difference of receiving from above and living in the
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ambience of the Above — whatever comes receives the breadth of largeness which belongs to that plane.  
26 October 1936

I don’t know yet whether every line [of a passage] is final, but I send it all the same.  
29 October 1936

Why shouldn’t every line be final? . . . Do you ever have to pay attention to technique? That is, when revising do you think whether you have varied the pauses and the rhythm-modulations and the sentence-lengths? I suppose that if the expression satisfies you it automatically means a perfection of technique also, without your having to keep a special eye on it.

Every line was not sure of being final because three or four were newly written in the rebuilding, and I can never be certain of newly written stuff (I mean in this Savitri) until I have looked at it again after an interval. Apart from the quality of new lines, there is the combination with others in the whole which I have modified more than anything else in my past revisions . . .

I don’t think about the technique because thinking is no longer in my line. But I see and feel first when the lines are coming through and afterwards in revision of the work. I don’t bother about details while writing, because that would only hamper the inspiration. I let it come through without interference; only pausing if there is an obvious inadequacy felt, in which case I conclude that it is a wrong inspiration or inferior level that has cut across the communication. If the inspiration is the right one, then I have not to bother about the technique then or afterwards, for there comes through the perfect line with the perfect rhythm inextricably intertwined or rather fused into an inseparable and single unity; if there is anything wrong with the expression that carries with it an imperfection in the rhythm, if there is a flaw in the rhythm, the expression also does not carry its full weight, is not absolutely inevitable. If on the other hand the inspiration is not throughout the right one, then there is an after examination and recasting of part or whole. The things
I lay most stress on then are whether each line in itself is the inevitable thing not only as a whole but in each word; whether there is the right distribution of sentence lengths (an immensely important thing in this kind of blank verse); whether the lines are in their right place, for all the lines may be perfect, but they may not combine perfectly together — bridges may be needed, alterations of position so as to create the right development and perspective etc., etc. Pauses hardly exist in this kind of blank verse; variations of rhythm as between the lines, of caesura, of the distribution of long and short, clipped and open syllables, manifold combinations of vowel and consonant sounds, alliteration, assonances, etc., distribution into one line, two line, three or four or five line, many line sentences, care to make each line tell by itself in its own mass and force and at the same time form a harmonious whole sentence — these are the important things. But all that is usually taken care of by the inspiration itself, for as I know and have the habit of the technique, the inspiration provides what I want according to standing orders. If there is a defect I appeal to headquarters till a proper version comes along or the defect is removed by a word or phrase substitute that flashes — with the necessary sound and sense. These things are not done by thinking or seeking for the right thing — the two agents are sight and call. Also feeling — the solar plexus has to be satisfied and, until it is, revision after revision has to continue. I may add that the technique does not go by any set mental rule — for the object is not perfect technical elegance according to precept, but sound-significance filling out word-significance. If that can be done by breaking rules, well, so much the worse for the rule.

30 October 1936

The poem was originally written from a lower level, a mixture perhaps of the inner mind, psychic, poetic intelligence, sublimised vital, afterwards with the Higher Mind, often illumined and intuitivised, intervening. Most of the stuff of the first book is new or else the old so altered as to be no more what it was; the best of the old has sometimes been kept almost
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intact because it had already the higher inspiration. Moreover there have been made successive revisions each trying to lift the general level higher and higher towards a possible Overmind poetry. As it now stands there is a general Overmind influence, I believe, sometimes coming fully through, sometimes colouring the poetry of the other higher planes fused together, sometimes lifting any one of these higher planes to its highest or the psychic, poetic intelligence or vital towards them. 3 November 1936

It will take you exactly eight minutes to read the third section and two more minutes are enough for you to decide in the matter of alternatives.

You have queer ideas about poetic time! Sometimes it takes me months to get the right form of a line. 19 November 1936

As far as I know, you don’t need to recast anything in the third section, except an occasional word which is too closely repeated. As for the rest you have only to decide in a few places which of the two alternatives already found by you is the right one — a problem which your solar plexus can polish off in a jiffy.

Allow me to point out that whatever I did in a jiffy would not be any more than provisionally final. It is not a question of making a few changes in individual lines, that is a very minor problem; the real finality only comes when all is felt as a perfect whole, no line jarring with or falling away from the level of the whole though some may rise above it and also all the parts in their proper place making the right harmony. It is an inner feeling that has to decide that and my inner feeling is not as satisfied in that respect with parts of the third section as it is with the first two. Unfortunately the mind can’t arrange these things, one has to wait till the absolutely right thing comes in a sort of receptive self-opening and calling-down condition. Hence the months. 20 November 1936
On the Characters of the Poem

What a flight! — nobody can describe so marvellously our Mother. Isn’t Savitri she and she only?

Savitri is represented in the poem as an incarnation of the Divine Mother. 3 November 1936

If Savitri is represented as an incarnation of the Divine Mother, Aswapati must be meant to represent Theon.

What has Theon to do with it?

If Aswapati is he, I’ll learn about his role from the poem — but couldn’t you say something about him in direct reference to Mother and yourself?

This incarnation is supposed to have taken place in far past times when the whole thing had to be opened, so as to “hew the ways of Immortality”. Theon and the circumstances of this life have nothing to do with it. 10 November 1936

On the Verse and Structure of the Poem

Please send me some passages from Savitri together with my selections from the blank-verse poetry of Abercrombie that I sent you in order to help me distinguish at a glance “Hyperion from a satyr”.

Savitri is built on another plan altogether. It is blank verse without enjambements (except rarely) — each line a thing by itself and arranged in paragraphs of one, two, three, four, five lines (rarely a longer series), in an attempt to catch something of the Upanishadic and Kalidasian movements, so far as that is a possibility in English. You can’t take that as a model — it is too difficult a rhythm-sculpture to be a model. I shall myself know whether it is a success or not, only when I have finished 2 or 3 books. But where is the time now for such a work? When the
supramental has finished coming down — then perhaps.  
25 December 1932

This First Book is divided into sections and the larger sections into subsections; you might wait till one section is with you before you type. E.g. the first section is “the last Dawn”, i.e. the dawn of the day of Satyavan’s death (but it must be remembered that everything is symbolic or significant in the poem, so this dawn also,) the next is the Issue — both of these are short. Then comes a huge section of the Yoga of the Lord of the Horse (Aswapati, father of Savitri) relating how came about the birth of Savitri and its significance — finally the birth and childhood of Savitri.  
25 October 1936

Savitri was originally written many years ago before the Mother came as a narrative poem in two parts, Part I Earth and Part II Beyond (these two parts are still extant in the scheme) each of four books — or rather Part II consisted of 3 books and an epilogue. Twelve books to an epic is a classical superstition, but this new Savitri may extend to ten books — if much is added in the final revision it may be even twelve. The first book has been lengthening and lengthening out till it must be over 2000 lines, but I shall break up the original first four into five, I think — in fact I have already started doing so. These first five will be, as I conceive them now, the Book of Birth, the Book of Quest, the Book of Love, the Book of Fate, the Book of Death. As for the second Part, I have not touched it yet. There was no climbing of planes there in the first version — rather Savitri moves through the worlds of Night, of Twilight, of Day — all of course in a spiritual sense — and ended by calling down the power of the Highest Worlds of Sachchidananda. I had no idea of what the supramental World could be like at that time, so it could not enter into the scheme. As for expressing the supramental inspiration, that is a matter of the future.  
31 October 1936
Here is the beginning of the second section which is entitled “The Issue” — that is of course the issue between Savitri and Fate or rather between the incarnate Light, the Sun Goddess, and Death the Creator and Devourer of this world with his Law of darkness, limitation, ignorance.

31 October 1936

I was trying doublets again because in the third Section, first subsection (Yoga of the Lord of the Horse — Ascent to Godhead) there is a long passage describing Aswapati’s progress through the subtle physical, vital and mental worlds towards the Overmind which is far yet from being either complete or au point. It was only a brief interlude of a few lines formerly, but I had been lengthening it out afterwards with much difficulty in getting it right. I have now got the subtle physical and lower vital worlds into some kind of order, but the big dark Asuric vital and the vital heavens are still roaming about in a state of half solid incompleteness. Still I suppose as I am taking my vacation (from correspondence), I may have time to put all that right.

1 November 1936

Don’t you consider it rather necessary that some interpretative hint ought to be given of the term “Horse” in this section? Otherwise the section title [“The Yoga of the Lord of the Horse”] may mystify somewhat.

No. The name is Aswapati, Lord of the Horse, and it will be explained elsewhere. I don’t want to be allegorical, only mystic and allusive.

10 November 1936

I suppose the name of the section finished yesterday is “Aswapati, Lord of the Horse” and not, as originally conceived, “The Yoga of the Lord of the Horse”?

No. The proposed title would have no connection with the text except the name of the man which is not relevant as yet. “The Yoga of the Lord of the Horse” covers a number of sections
making the greater part of the first book, — it is not the title of
one section only. This title is essential to the plan of the work.
The subtitle “Ascent to Godhead” covers the two sections, the
one just finished and the one now begun. 16 November 1936

I am not quite sure of the sections (titles) yet — the fourth section
is obviously a continuation of the Ascent to Godhead — it is the
realisation of Godhead with which it will ascend — after that
the Unknowable Brahman, then the Purushottama and finally
the Mother. 19 May 1937

You will see when you get the full typescript [of the first three
books] that Savitri has grown to an enormous length so that
it is no longer quite the same thing as the poem you saw then.
There are now three books in the first part. The first, the Book of
Beginnings, comprises five cantos which cover the same ground
as what you typed but contains also much more that is new. The
small passage about Aswapati and the other worlds has been
replaced by a new book, the Book of the Traveller of the Worlds,
in fourteen cantos with many thousand lines. There is also a
third sufficiently long book, the Book of the Divine Mother. In
the new plan of the poem there is a second part consisting of
five books: two of these, the Book of Birth and Quest and the
Book of Love, have been completed and another, the Book of
Fate, is almost complete. Two others, the Book of Yoga and the
Book of Death, have still to be written, though a part needs only
a thorough recasting. Finally, there is the third part consisting
of four books, the Book of Eternal Night, the Book of the Dual
Twilight, the Book of Everlasting Day and the Return to Earth,
which have to be entirely recast and the third of them largely
rewritten. So it will be a long time before Savitri is complete.

In the new form it will be a sort of poetic philosophy of the
Spirit and of Life much profounder in its substance and vaster
in its scope than was intended in the original poem. I am trying
of course to keep it at a very high level of inspiration, but in so
large a plan covering most subjects of philosophical thought and vision and many aspects of spiritual experience there is bound to be much variation of tone: but that is, I think, necessary for the richness and completeness of the treatment.

