

Grades of Perfection in Poetic Style

Grades of Perfection in Poetry

I suppose “inevitability of expression” consists of two things producing one effect: (1) the rightness of individual words and phrases, (2) the rightness of the general lingual reconstruction of the poetic vision — that is, the manner, syntactical and psychological, of whole sentences and their coordination.

To the two requisites you mention which are technical, two others have to be added, a certain smiling sureness of touch and inner breath of perfect perfection, born not made, in the words themselves, and a certain absolute winging movement in the rhythm. Without an inevitable rhythm there can be no inevitable wording. If you understand all that, you are lucky. But how to explain the inexplicable, something that is self-existent? That simply means an absoluteness, one might say, an inexplicably perfect and in-fitting thusness and thereness and thatness and everything-elseness so satisfying in every way as to be unalterable. All perfection is not necessarily inevitability. I have tried to explain in *The Future Poetry* — very unsuccessfully I am afraid — that there are different grades of perfection in poetry: adequateness, effectivity, illumination of language, inspiredness — finally, inevitability. These are things one has to learn to feel, one can’t analyse.

All the styles, “adequate”, “effective”, etc. can be raised to inevitability in their own line.¹

The supreme inevitability is something more even than that, a speech overwhelmingly sheer, pure and true, a quintessential essence of convincingly perfect utterance. That goes out of

¹ This item is composed of parts of three letters that were typed together and revised by Sri Aurobindo in that form. This sentence is from a letter reproduced in full on page 191. — Ed.

all classifications and is unanalysable. Instances would include the most different kinds of style — Keats’ “magic casements”, Wordsworth’s [*lines on*] Newton and his “fields of sleep”, Shakespeare’s “Macbeth has murdered sleep”, Homer’s descent of Apollo from Olympus, Virgil’s “Sunt lachrimae rerum” and his “O passi graviora”.

16 September 1934

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You write, in regard to a poem of mine, “it is difficult to draw the line” between the illumined and inspired styles. Was that a general statement, or was it meant to apply only in that particular instance? I suppose there must be some characteristic in the rhythm and the manner of expression to mark out the inspired style.

It is often a little difficult. The illumined is on the way to the inspired and a little more intensity of vision and expression is enough to make the difference.

24 September 1934

Grades of Perfection and Planes of Inspiration

Is there any coordination between the differences of style and the different planes of inspiration?

I don’t think so — unless one can say that the effective style comes from the higher mind, the illumined from the illumined mind, the inspired from the plane of intuition. But I don’t know whether that would stand at all times — especially when each style reaches its inevitable power.

23 September 1934

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If one can write from the highest plane, i.e. overmind and supermind plane — as you have done in *Savitri* — is it evidently going to be greater poetry than any other poetry?

Nobody ever spoke of supermind plane poetry. Is *Savitri* all from overhead plane? I don’t know.

You lay down certain features of overhead poetry, e.g. greater depth and height of spiritual vision, inner life and experience

and character of rhythm and expression. But it won't necessarily outshine Shakespeare in poetic excellence.

Obviously if properly done it would have a deeper and rarer substance, but would not be necessarily greater in poetic excellence.

You say also that for overhead poetry technique, it must be the right word and no other in the right place, right sounds and no others in a design of sound that cannot be changed even a little. Well, is that not what is called sheer inevitability which is the sole criterion of highest poetry?

Yes, but mental and vital poetry can be inevitable also. Only in O.P. there must be a rightness throughout which is not the case elsewhere — for without this inevitability it is no longer fully O.P., while without this sustained inevitability there can be fine mental and vital poetry. But practically that means O.P. comes usually by bits only, not in a mass.

You may say that in overhead poetry expression of spiritual vision is more important. True, but why can't it be clothed in as fine poetry as in the case of Shakespeare? The highest source of inspiration will surely bring in all the characteristics of highest poetry, no?

It can, but it is more difficult to get. It can be as fine poetry as Shakespeare's if there is the equal genius, but it needn't by the fact of being O.P. become finer.

17 May 1937