

Substance, Style, Diction

Form and Substance

On the general question [*of rhythm vs. substance*] the truth seems to me to be very simple. It may be quite true that fine or telling rhythms without substance (substance of idea, suggestion, feeling) are hardly poetry at all, even if they make good verse. But that is no ground for belittling beauty or excellence of form or ignoring its supreme importance for poetic perfection. Poetry is after all an art and a poet ought to be an artist of word and rhythm, even though, necessarily, like other artists, he must also be something more than that, even much more. I hold therefore that harshness and roughness, ককশতা, are not merits, but serious faults to be avoided by anyone who wants his work to be true poetry and survive. One can be strong and powerful, full of sincerity and substance without being harsh, rough or aggressive to the ear. Swinburne's later poetry is a mere body of rhythmic sound without a soul; but what of Browning's constant deliberate roughness or, let us say, excessive sturdiness which deprives much of his work of the claim to be poetry — it is already much discredited and it is certain there is much in it that posterity will carefully and with good reason forget to read. Energy enough there is and abundance of matter and these carry the day for a time and give fame, but it is only perfection that endures. Or, if the cruder work lasts, it is only by association with the perfection of the same poet's work at his best. I may say also that if mere rhythmic acrobacies of the kind to which you very rightly object condemn a poet's work to inferiority and a literature deviating on to that line to decadence, the drive towards a harsh strength and rough energy of form and substance may easily lead to other kind of undesirable acrobacy and an opposite road towards individual inferiority and general decadence. Why

should not Bengali poetry go on the straight way of its progress without running either upon the rocks of roughness or into the shallows of mere melody? Austerity of course is another matter — rhythm can be either austere to bareness or sweet and subtle, and a harmonious perfection can be attained in either of these extreme directions if the mastery is there.

As for rules, — rules are necessary but they are not absolute; one of the chief tendencies of genius is to break old rules and make departures, which create new ones. English poetry of today luxuriates in movements which to the mind of yesterday would have been insanity or chaotic licence, yet it is evident that this freedom of experimentation has led to discoveries of new rhythmic beauty with a very real charm and power and opened out possible lines of growth, — however unfortunate many of its results may be. Not the formal mind, but the ear must be the judge.

Moreover the development of a new note — the expression of a deeper yogic or mystic experience in poetry — may very well demand for its fullness new departures in technique, a new turn or turns of rhythm, but these should be, I think, subtle in their difference rather than aggressive.

4 January 1932

Richness of Image

Richness of image is not the whole of poetry. There are many “born poets” who avoid too much richness of image. There are certain fields of consciousness which express themselves naturally through image most — there are others that do it more through idea and feeling.

13 February 1936

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Poetry depends on power of thought, feeling, language — not on abundance of images. Some poets are rich in images, all need not be.

18 February 1936

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What is this superstition? At that rate Sophocles, Chaucer, Milton, Wordsworth are not good poets, because their poetry is not

full of images? Is Kalidasa a greater poet than Vyasa or Valmiki because he is fuller of images? 18 February 1936

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Poetry does not consist only in images or fine phrases. When Homer writes simply “Sing, Goddess, the baleful wrath of Achilles, son of Peleus, which laid a thousand woes on the Achaeans and hurled many strong souls of heroes down to Hades and made their bodies a prey for dogs and all the birds; and the will of Zeus was accomplished”, he is writing in the highest style of poetry. 13 June 1936

Conceit

When an image comes out from the mind not properly transmuted in the inner vision or delivered by the alchemy of language, it betrays itself as coin of the fancy or the contriving intellect and is then called a conceit.¹ 26 August 1931

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Conceit means a too obviously ingenious or far-fetched or extravagant idea or image which is evidently an invention of a clever brain, not a true and convincing flight of the imagination. E.g. Donne’s (?) comparison of a child’s small-pox eruptions to the stars of the milky way or something similar: I have forgotten the exact thing, but that will serve.

This hill turns up its nose at heaven’s height,
Heaven looks back with a blue contemptuous eye —

that’s a conceit.

O cloud, thou wild black wig on heaven’s bald head
would be another. These are extravagant specimens.

¹ *This sentence was extracted for separate publication from a letter given in full on pages 505–06. — Ed.*

I haven't time to think out any ingenious ones, nor to discuss trochees adequately — have given one or two hints in the margin.

Some more conceits, ingenious all of them.

Am I his tail and is he then my head?

But head by tail, I think, is often led.

Also

Like a long snake came wriggling out his laugh.

Also

How the big Gunner of the upper sphere

Is letting off his cannon in the sky!

Flash, bang bang bang! he has some gunpowder

With him, I think. Again! Whose big bow-wow

Goes barking through the hunting fields of Heaven?

What a magnificent row the gods can make!

And don't forget

The long slow scolopendra of the train.

Or if you think these are not dainty or poetic enough, here's another

God made thy eyes sweet cups to hold blue wine;

By sipping at them rapture-drunk are mine.

Enough? Amen!

16 May 1937

Oxymoron

An oxymoron often necessitates what you call echolalia — e.g.

For good like this can be

An obstacle against the highest Good

And light itself denial of the Light.

Whether such things make good poetry or not is a matter of opinion.