Comments on Specific Lines
and Passages of the Poem

As if solicited in an alien world
With timid and hazardous instinctive grace,
Orphaned and driven out to seek a home,
An errant marvel with no place to live, \(^2\)

I see no sufficient reason to alter the passage; certainly, I could not alter the line beginning “Orphaned . . .”; it is indispensable to the total idea and its omission would leave an unfilled gap. If I may not expect a complete alertness from the reader, — but how without it can he grasp the subtleties of a mystical and symbolic poem? — he surely ought to be alert enough when he reads the second line to see that it is somebody who is soliciting with a timid grace and it can’t be somebody who is being gracefully solicited; also the line “Orphaned etc.” ought to suggest to him at once that it is some orphan who is soliciting and not the other way round: the delusion of the past participle passive ought to be dissipated long before he reaches the subject of the verb in the fourth line. The obscurity throughout, if there is any, is in the mind of the hasty reader and not in the grammatical construction of the passage.

Then a faint hesitating glimmer broke.
A slow miraculous gesture dimly came,

\(^2\) Sri Aurobindo, Savitri: A Legend and a Symbol, volume 33 of THE COMPLETE WORKS OF SRI AUROBINDO, p. 3. Subsequent page references are given in square brackets after the line or lines quoted. The passages Sri Aurobindo was asked to comment on were often revised later. Here the passages are reproduced from a version written at or near the time of Sri Aurobindo’s comment. Where this version differs significantly from the final version, the page reference is preceded by “cf.” (compare). The letters are arranged according to the order of the lines in the final text of Savitri. — Ed.
The insistent thrill of a transfiguring touch  
Persuaded the inert black quietude  
And beauty and wonder disturbed the fields of God.  
A wandering hand of pale enchanted light  
That glowed along the moment’s fading brink,  
Fixed with gold panel and opalescent hinge  
A gate of dreams ajar on mystery’s verge. [cf. p. 3]

Can’t see the validity of any prohibition of double adjectives in abundance. If a slow rich wealth-burdened movement is the right thing, as it certainly is here in my judgment, the necessary means have to be used to bring it about — and the double adjective is admirably suited for the purpose. 25 October 1936

Now as to the double adjectives — well, man alive, your proposed emendations are an admirable exposition of the art of bringing a line down the steps till my poor “slow miraculous” above-mind line meant to give or begin the concrete portrayal of an act of some hidden Godhead finally becomes a mere metaphor thrown out from its more facile mint by a brilliantly imaginative poetic intelligence. First of all, you shift my “dimly” out of the way and transfer it to something to which it does not inwardly belong, make it an epithet of the gesture or an adverb qualifying its epithet instead of something that qualifies the atmosphere in which the act of the godhead takes place. That is a preliminary havoc which destroys what is very important to the action, its atmosphere. I never intended the gesture to be dim, it is a luminous gesture, but forcing its way through the black quietude it comes dimly. Then again the bald phrase “a gesture came” without anything to psychicise it becomes simply something that “happened”, “came” being a poetic equivalent for “happened” instead of the expression of the slow coming of the gesture. The words “slow” and “dimly” assure this sense of motion and this concreteness to the word’s sense here. Remove one or both whether entirely or elsewhere and you ruin the vision and change altogether its character. That is at least what happens wholly in
your penultimate version and as for the last the “came” gets another meaning and one feels that somebody very slowly decided to let out the gesture from himself and it was quite a miracle that it came out at all! “Dimly miraculous” means what precisely or what “miraculously dim” — it was miraculous that it managed to be so dim or there was something vaguely miraculous about it after all? No doubt they try to mean something else — but these interpretations lurk in their way and trip them over. The only thing that can stand is the first version which is no doubt fine poetry, but the trouble is that it does not give the effect I wanted to give, the effect which is necessary for the dawn’s inner significance. Moreover what becomes of the slow lingering rhythm of my line which is absolutely indispensable?

Do not forget that the Savitri is an experiment in mystic poetry, spiritual poetry cast into a symbolic figure. Done on this scale, it is really a new attempt and cannot be hampered by old ideas of technique except when they are assimilable. Least of all by standards proper to a mere intellectual and abstract poetry which makes “reason and taste” the supreme arbiters, aims at a harmonised poetic-intellectual balanced expression of the sense, elegance in language, a sober and subtle use of imaginative decoration, a restrained emotive element etc. The attempt at mystic spiritual poetry of the kind I am at demands above all a spiritual objectivity, an intense psycho-physical concreteness. I do not know what you mean exactly here by “obvious” and “subtle”. According to certain canons epithets should be used sparingly, free use of them is rhetorical, an “obvious” device, a crowding of images is bad taste, there should be a subtlety of art not displayed but severely concealed — summa ars est celare artem. Very good for a certain standard of poetry, not so good or not good at all for others. Shakespeare kicks over these traces at every step, Aeschylus freely and frequently, Milton whenever he chooses. Such lines as

In hideous ruin and combustion down
Wilt thou upon the high and giddy mast
Seal up the ship-boy’s eyes, and rock his brains
In cradle of the rude imperious surge

(note two double adjectives in three lines in the last) — are not subtle or restrained, or careful to conceal their elements of powerful technique, they show rather a vivid richness or vehemence, forcing language to its utmost power of expression. That has to be done still more in this kind of mystic poetry. I cannot bring out the spiritual objectivity if I have to be miserly about epithets, images, or deny myself the use of all available resources of sound significance.

The double epithets are indispensable here and in the exact order in which they are arranged by me. You say the rich burdened movement can be secured by other means, but a rich burdened movement of any kind is not my primary object, it is desirable only because it is needed to express the spirit of the action here; and the double epithets are wanted because they are the best, not only one way of securing it. The “gesture” must be “slow miraculous” — if it is merely miraculous or merely slow that does not create a picture of the thing as it is, but of something quite abstract and ordinary or concrete but ordinary — it is the combination that renders the exact nature of the mystic movement, with the “dimly came” supporting it, so that “gesture” is not here a metaphor, but a thing actually done. Equally a pale light or an enchanted light may be very pretty, but it is only the combination that renders the luminosity which is that of the hand acting tentatively in the darkness. That darkness itself is described as a quietude, which gives it a subjective spiritual character and brings out the thing symbolised, but the double epithet “inert black” gives it the needed concreteness so that the quietude ceases to be something abstract and becomes something concrete, objective, but still spiritually subjective. I might go on, but that is enough. Every word must be the right word, with the right atmosphere, the right relation to all the other words, just as every sound in its place and the whole sound together must bring out the imponderable significance.
which is beyond verbal expression. One can’t chop and change about on the principle that it is sufficient if the same mental sense or part of it is given with some poetical beauty or power. One can only change if the change brings out more perfectly the thing behind that is seeking for expression — brings out in full objectivity and also in the full mystic sense. If I can do that, well, other considerations have to take a back seat or seek their satisfaction elsewhere. 31 October 1936

A lonely splendour from the invisible goal
Almost was flung on the opaque Inane. [p. 4]

No word will do except “invisible”. I don’t think there are too many “l’s” — in fact such multiplications of a vowel or consonant assonance or several together as well as syllabic assonances in a single line or occasionally between line-endings (e.g. face — fate in the next instalment) are an accepted feature of the technique in Savitri. Purposeful repetitions also, or those which serve as echoes or key notes in the theme. 27 October 1936

I notice that you have changed “twixt” to “between” when substituting “link” for “step” in the line, “Air was a vibrant link between earth and heaven.” [p. 4] Is it merely because several lines earlier “twixt” has been used?

No, it is because “link twixt”, two heavy syllables (heavy because ending in two consonants) with the same vowel, makes an awkward combination which can only be saved by good management of the whole line — but here the line was not written to suit such a combination, so it won’t do. 28 October 1936

Here where our half-lit ignorance skirts the guls
On the dumb bosom of the ambiguous earth,
Here where one knows not even the step in front
And Truth has her throne on the shadowy back of doubt,
An anguished and precarious field of toil
Outspread beneath some large indifferent gaze,
Our prostrate soil bore the awakening Light.
Here too the glamour and prophetic flame
Touched for an instant trivial daylong shapes,
Then the divine afflatus, lost, withdrew,
Dimmed, fading slowly from the mortal’s range.
A sacred yearning lingered in its trace,
The worship of a Presence and a Power
Too perfect to be held by death-bound hearts,
The prescience of a marvellous birth to come.
Affranchised from its respite of fatigue,
Once more the rumour of the speed of Life
Renewed the cycles of the blinded quest.
All sprang to their unvarying daily acts;
The thousand peoples of the soil and tree
Obeyed the unforeseeing instant's urge,
And, leader here with his uncertain mind,
Alone who seeks the future's covered face,
Man lifted up the burden of his fate. [cf. pp. 5 – 6]

A deep and large suggestive tone is here, with every word
doing perfect expressive duty; but it would be interesting to
know if there is some shifting of the plane — if the poetry is
nearer the Higher Mind than in the preceding passages where
a more direct luminosity seemed to be at work.

The former pitch continues, as far as I can see, up to “Light”,
then it begins to come down to an intuitivised higher mind in
order to suit the change of the subject — but it is only occa-
sionally that it is pure higher mind — a mixture of the intuitive
or illumined is usually there except when some truth has to be
stated to the philosophic intelligence in as precise a manner as
possible. 28 October 1936

*[As typed] Its passive flower of love and doom it gave.
[cf. p. 7]*
Good Heavens! how did Gandhi come in there? Passion-flower, sir — passion, not passive. 30 October 1936

* 

Into how many feet do you scan the line

Draped in the leaves’ emerald vivid monotone [cf. p. 13]? Five, the first being taken as a dactyl. A little gambol like that must be occasionally allowed in an otherwise correct metrical performance. 2 November 1936

* 

The Gods above and Nature sole below

Were the spectators of that mighty strife. [p. 13]

The last line drops only in appearance, I think, towards Miltonism.

Miltonism? Surely not. The Miltonic has a statelier more spreading rhythm and a less direct more loftily arranged language. Miltonically I should have written

Only the Sons of Heaven and that executive She

Watched the arbitrament of the high dispute. 1 November 1936

* 

Is the r-effect in

Never a rarer creature bore his shaft [p. 14]

deliberate?

Yes, like Shakespeare’s

. . . rock his brains

In cradle of the rude imperious surge.

