The Voices of the Poets

Out of the infinite silence of the past, peopled only to the eye of history or the ear of the Yogin, a few voices arise which speak for it, express it and are the very utterance and soul of those unknown generations, of that vanished and now silent humanity. These are the voices of the poets. We whose souls are drying up in this hard and parched age of utilitarian and scientific thought when men value little beyond what gives them exact and useful knowledge or leads them to some outward increase of power & pleasure, we who are beginning to neglect & ignore poetry and can no longer write it greatly & well,—just as we have forgotten how to sculpture like the Greeks, paint like the mediaeval Italians or build like the Buddhists,—are apt to forget this grand utility of the poets, one noble faculty among their many divine and unusual powers. The kavi or vates, poet & seer, is not the manishi; he is not [the] logical thinker, scientific analyser or metaphysical reasoner; his knowledge is one not with his thought, but with his being; he has not arrived at it but has it in himself by virtue of his power to become one with all that is around him. By some form of spiritual, vital and emotional oneness, he is what he sees; he is the hero thundering in the forefront of the battle, the mother weeping over her dead, the tree trembling violently in the storm, the flower warmly penetrated with the sunshine. And because he is these things, therefore he knows them; because he knows thus, spiritually & not rationally, he can write of them. He feels their delight & pain, he shares their virtue & sin, he enjoys their reward or bears their punishment. It is for this reason that poetry written out of the intellect is so inferior to poetry written out of the soul, is,—even as poetical thinking,—so inferior to the thought that comes formed by inscrutable means out of the soul. For this reason, too, poets of otherwise great faculty, have failed to give us living
men and women or really to show to our inner vision even the things of which they write eloquently or sweetly, because they are content to write about them after having seen them with the mind only, and have not been able or have not taken care first to be the things of which they would write and then not so much write about them as let them pour themselves out in speech that is an image of the soul. They have been too easily attracted by the materials of poetry, artha & shabda; drawn by some power & charm in the substance of speech, captivated by some melody, harmony or colour in the form of speech, arrested by some strong personal emotion which clutches at expression or gropes for expression in these externals of poetry they have forgotten to bathe in the Muse’s deepest springs.

Therefore among those ancient voices, even when the literature of the ages has been winnowed & chosen by Time, there are very few who recreate for us in poetic speech deeply & mightily the dead past, because they were that past, not so much themselves as the age & nation in which they lived and not so much even the age and nation as that universal humanity which in spite of all differences, under them and within them, even expressing its unity through them is the same in every nation and in every age. Others give us only fragments of thought or outbursts of feeling or reveal to us scattered incidents of sight, sound and outward happening. These are complete, vast, multitudinous, infinite in a way, impersonal & many-personed in their very personality, not divine workmen merely but true creators endowed by God with something of His divine power and offering therefore in their works some image of His creative activity.