Mine has only three sonant r’s, the others being inaudible — Shakespeare pours himself 5 in a close space. 2 November 1936

*
All in her pointed to a nobler kind. [p. 14]

It is a “connecting” line which prepares for what follows. It is sometimes good technique, as I think, to intersperse lines like that (provided they don’t fall below standard) so as to give the intellect the foothold of a clear unadorned statement of the gist of what is coming, before taking a higher flight. This is of course a technique for long poems and long descriptions, not for shorter things or lyrical writing. 2 November 1936

I refuse entirely to admit that that [“All in her pointed to a nobler kind”] is poor poetry. It is not only just the line that is needed to introduce what follows but it is very good poetry with the strength and pointed directness, not intellectualised like Pope’s, but intuitive, which we often find in the Elizabethans, for instance in Marlowe supporting adequately and often more than adequately his “mighty lines”. But the image must be understood, as it was intended, in its concrete sense and not as a vague rhetorical phrase substituted for a plainer wording, — it shows Savitri as the forerunner or first creator of a new race. All poets have lines which are bare and direct statements and meant to be that in order to carry their full force; but to what category their simplicity belongs or whether a line is only passable or more than that depends on various circumstances. Shakespeare’s

To be or not to be, that is the question

introduces powerfully one of the most famous of all soliloquies and it comes in with a great dramatic force, but in itself it is a bare statement and some might say that it would not be otherwise written in prose and is only saved by the metrical rhythm. The same might be said of the well-known passage in Keats which I have already quoted in this connection:

“Beauty is truth, truth beauty” — that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.

The same might be said of Milton’s famous line,
Fallen Cherub! to be weak is miserable.

But obviously in all these lines there is not only a concentrated force, power or greatness of the thought, but also a concentration of intense poetic feeling which makes any criticism impossible. Then take Milton’s lines,

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Were it not better done as others use,} \\
\text{To sport with Amaryllis in the shade,} \\
\text{Or with the tangles of Neaera’s hair?}
\end{align*}
\]

It might be said that the first line has nothing to distinguish it and is merely passable or only saved by the charm of what follows; but there is a beauty of rhythm and a *bhāva* or feeling brought in by the rhythm which makes the line beautiful in itself and not merely passable. If there is not some saving grace like that then the danger of laxity may become possible. I do not think there is much in *Savitri* which is of that kind. But I can perfectly understand your anxiety that all should be lifted to or towards at least the minimum overhead level or so near as to be touched by its influence or at the very least a good substitute for it. I do not know whether that is always possible in so long a poem as *Savitri* dealing with so many various heights and degrees and so much varying substance of thought and feeling and descriptive matter and narrative. But that has been my general aim throughout and it is the reason why I have made so many successive drafts and continual alterations till I felt that I had got the thing intended by the higher inspiration in every line and passage. It is also why I keep myself open to every suggestion from a sympathetic and understanding quarter and weigh it well, rejecting only after due consideration and accepting when I see it to be well-founded. But for that the critic must be one who has seen and felt what is in the thing written, not like your friend Mendonça, one who has not seen anything and understood only the word surface and not even always that; he must be open to this kind of poetry, able to see the spiritual vision it conveys, capable too of feeling the overhead touch when it comes,—the fit reader. 22 April 1947
Are not these lines a snatch of the sheer Overmind?

All in her pointed to a nobler kind.
Near to earth’s wideness, intimate with heaven,
Exalted and swift her young large-visioned spirit,
Winging through worlds of splendour and of calm,
O’erflew the ways of Thought to unborn things.
Ardent was her self-poised unstumbling will,
Her mind, a sea of white sincerity,
Passionate in flow, had not one turbid wave.
As in a mystic and dynamic dance
A priestess of immaculate ecstasies,
Inspired and ruled from Truth’s revealing vault,
Moves in some prophet cavern of the Gods,
A heart of silence in the hands of joy
Inhabited with rich creative beats
A body like a parable of dawn
That seemed a niche for veiled divinity
Or golden temple-door to things beyond.
Immortal rhythms swayed her time-born steps;
Her look, her smile awoke celestial sense
In this earth-stuff and their intense delight
Poured a supernal beauty on men’s lives.
The great unsatisfied godhead here could dwell.
Vacant of the dwarf self’s imprisoned air,
Her mood could harbour his sublimer breath
Spiritual that can make all things divine:
For even her gulfs were secrecies of light.
At once she was the stillness and the Word,
An ocean of untrembling virgin fire,
A continent of self-diffusing peace.
In her he met a vastness like his own;
His warm high subtle ether he refound
And moved in her as in his natural home. [cf. pp. 14–16]

This passage is, I believe, what I might call the Overmind Intuition at work expressing itself in something like its own rhythm and language. It is difficult to say about one’s own poetry, but I think I have succeeded here and in some passages later on
in catching that very difficult note; in separate lines or briefer passages (i.e. a few lines at a time) I think it comes in not unoften.

3 November 1936

I shall answer in this letter only about the passage in the description of Savitri which has been omitted. The simplest thing would be to leave the description itself and the article as they are. I am unable to accept the alterations you suggest because they are romantically decorative and do not convey any impression of directness and reality which is necessary in this style of writing. A “sapphire sky” is too obvious and common and has no significance in connection with the word “magnanimity” or its idea and “boundless” is somewhat meaningless and inapt when applied to sky. The same objections apply to both “opulence” and “amplitude”; but apart from that they have only a rhetorical value and are not the right word for what I want to say. Your “life’s wounded wings of dream” and “the wounded wings of life” have also a very pronounced note of romanticism and do not agree with the strong reality of things stressed everywhere in this passage. In the poem I dwell often upon the idea of life as a dream, but here it would bring in a false note. It does not seem to me that magnanimity and greatness are the same thing or that this can be called a repetition. I myself see no objection to “heaven” and “haven”; it is not as if they were in successive lines; they are divided by two lines and it is surely an excessively meticulous ear that can take their similarity of sound at this distance as an offence. Most of your other objections hang upon your overscrupulous law against repetitions. I shall speak about that in a later letter; at present I can only say that I consider that this law has no value in the technique of a mystic poem of this

3 This letter was written in response to suggestions made by K. D. Sethna (Amal Kiran) before he reproduced certain passages from Savitri in his article “Sri Aurobindo—A New Age of Mystic Poetry” (Sri Aurobindo Circle 2 [1946]). In that article Sethna omitted a number of lines from passages he quoted from the poem. The lines under discussion here are those that begin “Near to earth’s wideness, intimate with heaven” (pp. 14–16).—Ed.
kind and that repetition of a certain kind can be even part of
the technique; for instance, I see no objection to “sea” being re-
peated in a different context in the same passage or to the image
of the ocean being resorted to in a third connection. I cannot see
that the power and force or inevitability of these lines is at all
diminished in their own context by their relative proximity or
that that proximity makes each less inevitable in its place.

Then about the image about the bird and the bosom, I un-
derstand what you mean, but it rests upon the idea that the
whole passage must be kept at the same transcendental level.
It is true that all the rest gives the transcendental values in the
composition of Savitri's being, while here there is a departure
to show how this transcendental greatness contacts the psychic
demand of human nature in its weakness and responds to it and
acts upon it. That was the purpose of the new passage and it is
difficult to accomplish it without bringing in a normal psychic
instead of a transcendental tone. The image of the bird and the
bosom is obviously not new and original, it images a common
demand of the human heart and does it by employing a physical
and emotional figure so as to give it a vivid directness in its own
kind. This passage was introduced because it brought in some-
thing in Savitri's relation with the human world which seemed to
me a necessary part of a complete psychological description of
her. If it had to be altered, — which would be only if the descent
to the psychic level really spoils the consistent integrality of the
description and lowers the height of the poetry, — I would have
to find something equal and better, and just now I do not find
any such satisfying alteration.

As for the line about the strength and silence of the gods,
that has a similar motive of completeness. The line about the
“stillness” and the “word” gives us the transcendental element
in Savitri, — for the Divine Savitri is the word that rises from the
transcendental stillness; the next two lines render that element
into the poise of the spiritual consciousness; this last line brings
the same thing down to the outward character and temperament
in life. A union of strength and silence is insisted upon in this
poem as one of the most prominent characteristics of Savitri and
I have dwelt on it elsewhere, but it had to be brought in here also if this description of her was to be complete. I do not find that this line lacks poetry or power; if I did, I would alter it. Your objection to the substitution of wideness for vastness is quite justified though not because of any reason of repetition, but because vastness is the right word and wideness is much inferior; the change was not deliberate but came by inadvertence due to a lapse of memory. I have restored vastness in the poem.

But, for all this, it may perhaps be better to keep the passage as you have written it [with omissions] since it is a particular characteristic of poetic style at its highest which you want to emphasise, and anything which you feel to lower or depart from that height may very properly be omitted. So unless you positively want to include the omitted passage kept as I have written it, we will leave your article and quotations to stand in their present form. The rest in another letter.

P.S. One thing occurs to me that the lines you most want to include might be kept, while the passage about the bird and the “haven” down to the “warmth and colour’s rule” could be left out. This would throw out all the things to which you object except the frequency of the sea and sky images and the recurrence of “great” after “greatness”; those have to remain, for I feel no disposition to alter those defects, if defects they are. Unless you think otherwise, we will so arrange it. In that case the alteration you want made in your article will find its place.

11 March 1946

As might a soul fly like a hunted bird,
Escaping with tired wings from a world of storms,
And a quiet reach like a remembered breast,
In a haven of safety and splendid soft repose
One could drink life back in streams of honey-fire,
Recover the lost habit of happiness, [p. 15]

\[4 \text{ In her he met a wideness like his own; [cf. p. 16].} \]
“One” who is himself a soul is compared to “a soul” acting like a bird taking shelter, as if to say: “A soul who is doing so-and-so is like a soul doing something similar” — a comparison which perhaps brings in some loss of surprise and revelation.

The suggestion you make about the “soul” and the “bird” may have a slight justification, but I do not think it is fatal to the passage. On the other hand there is a strong objection to the alteration you propose; it is that the image of the soul escaping from a world of storms would be impaired if it were only a physical bird that was escaping; a “world of storms” is too big an expression in relation to the smallness of the bird, it is only with the soul especially mentioned or else suggested and the “bird” subordinately there as a comparison that it fits perfectly well and gets its full value. The word “one” which takes up the image of the “bird” has a more general application than the “soul” and is not quite identical with it; it means anyone who has lost happiness and is in need of spiritual comfort and revival. It is as if one said: “as might a soul like a hunted bird take refuge from the world in the peace of the Infinite and feel that as its own remembered home, so could one take refuge in her as in a haven of safety and like the tired bird reconstitute one’s strength so as to face the world once more.”

As to the sixfold repetition of the indefinite article “a” in this passage, one should no doubt make it a general rule to avoid any such excessive repetition, but all rules have their exception and it might be phrased like this, “Except when some effect has to be produced which the repetition would serve or for which it is necessary.” Here I feel that it does serve subtly such an effect; I have used the repetition of this “a” very frequently in the poem with a recurrence at the beginning of each successive line in order to produce an accumulative effect of multiple characteristics or a grouping of associated things or ideas or other similar massings.

22 April 1947

My remarks about the Bird passage [in the above letter] are written from the point of view of the change made and the new
character and atmosphere it gives. I think the old passage was right enough in its own atmosphere, but not so good as what has replaced it: the alteration you suggest may be as good as that was but the objections to it are valid from the new standpoint.

7 July 1947

Almost they saw who lived within her light
The white-fire dragon-bird of endless bliss,
Her playmate in the sempiternal spheres
In her attracting advent’s luminous wake
Descended from his unattainable realms,
Drifting with burning wings above her days. [cf. p. 16]

I suppose the repetition of adjective and noun in four consecutive line-endings is meant to create an accumulating grandiose effect.

Yes; the purpose is to create a large luminous trailing repetitive movement like the flight of the Bird with its dragon tail of white fire.

Will you please say something about this bird?

What to say about him? One can only see. 4 November 1936

About that bird, it is true that “one can only see”; but if not more than one can see, don’t others need a bit of explanation? To what region does it belong? Is it any relation of the Bird of Fire with “gold-white wings” or the Hippogriff with a face “lustred, pale-blue-lined”?

All birds of that region are relatives. But this is the bird of eternal Ananda, while the Hippogriff was the divinised Thought and the Bird of Fire is the Agni-bird, psychic and tapas. All that however is to mentalise too much and mentalising always takes most of the life out of spiritual things. That’s why I say it can be seen, but nothing said about it.
But joy cannot endure until the end:
There is a darkness in terrestrial things
That will not suffer long too glad a note. [pp. 16–17]

Are these lines the poetic intelligence at its deepest, say, like a mixture of Sophocles and Virgil? They may be the pure or the intuitivised higher mind.

I do not think it is the poetic intelligence any more than Virgil’s Sunt lacrimae rerum et mentem mortalia tangunt, which I think to be the Higher Mind coming through to the psychic and blending with it. So also his O passi graviora, dabit deus his quoque finem. Here it may be the intuitive inner mind with the psychic fused together. 5 November 1936

One dealt with her who meets the burdened great. [p. 17]

Who is “One” here? Is it Love, the godhead mentioned before? If not, does this “dubious godhead with his torch of pain” correspond to “the image white and high of godlike Pain” spoken of a little earlier? Or is it Time whose “snare” occurs in the last line of the preceding passage?

Love? It is not Love who meets the burdened great and governs the fates of men! Nor is it Pain. Time also does not do these things—it only provides the field and movement of events. If I had wanted to give a name, I would have done it, but it has purposely to be left nameless because it is indefinable. He may use Love or Pain or Time or any of these powers, but is not any of them. You can call him the Master of the Evolution, if you like. 5 November 1936

Her spirit refused struck from the starry list
To quench in dull despair the God-given light. [cf. p. 19]

Any punctuation missing in the first line? Perhaps a dash after “refused” as well as after “list”?

I omitted any punctuation because it is a compressed construc-
tion meant to signify refused to be struck from the starry list and quenched in dull despair etc. — the quenching being the act of assent that would make effective the sentence of being struck from the starry list.

7 November 1936

* Beyond life's arc in spirit's immensities. [p. 44]

“Spirit” instead of “spirit’s” might mean something else, the word “spirit” as an epithet is ambiguous — it might be spiritistic and not spiritual.

1936

* The calm immensities of spirit space,
The golden plateaus of immortal Fire,
The moon-flame oceans of unfallen Bliss. [cf. p. 47]

Less than 20 lines earlier you have

Beyond life's arc in spirit's immensities.

Is it not possible to recast a little the first half of that line?

“Immensities” was the proper word because it helped to give the whole soul-scape of those worlds — the immensities of space, the plateaus of fire, the oceans of bliss. “Infinities” could just replace it, but now something has to be sacrificed. The only thing I can think of now is

The calm immunity of spirit space.

22 May 1937

* Why “immunity” — the singular — and not “immunities” to replace “immensities”?

“Immunities” in the plural is much feebleer and philosophically abstract — one begins to think of things like “qualities” — naturally it suggested itself to me as keeping up the plural sequence, but it grated on the sense of spiritual objective reality and I had to reject it at once. The calm immunity was a thing I could at
once feel, with immunities the mind has to cavil: “Well, what are they?” 23 May 1937

As if the original Ukase still held back [cf. p. 76]

I have accented on the first syllable as I have done often with words like “occult”, “divine”. It is a Russian word and foreign words in English tend often to get their original accent shifted as far backward as possible. I have heard many do that with “ukase”.

Resiled from poor assent to Nature’s terms, [p. 77]

It [“resiled”] is a perfectly good English word, meaning originally to leap back, rebound (like an elastic)—so to draw back from, recoil, retreat (in military language it means to fall back from a position gained or to one’s original position); but it is specially used for withdrawing from a contract, agreement, previous statement. It is therefore quite the just word here. Human nature has assented to Nature’s terms and been kept by her to them, but now Aswapati resiles from the contract and the assent to it made by humanity to which he belonged. Resiled, resilient, resilience are all good words and in use.

The incertitude of man’s proud confident thought, [p. 78]

Is “incertitude” preferable to “uncertainty”—with “Infini-tudes” so closely preceding it?

“Uncertainty” would mean that the thought was confident but uncertain of itself, which would be a contradiction. “Incertitude” means that its truth is uncertain in spite of its proud confidence in itself. I don’t think the repetition of the sound is objectionable in a technique of this kind. 12 November 1936
Aware of his occult omnipotent Source,  
Allured by the omniscient Ecstasy,  
He felt the invasion and the nameless joy. [p. 79]

I certainly won't have "attracted" [in place of "allured"] — there is an enormous difference between the force of the two words and merely "attracted" by the Ecstasy would take away all my ecstasy in the line — nothing so tepid can be admitted. Neither do I want "thrill" [in place of "joy"] which gives a false colour — precisely it would mean that the ecstasy was already touching him with its intensity which is far from my intention. Your statement that "joy" is just another word for "ecstasy" is surprising. "Comfort", "pleasure", "joy", "bliss", "rapture", "ecstasy" would then be all equal and exactly synonymous terms and all distinction of shades and colours of words would disappear from literature. As well say that "flashlight" is just another word for "lightning" — or that glow, gleam, glitter, sheen, blaze are all equivalents which can be employed indifferently in the same place. One can feel allured to the supreme omniscient ecstasy and feel a nameless joy touching one without that joy becoming itself the supreme Ecstasy. I see no loss of expressiveness by the joy coming in as a vague nameless hint of the immeasurable superior Ecstasy. 22 May 1937

But aren't there two tendencies in poetry — one to emphasise the shades, another to blend and blur them owing to technical exigencies? What poet would not use "gleam", "glow" and "sheen" indifferently for the sake of rhyme, rhythm or metre?

That might be all right for mental poetry — it won't do for what I am trying to create — in that one word won't do for the other. Even in mental poetry I consider it an inferior method. "Gleam" and "glow" are two quite different things and the poet who uses them indifferently has constantly got his eye upon words rather than upon the object. 23 May 1937
Across the soul’s unmapped immensitudes. [cf. p. 80]

Whatever you have written, it is not “immensities”.

The word is “immensitudes” as you have written. I take upon myself the right to coin new words. It is not any more fantastic than “infinitudes” to pair “infinity”. 13 November 1936

Would you also use “eternitudes”?

Not likely! I would think of the French étener and sneeze.

The body and the life no more were all.5

Don’t care to [change the line] — it says precisely what I want to convey and I don’t see how I can say it otherwise without diminishing or exaggerating the significance. 14 November 1936

I still consider the line a very good one and it did perfectly express what I wanted to say — as for “baldness”, an occasionally bare and straightforward line without any trailing of luminous robes is not an improper element. E.g. “This was the day when Satyavan must die”, which I would not remove from its position even if you were to give me the crown and income of the Kavi Samrat for doing it. If I have changed here, it is because the alterations all around it made the line no longer in harmony with its immediate environment. 21 May 1937

Your line

The body and the life no more were all

is no doubt a very good line in itself but it seemed to be, in its context here, baldness for baldness’ sake.

5 This line does not form part of the final version of Savitri. — Ed.
Not at all. It was bareness for expression’s sake which is a different matter.

Even if not quite that, it did not appear to justify itself completely: if it had been so very juste you would have scorned the Kavi Samrat’s crown and income resolutely for its sake also.

It was juste for expressing what I had to say then in a certain context. The context being entirely changed in its sense, bearing and atmosphere, it was no longer juste in that place. Its being an interloper in a new house does not show that it was an interloper in an old one. The colours and the spaces being heightened and widened this tint which was appropriate and needed in the old design could not remain in the new one. These things are a question of design; a line has to be viewed not only in its own separate value but with a view to its just place in the whole.

22 May 1937

What plane is spoken of by Virgil in these lines:

Largior hic campos aether et lumine vestit
purpureo, solemque suum, sua sidera norunt.

I don’t know, but purple is a light of the vital. It may have been one of the vital heavens he was thinking of. The ancients saw the vital heavens as the highest and most of the religions also have done the same. I have used the suggestion of Virgil to insert a needed new line:

And griefless countries under purple suns. [p. 120]

17 November 1936

Here too the gracious mighty Angel poured
Her splendour and her swiftness and her thrill,
Hoping to fill this new fair world with her joy, [cf. p. 130]

Would not “pours” be better?

No, that would take away all meaning from “new fair world”
— it is the attempted conquest of earth by life when earth had been created, — a past event though still continuing in its sequel and result. 18 November 1936

The hopes that fade to drab realities [cf. p. 159]
“Dun” occurred to me as less common than “drab” with “realities”.
I need “dun” afterwards, besides “drab” gives the more correct colour. 20 November 1936

The Mask is mentioned not twice but four times in this opening passage [Book Two, Canto Seven, pp. 202–03] and it is purposely done to keep up the central connection of the idea running through the whole. The ambassadors wear this grey Mask, so your criticism cannot stand since there is no separate mask coming as part of a new idea but a very pointed return to the principal note indicating the identity of the influence throughout. It is not a random recurrence but a purposeful touch carrying a psychological meaning. 1948

And overcast with error, grief and pain
The soul’s native will for truth and joy and light. [p. 203]
The two trios are not intended to be exactly correspondent; “joy” answers to both “grief” and “pain” while “light” is an addition in the second trio indicating the conditions for “truth” and “joy”. 1948

All evil starts from that ambiguous face. [p. 205]
Here again the same word “face” occurs a second time at the end of a line but it belongs to a new section and a new turn of ideas. I am not attracted by your suggestion; the word “mien” here is an obvious literary substitution and not part of a straight
On His Own and Others’ Poetry

and positive seeing: as such it sounds deplorably weak. The only thing would be to change the image, as for instance,

All evil creeps from that ambiguous source.

But this is comparatively weak. I prefer to keep the “face” and insert a line before it so as to increase a little the distance between the two faces:

Its breath is a subtle poison in men’s hearts.

1948

As to the two lines with “no man’s land” [in Book Two, Canto Seven, pages 206 and 211] there can be no capital in the first line because there it is a description while the capital is needed in the other line, because the phrase has acquired there the force of a name or appellation. I am not sure about the hyphen; it could be put but the no hyphen might be better as it suggests that no one in particular has as yet got possession.

1948

The cliché you object to . . . “he quoted Scripture and Law” was put in there with fell purpose and was necessary for the effect I wanted to produce, the more direct its commonplace the better. However, I defer to your objection and have altered it to

He armed untruth with Scripture and the Law. [p. 207]

1946

I don’t remember seeing the sentence about

Agreeing on the right to disagree

anywhere in a newspaper or in any book either; colloquial it is and perhaps for that reason only out of harmony in this passage. So I substitute

Only they agreed to differ in Evil’s paths. [p. 208]
Oft, some familiar visage studying,
Discovered suddenly Hell’s trademark there. [cf. p. 215]

It is a reference to the beings met in the vital worlds that seem like human beings but, if one looks closely, they are seen to be Hostiles, often assuming the appearance of a familiar face, they try to tempt or attack by surprise, and betray the stamp of their origin — there is also a hint that on earth also they take up human bodies or possess them for their own purpose.

11 January 1937

* Bliss into black coma fallen, insensible. [p. 221]

Neither of your scansions can stand. The best way will be to spell “fallen” “fall’n” as is occasionally done and treat “bliss into” as a dactyl.

1948

* Bliss into black coma fallen, insensible,
Coiled back to itself and God’s eternal joy
Through a false poignant figure of grief and pain
Still dolorously nailed upon a cross
Fixed in the soil of a dumb insentient world
Where birth was a pang and death an agony,
Lest all too soon should change again to bliss. [p. 221]

This has nothing to do with Christianity or Christ but only with the symbol of the cross used here to represent a seemingly eternal world-pain which appears falsely to replace the eternal bliss. It is not Christ but the world-soul which hangs here.

1948

* Performs the ritual of her Mysteries. [p. 221]

It is “Mysteries” with capital M and means mystic symbolic rites as in the Orphic and Eleusinian “Mysteries”. When written with capital M it does not mean secret mysterious things, but has this sense, e.g. a “Mystery play”.

1936
The passage running from “It was the gate of a false Infinite” to “None can reach heaven who has not passed through hell” [pp. 221–27] suggests that there was an harmonious original plan of the Overmind Gods for earth’s evolution, but that it was spoiled by the intrusion of the Rakshasic worlds. I should, however, have thought that an evolution, arising from the stark inconscient’s sleep and the mute void, would hardly be an harmonious plan. The Rakshasas only shield themselves with the covering “Ignorance”, they don’t create it. Do you mean that, if they had not interfered, there wouldn’t have been resistance and conflict and suffering? How can they be called the artificers of Nature’s fall and pain?

An evolution from the Inconscient need not be a painful one if there is no resistance; it can be a deliberately slow and beautiful efflorescence of the Divine. One ought to be able to see how beautiful outward Nature can be and usually is although it is itself apparently “inconscient” — why should the growth of consciousness in inward Nature be attended by so much ugliness and evil spoiling the beauty of the outward creation? Because of a perversity born from the Ignorance, which came in with Life and increased in Mind — that is the Falsehood, the Evil that was born because of the starkness of the Inconscient’s sleep separating its action from the secret luminous Conscience that was all the time within it. But it need not have been so except for the overriding Will of the Supreme which meant that the possibility of Perversion by inconscience and ignorance should be manifested in order to be eliminated though being given their chance, since all possibility has to manifest somewhere. Once it is eliminated the Divine Manifestation in Matter will be greater than it otherwise could be because it will gather all the possibilities involved in this difficult creation and not some of them as in an easier and less strenuous creation might naturally be. 15 January 1937

And the articles of the bound soul’s contract, [p. 231]

Liberty is very often taken with the last foot nowadays and
usually it is just the liberty I have taken here. This liberty I took long ago in my earlier poetry.

*  
Their slopes were a laughter of delightful dreams . . .
*  
[eight lines]  
There Love fulfilled her gold and roseate dreams  
And Strength her crowned and mighty reveries.
*  
[two lines]  
Dream walked along the highway of the stars; . . .
*  
[cf. pp 234–35]  
“Gold and roseate dreams” cannot be changed. “Muse” would make it at once artificial. “Dreams” alone is the right word there. “Reveries” also cannot be changed, especially as it is not any particular “reverie” that is meant. Also, “dream” at the beginning of a later line departs into another idea and is appropriate in its place; I see no objection to this purposeful repetition. Anyway the line cannot be altered. The only concession I can make to you is to alter the first.

*  
All reeled into a world of Kali’s dance. [p. 255]  
It is “world”, not “whirl”. It means “all reeling in a clash and confusion became a world of Kali’s dance”.

*  
Knowledge was rebuilt from cells of inference  
Into a fixed body flasque and perishable; [p. 267]  
“Flasque” is a French word meaning “slack”, “loose”, “flaccid” etc. I have more than once tried to thrust in a French word like this, for instance, “A harlot empress in a bouge” — somewhat after the manner of Eliot and Ezra Pound.
To unify their task, excluding life  
Which cannot bear the nakedness of the Vast, [p. 273]

I suppose the intransitive use of “unify” is not illegitimate,  
though the Oxford dictionary gives only the transitive.

Quite possible to use a transitive verb in this way with an unex-  
pressed object, things in general being understood.

31 March 1948

For Truth is wider, greater than her forms.  
A thousand icons they have made of her  
And find her in the idols they adore;  
But she remains herself and infinite. [p. 276]

“They” means nobody in particular but corresponds to the  
French “On dit” meaning vaguely “people in general”. This  
is a use permissible in English; for instance, “They say you are  
not so scrupulous as you should be.” 1948

Would it be an improvement if one of the two successive “it”s  
in  
In the world which sprang from it it took no part [p. 283]  
is avoided? Why not put something like “its depths” for the  
first “it”?  

“Depths” will not do, since the meaning is not that it took no  
part in what came from the depths but did take part in what  
came from the shallows; the word would be merely a rhetorical  
flourish and take away the real sense. It would be easy in several  
ways to avoid the two “it”s coming together but the direct force  
would be lost. I think a comma at “it” and the slight pause it  
would bring in the reading would be sufficient. For instance, one  
could write “no part it took”, instead of “it took no part”, but  
the direct force I want would be lost. 1948
I am unable to follow your criticism. I find nothing pompous or bombastic in the line unless it is the resonance of the word “fortuitous” and the many closely packed “t”s that give you the impression. But “fortuitous” cannot be sacrificed as it exactly hits the meaning I want. Also I fail to see what is abstract and especially mental in it. Neither a travesty nor sovereignty are abstract things and the images here are all concrete, as they should be to express the inner vision’s sense of concreteness of subtle things. The whole passage is of course about mental movements and mental powers, therefore about what the intellect sees as abstractions, but the inner vision does not feel them as that. To it mind has a substance and its energies and actions are very real and substantial things. Naturally there is a certain sense of scorn in this passage, for what the Ignorance regards as its sovereignty and positive truth has been exposed by the “sceptic ray” as fortuitous and unreal.

That clasped him in from day and night’s pursuit, [p. 289]

I do not realise what you mean by “stickiness”, since there are only two hard labials and some nasals; is it that combination which makes you feel sticky, or does the addition of some hard dentals also help? Anyhow, sticky or not, I am unwilling to change anything.

I do not want to put “day’s” and “night’s”; I find it heavy and unnecessary. It ought to be clear enough to the reader that “day and night” are here one double entity or two hounds in a leash pursuing a common prey.

Your line,

In a stillness of the voices of the world, [cf. p. 294]

is separated by twenty lines from
In the formless force and the still fixity. [p. 294]

So there is no fault here in “stillness”, but an added poetic quality might come if “stillness” were avoided and some such word as “lulling” used, especially as the line before runs:

And cradles of heavenly rapture and repose.

“Lulling” will never do. It is too ornamental and romantic and tender. I have put “slumber” in its place.

A Panergy that harmonised all life [p. 300]

I do not think the word “Panergy” depends for its meaning on the word “energies” in a previous line. The “Panergy” suggested is a self-existent total power which may carry the cosmic energies in it and is their cause but is not constituted by them. 1948

Your new objection to the line,

All he had been and all that still he was, [cf. p. 307]

is somewhat self-contradictory. If a line has a rhythm and expressive turn which makes it poetic, then it must be good poetry; but I suppose what you mean is fine or elevated poetry. I would say that the line even in its original form is good poetry and is further uplifted by rising towards its subsequent context which gives it its full poetic meaning and suggestion, the evolution of the inner being and the abrupt end or failure of all that had been done unless it could suddenly transcend itself and become something greater. I do not think that this line in its context is merely passable, but I admit that it is less elevated and intense than what precedes or what follows. I do not see how that can be avoided without truncating the thought significance of the whole account by the omission of something necessary to its evolution or else overpitching the expression where it needs to be direct or clear and bare in its lucidity. In any case the emended version [“All he had been and all towards which he
grew”) cures any possibility of the line being merely passable as it raises both the idea and the expression through the vividness of image which makes us feel and not merely think the living evolution in Aswapati’s inner being.

1946

General Comments on Some Criticisms of the Poem

Now as to the many criticisms contained in your letter I have a good deal to say; some of them bring forward questions of the technique of mystic poetry about which I wanted to write in an introduction to Savitri when it is published, and I may as well say something about that here.

I am glad, however, that you have called my attention to some lapses such as the inadvertent substitution of “wideness” for “vastness” in the line about love and Savitri. In all these cases there was the same inadvertent and unintentional change. “A prophet cavern” should certainly have remained as “some prophet cavern”. Also, it should be “a niche for veiled divinity” and “of” is an obvious slip. Again, “still depths” is a similar inadvertent mistake for “sealed depths” which, of course, I have restored. Also “step twixt” instead of “link between” was a similar mistake.

Now as to some other passages. You have made what seems to me a strange confusion as regards the passage about the “errant marvel” owing to the mistake in the punctuation which is now corrected. You took the word “solicited” as a past participle passive and this error seems to have remained fixed in your mind so as to distort the whole building and sense of the passage. The word “solicited” is the past tense and the subject of this verb.

6 In her he met a wideness like his own, [cf. p. 16]
7 Moves in a prophet cavern of the gods, [cf. p. 13]
8 That seemed a niche of veiled divinity, [cf. p. 15]
9 And, scattered on still depths, her luminous smile, [cf. p. 4]
10 Air was a vibrant step twixt earth and heaven, [cf. p. 4]
11 As if solicited in an alien world
With timid and hazardous instinctive grace,
Orphaned and driven out to seek a home
is “an errant marvel” delayed to the fourth line by the paren-
thesis “Orphaned etc.” This kind of inversion, though longer
than usual, is common enough in poetical style and the object is
to throw a strong emphasis and prominence upon the line, “An
errant marvel with no place to live”; that being explained, the
rest about the “gesture” should be clear enough.

Your objection to the “finger” and the “clutch” moves me
only to change “reminding” to “reminded” in the second line
of that passage.12 It is not intended that the two images “finger
laid” and “clutch” should correspond exactly to each other; for
the “void” and the “Mother of the universe” are not the same
thing. The “void” is only a mask covering the Mother’s cheek or
face. What the “void” feels as a clutch is felt by the Mother only
as a reminding finger laid on her cheek. It is one advantage of the
expression “as if” that it leaves the field open for such variation.
It is intended to suggest without saying it that behind the sombre
void is the face of a mother. The other two “as if”s13 have the
same motive and I do not find them jarring upon me. The second
is at a sufficient distance from the first and it is not obtrusive
enough to prejudice the third which more nearly follows. In any
case your suggestion “as though” [for the third “as if”] does not
appeal to me: it almost makes a suggestion of falsity and in any
case it makes no real difference as the two expressions are too
much kin to each other to repel the charge of reiteration.

In the passage about Dawn14 your two suggestions I again
find unsatisfying. “Windowing hidden things” presents a vivid

An errant marvel with no place to live,
Into a far-off nook of heaven there came
A slow miraculous gesture’s dim appeal. [cf. p. 3]

12 As if a childlike finger laid on a cheek
Reminding of the endless need in things
The heedless Mother of the universe,
An infant longing clutched the sombre Vast. [cf. p. 2]

13 As if a soul long dead were moved to live: . . .
As if solicited in an alien world . . . [p. 3]

14 One lucent corner windowing hidden things
Forced the world’s blind immensity to sight.
The darkness failed and slipped like a falling cloak. [cf. p. 3]
image and suggests what I want to suggest and I must refuse to alter it; “vistaing” brings in a very common image and does not suggest anything except perhaps that there is a long line or wide range of hidden things. But that is quite unwanted and not a part of the thing seen. “Shroud” sounds to me too literary and artificial and besides it almost suggests that what it covers is a corpse which would not do at all; a slipping shroud sounds inapt while “slipped like a falling cloak” gives a natural and true image. In any case, “shroud” would not be more naturally continuous in the succession of images than “cloak”. As to this succession, I may say that rapid transitions from one image to another are a constant feature in Savitri as in most mystic poetry. I am not here building a long sustained single picture of the Dawn with a single continuous image or variations of the same image. I am describing a rapid series of transitions, piling one suggestion upon another. There is first a black quietude, then the persistent touch, then the first “beauty and wonder” leading to the magical gate and the “lucent corner”. Then comes the failing of the darkness, the simile used suggesting the rapidity of the change. Then as a result the change of what was once a rift into a wide luminous gap,—if you want to be logically consistent you can look at the rift as a slit in the “cloak” which becomes a big tear. Then all changes into a “brief perpetual sign”, the iridescence, then the blaze and the magnificent aura. In such a race of rapid transitions you cannot bind me down to a logical chain of figures or a classical monotone. The mystic Muse is more of an inspired Bacchante of the Dionysian wine than an orderly housewife.

As for other suggestions, I am afraid, “soil” must remain because that was what I meant, it cannot elevate itself even into a prostrate soul as that would be quite irrelevant. Your “barely enough”, instead of the finer and more suggestive “hardly”,

15 And through the pallid rift that seemed at first
Hardly enough for a trickle from the suns,
Outpoured the revelation and the flame.
The brief perpetual sign recurred above. [cf. p. 3]
16 Our prostrate soil bore the awakening ray. [p. 5]
17 Hardly enough for a trickle from the suns, [p. 3]
falls flat upon my ear; one cannot substitute one word for another in this kind of poetry merely because it means intellectually the same thing; “hardly” is the mot juste in this context and, repetition or not, it must remain unless a word not only juste but inevitable comes to replace it. I am not disposed either to change “suns” to “stars” in the line about the creative slumber of the ignorant Force;18 “stars” does not create the same impression and brings in a different tone in the rhythm and the sense. This line and that which follows it bring in a general subordinate idea stressing the paradoxical nature of the creation and the contrasts which it contains, the drowsed somnambulist as the mother of the light of the suns and the activities of life. It is not intended as a present feature in the darkness of the Night. Again, do you seriously want me to give an accurate scientific description of the earth half in darkness and half in light so as to spoil my impressionist symbol19 or else to revert to the conception of earth as a flat and immobile surface? I am not writing a scientific treatise, I am selecting certain ideas and impressions to form a symbol of a partial and temporary darkness of the soul and Nature which seems to a temporary feeling of that which is caught in the Night as if it were universal and eternal. One who is lost in that Night does not think of the other half of the earth as full of light; to him all is Night and the earth a forsaken wanderer in an enduring darkness. If I sacrifice this impressionism and abandon the image of the earth wheeling through dark space I might as well abandon the symbol altogether, for this is a necessary part of it. As a matter of fact in the passage itself earth in its wheeling does come into the dawn and pass from darkness into the light. You must take the idea as a whole and in all its transitions

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18 Cradled the cosmic drowse of ignorant Force
Whose moved creative slumber kindles the suns
And carries our lives in its somnambulist whirl. [p. 1]

19 Athwart the vain enormous trance of Space,
Its formless stupor without mind or life,
A shadow spinning through a soulless Void,
Thrown back once more into unthinking dreams,
Earth wheeled abandoned in the hollow gulls,
Forgetful of her spirit and her fate. [p. 1]
and not press one detail with too literal an insistence. In this poem I present constantly one partial view of life or another temporarily as if it were the whole in order to give full value to the experience of those who are bound by that view, as for instance, the materialist conception and experience of life, but if any one charges me with philosophical inconsistency, then it only means that he does not understand the technique of the Overmind interpretation of life.

The line about “Wisdom nursing the child Laughter of Chance” [cf. p. 41] contained one of the inadvertent changes of which I have spoken; the real reading was and will remain “Wisdom suckling”. The verbal repetition of “nursing” and “nurse” therefore disappears, though there is the idea of nursing repeated in two successive lines and to that I see no objection. But for other reasons I have changed the two lines that follow as I was not altogether satisfied with them. I have changed them into

Silence, the nurse of the Almighty’s power,  
The omnipotent hush, womb of the immortal Word. [p. 41]  

As to the exact metrical identity in the first half of the two lines that follow,20 it was certainly intentional, if by intention is meant, not a manufacture by my personal mind but the spontaneous deliberateness of the inspiration which gave the lines to me and an acceptance in the receiving mind. The first halves of the two lines are metrically identical closely associating together the two things seen as of the same order, the “still Timeless” and the “dynamic creative Eternity” both of them together originating the manifest world: the latter halves of the lines diverge altogether, one into the slow massiveness of the “still brooding face”, with its strong close, the other into the combination of two high and emphatic syllables with an indeterminate run of short syllables between and after, allowing the line to drop away into some unuttered endlessness rather than cease. In this rhythmical significance I can see no weakness.

20 And of the Timeless the still brooding face,  
And the creative eye of Eternity. [p. 41]
I come next to the passage which you so violently attack, about the Inconscient waking Ignorance. In the first place, the word “formless” is indeed defective, not so much because of any repetition but because it is not the right word or idea and I was not myself satisfied with it. I have changed the passage as follows:

Then something in the inscrutable darkness stirred;
A nameless movement, an unthought Idea
Insistent, dissatisfied, without an aim,
Something that wished but knew not how to be,
Teased the Inconscient to wake Ignorance. . . . [pp. 1–2]

But the teasing of the Inconscient remains and evidently you think that it is bad poetic taste to tease something so bodiless and unreal as the Inconscient. But here several fundamental issues arise. First of all, are words like Inconscient and Ignorance necessarily an abstract technical jargon? If so, do not words like consciousness, knowledge etc. undergo the same ban? Is it meant that they are abstract philosophical terms and can have no real or concrete meaning, cannot represent things that one feels and senses or must often fight as one fights a visible foe? The Inconscient and the Ignorance may be mere empty abstractions and can be dismissed as irrelevant jargon if one has not come into collision with them or plunged into their dark and bottomless reality. But to me they are realities, concrete powers whose resistance is present everywhere and at all times in its tremendous and boundless mass. In fact, in writing this line I had no intention of teaching philosophy or forcing in an irrelevant metaphysical idea, although the idea may be there in implication. I was presenting a happening that was to me something sensible and, as one might say, psychologically and spiritually concrete. The Inconscient comes in persistently in the cantos of the First Book of Savitri, e.g.

Opponent of that glory of escape,
The black Inconscient swung its dragon tail
Lashing a slumbrous Infinite by its force
On Savitri

Into the deep obscurities of form. [p. 79]

There too a metaphysical idea might be read into or behind the thing seen. But does that make it technical jargon or the whole thing an illegitimate mixture? It is not so to my poetic sense. But you might say, “It is so to the non-mystical reader and it is that reader whom you have to satisfy, as it is for the general reader that you are writing and not for yourself alone.” But if I had to write for the general reader I could not have written Savitri at all. It is in fact for myself that I have written it and for those who can lend themselves to the subject-matter, images, technique of mystic poetry.

This is the real stumbling-block of mystic poetry and specially mystic poetry of this kind.21 The mystic feels real and present, even ever-present to his experience, intimate to his being, truths which to the ordinary reader are intellectual abstractions or metaphysical speculations. He is writing of experiences that are foreign to the ordinary mentality. Either they are unintelligible to it and in meeting them it flounders about as in an obscure abyss or it takes them as poetic fancies expressed in intellectually devised images. That was how a critic in The Hindu condemned such poems as Nirvana and Transformation. He said that they were mere intellectual conceptions and images and there was nothing of religious feeling or spiritual experience. Yet Nirvana was as close a transcription of a major experience as could be given in language coined by the human mind of a realisation in which the mind was entirely silent and into which no intellectual conception could at all enter. One has to use words and images in order to convey to the mind some perception, some figure of that which is beyond thought. The critic’s non-understanding was made worse by such a line as: “Only the illimitable Permanent, Is there”. Evidently he took this as technical jargon, abstract philosophy. There was no such thing; I felt with an overpowering vividness the illimitability or at least

21 This and the next five paragraphs were published separately in 1946 in a slightly different form. They are reproduced in that form on pages 93–97 of the present volume. — Ed.
something which could not be described by any other term and no other description except the “Permanent” could be made of That which alone existed. To the mystic there is no such thing as an abstraction. Everything which to the intellectual mind is abstract has a concreteness, substantiality which is more real than the sensible form of an object or of a physical event. To me, for instance, consciousness is the very stuff of existence and I can feel it everywhere enveloping and penetrating the stone as much as man or the animal. A movement, a flow of consciousness is not to me an image but a fact. If I wrote “His anger climbed against me in a stream”, it would be to the general reader a mere image, not something that was felt by me in a sensible experience; yet I would only be describing in exact terms what actually happened once, a stream of anger, a sensible and violent current of it rising up from downstairs and rushing upon me as I sat in the veranda of the guest-house, the truth of it being confirmed afterwards by the confession of the person who had the movement. This is only one instance, but all that is spiritual or psychological in Savitri is of that character. What is to be done under these circumstances? The mystical poet can only describe what he has felt, seen in himself or others or in the world just as he has felt or seen it or experienced through exact vision, close contact or identity and leave it to the general reader to understand or not understand or misunderstand according to his capacity. A new kind of poetry demands a new mentality in the recipient as well as in the writer.

Another question is the place of philosophy in poetry or whether it has any place at all. Some romanticists seem to believe that the poet has no right to think at all, only to see and feel. This accusation has been brought against me by many that I think too much and that when I try to write in verse, thought comes in and keeps out poetry. I hold, to the contrary, that philosophy has its place and can even take a leading place along with psychological experience as it does in the Gita. All depends on how it is done, whether it is a dry or a living philosophy, an arid intellectual statement or the expression not only of the living truth of thought but of something of its beauty, its light or its power.
The theory which discourages the poet from thinking or at least from thinking for the sake of the thought proceeds from an extreme romanticist temper; it reaches its acme on one side in the question of the surrealist, “Why do you want poetry to mean anything?” and on the other in Housman’s exaltation of pure poetry which he describes paradoxically as a sort of sublime nonsense which does not appeal at all to the mental intelligence but knocks at the solar plexus and awakes a vital and physical rather than intellectual sensation and response. It is of course not that really but a vividness of imagination and feeling which disregards the mind’s positive view of things and its logical sequences; the centre or centres it knocks at are not the brain-mind, not even the poetic intelligence but the subtle physical, the nervous, the vital or the psychic centre. The poem he quotes from Blake is certainly not nonsense, but it has no positive and exact meaning for the intellect or the surface mind; it expresses certain things that are true and real, not nonsense but a deeper sense which we feel powerfully with a great stirring of some inner emotion, but any attempt at exact intellectual statement of them sterilises their sense and spoils their appeal. This is not the method of Savitri. Its expression aims at a certain force, directness and spiritual clarity and reality. When it is not understood, it is because the truths it expresses are unfamiliar to the ordinary mind or belong to an untrodden domain or domains or enter into a field of occult experience; it is not because there is any attempt at a dark or vague profundity or at an escape from thought. The thinking is not intellectual but intuitive or more than intuitive, always expressing a vision, a spiritual contact or a knowledge which has come by entering into the thing itself, by identity.

It may be noted that the greater romantic poets did not shun thought; they thought abundantly, almost endlessly. They have their characteristic view of life, something that one might call their philosophy, their world-view, and they express it. Keats was the most romantic of poets, but he could write “To philosophise I dare not yet”; he did not write “I am too much of a poet to philosophise.” To philosophise he regarded evidently
as mounting on the admiral’s flag-ship and flying an almost royal banner. The philosophy of *Savitri* is different but it is persistently there; it expresses or tries to express a total and many-sided vision and experience of all the planes of being and their action upon each other. Whatever language, whatever terms are necessary to convey this truth of vision and experience it uses without scruple, not admitting any mental rule of what is or is not poetic. It does not hesitate to employ terms which might be considered as technical when these can be turned to express something direct, vivid and powerful. That need not be an introduction of technical jargon, that is to say, I suppose, special and artificial language, expressing in this case only abstract ideas and generalities without any living truth or reality in them. Such jargon cannot make good literature, much less good poetry. But there is a “poeticism” which establishes a sanitary cordon against words and ideas which it considers as prosaic but which properly used can strengthen poetry and extend its range. That limitation I do not admit as legitimate.

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

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

\[\text{doupēsen de pesōn arabēse de teuche' ep' autōi.}\]
\[\text{“Down with a thud he fell and his armour clangoured upon him.”}\]

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

\[\text{bē de kat' Oulumpio karēnōn chōomenos kē.}\]

And again the

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

bē d’akeōn para thina poluphloisboio thalassēs
“Silent he walked by the shore of the many-rumoured ocean.”

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

There is one place, perhaps two, where I am disposed to
make some concession. The first is where the word “awake”
occurs at the beginning of the poem, twice within six lines in the
same prominent place at the end of a line.22 In neither line can the
word be changed, for it is needed and to change would spoil; but
some modification can be made by restoring the original order
putting the lines about the unbodied Infinite first and pushing
those about the fallen self afterwards. The other place was in
the other long passage where the word “delight” occurs also
twice at the end of a line but with a somewhat longer interval
between;23 here, however, I have not yet found any satisfying
alternative.

I think there is none of your objections that did not occur
to me as possible from a certain kind of criticism when I wrote
or I re-read what I had written; but I brushed them aside as
invalid or as irrelevant to the kind of poem I was writing. So
you must not be surprised at my disregard of them as too slight
and unimperative.

You have asked what is my positive opinion about your
article. Well, it seems to me very fine both in style and substance,
but as it is in high eulogy of my own writing, you must not expect
me to say any more.

22 It was the hour before the Gods awake....
[four lines]
A power of fallen boundless self, awake [cf. p. 1]
23 Her looks, her smile awoke celestial sense
Even in earth-stuff, and their intense delight
Poured a supernal beauty on men's lives. . . .
As to a sheltering bosom a stricken bird
Escapes with tired wings from a world of storms,
In a safe haven of soft and splendid rest
One could restore life's wounded happiness,
Recover the lost habit of delight, [cf. p. 15]
On His Own and Others’ Poetry

P.S. I have just received your last letter of the 15th. I have maintained all the omissions you had made except the new lines in the description of Savitri which we have agreed to insert. The critic has a right to include or omit as he likes in his quotations. I doubt whether I shall have the courage to throw out again the stricken and too explicit bird into the cold and storm outside; at most I might change that one line, the first and make it stronger. I confess I fail to see what is so objectionable in its explicitness; usually, according to my idea, it is only things that are in themselves vague that have to be kept vague. There is plenty of room for the implicit and suggestive, but I do not see the necessity for that where one has to bring home a physical image. I have, of course, restored the original reading where you have made an alteration not approved by me, as in the substitution of the word “barely” for “hardly”. On this point I may add that in certain contexts “barely” would be the right word, as for instance, “There is barely enough food left for two or three meals”, where “hardly” would be adequate but much less forceful. It is the other way about in this line. I think I have answered everything else in the body of this letter.

19 March 1946

What you have written as the general theory of the matter seems to be correct and it does not differ substantially from what I wrote. But your phrase about unpurposive repetition might carry a suggestion which I would not be able to accept; it might seem to indicate that the poet must have a “purpose” in whatever he writes and must be able to give a logical account of it to the critical intellect. That is surely not the way in which the poet or at least the mystic poet has to do his work. He does not himself deliberately choose or arrange word and rhythm but only sees it

24 Lines omitted when passages from Savitri were reproduced in the article “Sri Aurobindo — A New Age of Mystical Poetry”, by K. D. Sethna (see above, page 290, footnote 3). — Ed.
25 As to a sheltering bosom a stricken bird

Escapes with tired wings from a world of storms, [cf. p. 15]
as it comes in the very act of inspiration. If there is any purpose of any kind, it also comes by and in the process of inspiration. He can criticise himself and the work; he can see whether it was a wrong or an inferior movement, he does not set about correcting it by any intellectual method but waits for the true thing to come in its place. He cannot always account to the logical intellect for what he has done; he feels or intuits, and the reader or critic has to do the same.

Thus I cannot tell you for what purpose I admitted the repetition of the word “great” in the line about the “great unsatisfied godhead” [p. 15], I only felt that it was the one thing to write in that line as “her greatness” was the only right thing in a preceding line; I also felt that they did not and could not clash and that was enough for me. Again, it might be suggested that the “high” “warm” subtle ether of love was not only the right expression but that repetition of these epithets after they had been used in describing the atmosphere of Savitri’s nature was justified and had a reason and purpose because it pointed and brought out the identity of the ether of love with Savitri’s atmosphere. But as a matter of fact I have no such reason or purpose. It was the identity which brought spontaneously and inevitably the use of the same epithets and not any conscious intention which deliberately used the repetition for a purpose.

Your contention that in the lines which I found to be inferior to their original form and altered back to that form, the inferiority was due to a repetition is not valid. In the line, “And found in her a vastness like his own” [cf. p. 16], the word “wideness” which had accidentally replaced “vastness” would have been inferior even if there had been no “wide” or “wideness” anywhere within a hundred miles and I would still have altered it back to the original word. So too with “sealed depths” and so many others. These alterations were due to inadvertence and not intentional; repetition or non-repetition had nothing to do with the matter. It was the same with “Wisdom nursing Chance”:26 if “nursing” had been the right word and not a slip replacing the

26 See page 313 above. — Ed.
original phrase I would have kept it in spite of the word “nurse” occurring immediately afterwards: only perhaps I would have taken care to so arrange that the repetition of the figure would simply have constituted a two-headed instead of a one-headed evil. Yes, I have changed in several places where you objected to repetitions but mostly for other reasons: I have kept many where there was a repetition and changed others where there was no repetition at all. I have indeed made modifications or changes where repetition came at a short distance at the end of a line; that was because the place made it too conspicuous. Of course where the repetition amounts to a mistake, I would have no hesitation in making a change; for a mistake must always be acknowledged and corrected. 26 April 1946

I am afraid I shall not be able to satisfy your demand for rejection and alteration of the lines about the Inconscient and the cloak any more than I could do it with regard to the line about the silence and strength of the gods. I looked at your suggestion about adding a line or two in the first case, but could get nothing that would either improve the passage or set your objection at rest. I am quite unable to agree that there is anything jargonish about the line any more than there is in the lines of Keats,

“Beauty is truth, truth beauty,” — that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.

That amounts to a generalised philosophical statement or enunciation and the words “beauty” and “truth” are abstract metaphysical terms to which we give a concrete and emotional value because they are connected in our associations with true and beautiful things of which our senses or our minds are vividly aware. Men have not learnt yet to recognise the Inconscient on which the whole material world they see is built, or the Ignorance of which their whole nature including their knowledge is built; they think that these words are only abstract metaphysical jargon flung about by the philosophers in their clouds or laboured out in long and wearisome books like The Life Divine. But it
is not so with me and I take my stand on my own feeling and experience about them as Keats did about his own Truth and Beauty. My readers will have to do the same if they want to appreciate my poetry, which, of course, they are not bound to do.

Is it really a fact that even the ordinary reader would not be able to see any difference between the Inconscient and Ignorance unless the difference is expressly explained to him? This is not a matter of philosophical terminology but of common sense and the understood meaning of English words. One would say “even the inconscient stone” but one would not say, as one might of a child, “the ignorant stone”. One must first be conscious before one can be ignorant. What is true is that the ordinary reader might not be familiar with the philosophical content of the word Inconscient and might not be familiar with the Vedantic idea of the Ignorance as the power behind the manifested world. But I don’t see how I can acquaint him with these things in a single line, even with the most illuminating image or symbol. He might wonder, if he were Johnsonianly minded, how an Inconscient could be teased or how it could wake Ignorance. I am afraid, in the absence of a miracle of inspired poetical exegesis flashing through my mind, he will have to be left wondering. I am not set against adding a line if the miracle comes or if some vivid symbol occurs to me, but as yet none such is making its appearance.

In the other case also, about the cloak, I maintain my position. Here, however, while I was looking at the passage an additional line occurred to me and I may keep it:

The darkness failed and slipped like a falling cloak
From the reclining body of a god. [p. 3]

But this additional line does not obviate your objection and it was not put in with that aim. You have, by the way, made a curious misapplication of my image of the careful housewife\textsuperscript{27}; you attribute this line to her inspiration. A careful housewife is meticulously and methodically careful to arrange everything in a perfect order, to put every object in its place and see that there

\textsuperscript{27} See page 311 above — Ed.
is no disharmony anywhere; but according to you she has thrust a wrong object into a wrong place, something discordant with the surroundings and inferior in beauty to all that is near it; if so, she is not a careful housewife but a slattern. The Muse has a careful housewife, — there is Pope’s, perfect in the classical or pseudo-classical style or Tennyson’s, in the romantic or semi-romantic manner, while as a contrast there is Browning’s with her energetic and rough-and-tumble dash and clatter.

You ask why in these and similar cases I could not convince you while I did in others. Well, there are several possible explanations. It may be that your first reaction to these lines was very vivid and left the mark of a *samskāra* which could not be obliterated. Or perhaps I was right in the other matters while your criticism may have been right in these, — my partiality for these lines may be due to an unjustified personal attachment founded on the vision which they gave me when I wrote them. Again, there are always differences of poetical appreciation due either to preconceived notions or to different temperamental reactions. Finally, it may well be that my vision was true but for some reason you are not able to share it. For instance, you may have seen in the line about the cloak only the objective image in a detailed picture of the dawn where I felt a subjective suggestion in the failure of the darkness and the slipping of the cloak, not an image but an experience. It must be the same with the line,

The strength, the silence of the gods were hers. [p. 16]

You perhaps felt it to be an ordinary line with a superficial significance; perhaps it conveyed to you not much more than the stock phrase about the “strong silent man” admired by biographers, while to me it meant very much and expressed with a bare but sufficient power what I always regarded as a great reality and a great experience.

I have seen your letter to Nolini and considered the points you raised. The reading of the mistyped line should run
His self-discovery’s flaming witnesses; [p. 97]

the error was only of a single letter. I do not agree with you that the two lines you stigmatise are not poetic. The first, however, I had already thought of altering, because it did not fully express what ought to have been said; so please change it to

All he had been and all towards which he grew. [p. 307]

The second line, though good enough as poetry, might perhaps be improved upon and you may change it to

Grew near to him, his daily associates. [p. 96]

As to the repetitions, the second one, I think, must remain as it is. As to the repetition of “peace”, I was of course aware of it, but I have left it as it was because I found nothing that would not spoil one or other of the lines, but perhaps it might be altered to

Passionless, wordless, absorbed in its fathomless hush [p. 308]

without altogether losing its force. In the other repetition passage I notice that in one line in the manuscript “nearness-self” has been written which is incorrect; in your letter you write it correctly “nearness’ self”. 15 October 1946

In the two passages ending with the same word “alone”28 I think that there is sufficient space between them and neither ear nor mind need be offended. The word “sole”, I think, would flatten the line too much and the word “aloof” would here have no atmosphere and it would not express the idea. It is not distance and aloofness that has to be stressed but unaccompanied solitude.

28 There knowing herself by her own termless self,
Wisdom supernal, wordless, absolute
Sat uncompanioned in the eternal Calm,
All-seeing, motionless, sovereign and alone.
[and, after 61 lines:]
The superconscient realms of motionless Peace
Where judgment ceases and the world is mute
And the Unconceived lies pathless and alone. [pp. 32, 33–34]
The line you object to on account of forced rhythm “in a triumph of fire” has not been so arranged through negligence. It was very deliberately done and deliberately maintained. If it were altered the whole effect of rhythmic meaning and suggestion which I intended would be lost and the alterations you suggest would make a good line perhaps but with an ordinary and inexpressive rhythm. Obviously it is not a “natural” rhythm, but there is no objection to its being forced when it is a forcible and violent action that has to be suggested. The rhythm cannot be called artificial, for that would mean something not true and genuine or significant but only patched up and insincere: the rhythm here is a turn of art and not a manufacture. The scansion is iamb, reversed spondee, pyrrhic, trochee, iamb. By reversed spondee I mean a foot with the first syllable long and highly stressed and the second stressed but short or with a less heavy ictus. In the ordinary spondee the greater ictus is on the second syllable while there are equal spondees with two heavy stresses, e.g. “vast space” or in such a line as

He has seized life in his resistless hands.²⁹

In the first part of the line the rhythm is appropriate to the violent breaking in of the truth while in the second half it expresses a high exultation and exaltation in the inrush. This is brought out by the two long and highly stressed vowels in the first syllable of “triumph” and in the word “fire” (which in the elocution of the line have to be given their full force), coming after a pyrrhic with two short syllables between them. If one slurs over the slightly weighted short syllable in “triumph” where the concluding consonants exercise a certain check and delay in the voice, one could turn this half line into a very clumsy double anapaest, the first a glide and the second a stumble; this would be bad elocution and contrary to the natural movement of the words.

I have wholly failed to feel the prosaic flatness of which you accuse the line

²⁹ This line does not form part of the final version of Savitri. — Ed.
On Savitri

All he had been and all that now he was. [cf. p. 307]

No doubt, the diction is extremely simple, direct and unadorned but that can be said of numberless good lines in poetry and even of some great lines. If there is style, if there is a balanced rhythm (rhyme is not necessary) and a balanced language and significance (for these two elements combined always create a good style), and if the line or the passage in which it occurs has some elevation or profundity or other poetic quality in the idea which it expresses, then there cannot be any flatness nor can any such line or passage be set aside as prosaic.

By the way, I think you said in a letter that in the line

Our prostrate soil bore the awakening light [cf. p. 5]

“soil” was an error for “soul”. But “soil” is correct; for I am describing the revealing light falling upon the lower levels of the earth, not on the soul. No doubt, the whole thing is symbolic, but the symbol has to be kept in front and the thing symbolised has to be concealed or only peep out from behind, it cannot come openly into the front and push aside the symbol.

As to the title of the three Cantos about the Yoga of the King,30 I intended the repetition of the word “Yoga” to bring out and emphasise the fact that this part of Aswapati’s spiritual development consisted of two yogic movements, one a psycho-spiritual transformation and the other, a greater spiritual transformation with an ascent to a supreme power. The omission which you suggest would destroy this significance and leave only something more abstract. In the second of these three Cantos there is a pause between the two movements and a description of the secret knowledge to which he is led and of which the results are described in the last Canto, but there is no description of the Yoga itself or of the steps by which this knowledge came. That is only indicated, not narrated; so to bring in “The Yoga of the King” as the title of this Canto would not be very apposite.

30 Book I. Canto 3: The Yoga of the King: The Yoga of the Soul’s Release.
Canto 4: The Secret Knowledge.
Canto 5: The Yoga of the King: The Yoga of the Spirit’s Freedom and Greatness.
Aswapati’s Yoga falls into three parts. First, he is achieving his own spiritual self-fulfilment as an individual and this is described as the Yoga of the King. Next, he makes the ascent as a typical representative of the race to win the possibility of discovery and possession of all the planes of consciousness and this is described in the second book: but this too is as yet only an individual victory. Finally, he aspires no longer for himself but for all, for a universal realisation and new creation. That is described in the Book of the Divine Mother.

As to the Nirvana poem, I have said that the poem announces no metaphysical philosophy but is only the description of a spiritual experience. So how can any metaphysics be derived from it true or false — if you mean truly or falsely derived? If you want to ask whether the metaphysics you derived is in itself true or false, well, I don’t remember what it was; so I would have to read your letter again before I could answer, and for that you may have to wait for some time.

As regards the other points you have drawn attention to, they have all been set right in the original version but your typescript seems to have been sent without making these changes. The “bird” passage has been changed thus:

As might a soul fly like a hunted bird,
   Escaping with tired wings from a world of storms,
   And a quiet reach like a remembered breast,
   In a haven of safety and splendid soft repose
   One could drink life back in streams of honey-fire,
   Recover the lost habit of happiness,
   Feel her bright nature’s glorious ambience etc. etc. [p. 15]

29 October 1946

I am not at all times impervious to criticism; I have accepted some of yours and changed my lines accordingly; I have also though not often accepted some adverse criticisms from outside and remoulded a line or a passage from here and there. But your criticisms are based upon an understanding appreciation of the
On Savitri

poem, its aim, meaning, method, the turn and quality of its language and verse technique. In your friend’s judgments I find an entire absence of any such understanding and accordingly I find his criticisms to be irrelevant and invalid. What one does not understand or perceive its meaning and spirit, one cannot fruitfully criticise.