28 January 1934

Simplicity and Condensation

Simplicity is not the test. There can be a supreme beauty of simplicity and there can be the opposite. 10 November 1938

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Too violent condensations of language or too compressed thoughts always create a sense either of obscurity or, if not that, then of effort and artifice, even if a powerful and inspired artifice. It is why Yeats finds your sonnets stiff and laboured, I suppose. Yet very great poets and writers have used them, so great a poet as Aeschylus or so great a prose stylist as Tacitus. Then there are the famous “knots” in the Mahabharata, the recurrence of lines so compressed in thought and speech (although the normal style of the poem is of a crystal clearness,) that even the divine scribe Ganesha, lord of wisdom and learning who wrote the poem to Vyasa’s dictation, had to stop and cudgel his brains for minutes to find out their significance, — thus giving the poet a chance to breathe and compose his lines. For the condition laid down was that the inspiration must be continuous and Ganesha would not even once have to pause for want of lines to write! I think one can say that these condensations are justified when they say something with more power and depth and full, if sometimes recondite, significance than an easier speech would give, but to make it a constant element of the language (without a constant justification of that kind) would turn it into a mannerism or artifice. 1 October 1932

Bareness and Ruggedness

I am afraid the language of your appreciations or criticisms here is not apposite. There is nothing “bare and rugged” in the two lines you quote;² on the contrary they are rather violently figured — the *osé* image of a fire opening a door of a treasure-house would probably be objected to by Cousins or any other

² *A rhythmic fire that opens a secret door,
And the treasures of eternity are found;*

purist. The language of poetry is called bare when it is confined rigorously to just the words necessary to express the thought or feeling or to visualise what is described, without superfluous epithets, without images, without any least rhetorical turn in it. E.g. Cowper's

Toll for the brave,
The brave who are no more —

is bare. Byron's

Jehovah's vessels hold
The godless heathen's wine;

does not quite succeed because of a rhetorical tinge that he has not been able to keep out of the expression. When Baxter (I think it was Baxter) writes

I spoke as one who never would speak again
And as a dying man to dying men,

that might be taken as an example of strong and bare poetic language. I have written of Savitri waking on the day of destiny —

Immobile in herself she gathered force.
This was the day when Satyavan must die, —

that is designedly bare.

But none of these lines or passages can be called rugged; for ruggedness and austerity are not the same thing; poetry is rugged when it is rough in language and rhythm or rough and unpolished but sincere in feeling. Donne is often rugged, —

Yet dare I almost be glad, I do not see
That spectacle of too much weight for me.
Who sees God's face that is self-life must die;
What a death were it then to see God die?

but it is only the first line that is at all bare.

On the other side you describe the line of your preference

My moments pass with moon-imprinted sail

by the epithets “real, wonderful, flashing”. Real or surreal? It is precisely its unreality that makes the quality of the line; it is surreal, not in any depreciatory sense, but because of its supraphysical imaginativeness, its vivid suggestion of occult vision; one does not quite know what it means, but it suggests something that one can vividly see. It is not flashing — gleaming or glinting would be nearer the mark — it penetrates the imagination and awakens sight and stirs or thrills with a sense of beauty but it is not something that carries one away by its sudden splendour.

You say that it is more poetic than the other quotation — perhaps, but not for the reason you give, rather because it is more felicitously complete in its image and more suggestive. But you seem to attach the word poetic to the idea of something remotely beautiful, deeply coloured or strangely imaged with a glitter in it or a magic glimmer. On the whole, what you seem to mean is that this line is “real” poetry, because it has this quality and because it has a melodious sweetness of rhythm, while the other is of a less attractive character. Your solar plexus refuses to thrill where these qualities are absent — obviously that is a serious limitation in the plasticity of your solar plexus, not that it is wrong in thrilling to these things but that it is sadly wrong in thrilling to them only. It means that your plexus will remain deaf and dead to most of the greater poetry of the world — to Homer, Milton, Valmiki, Vyasa, a great part even of Shakespeare. That is surely a serious limitation of the appreciative faculty. What is strange and beautiful has its appeal, but one ought to be able also to stir to what is great and beautiful or strong and noble or simple and beautiful or pure and exquisite. Not to do so would be like being blind of one eye and seeing with the other only very vividly strange outlines and intensely bright colours.

I may add that if really I appreciate any lines for something which I see behind them but they do not actually suggest or express, then I must be a very bad critic. The lines you quote

not only say nothing about the treasures except that they are found but do not suggest anything more. If then I see from some knowledge that has nothing to do with the actual expression and suggestion of the lines all the treasures of eternity and cry "How rich" — meaning the richness, not of the treasures, but of the poetry, then I am doing something quite illegitimate which is the sign of a great unreality and confusion in my mind, very undesirable in a critic. It is not for any reason of that kind that I made a mark indicating appreciation but because I find in the passage a just and striking image with a rhythm and expression which are a sufficient body for the significance.

2 September 1938

Nobility and Grandeur

I am unable to agree with you that Chapman's poetry is noble or equal, even at its best, to Homer and it seems to me that you have not seized the subtler quality of what Arnold means by noble. "Muscular vigour, strong nervous rhythm" are forceful, not noble. Everywhere in your remarks you seem to confuse nobility and forcefulness, but there is between the two a gulf of difference. Chapman is certainly forceful, next to Marlowe, I suppose, the most forceful poet among the Elizabethans. Among the lines you quote from him to prove your thesis, there is only one that approaches nobility:

Much have I suffered for thy love, much laboured, wishèd much
and even then it is spoilt for me by the last two words which are almost feeble. The second quotation:

When the unmeasured firmament bursts to disclose her light
has a rhythm which does not mate with the idea and the diction; these are exceedingly fine and powerful — but not noble. There is no nobility at all in the third:

And such a stormy day shall come, in mind and soul I know,
When sacred Troy shall shed her towers, for tears of overthrow.

The first line of the couplet is rhetorical and padded, the second is a violent, indeed an extravagant conceit which does not convey any true and high emotion but is intended to strike and startle the intellectual imagination. One has only to compare Homer's magnificent lines absolute in their nobility of restrained yet strong emotion, in which the words and rhythm give the very soul of the emotion

essetai ēmar hot' an pot' olōlē Ilios hirē
 (There shall be a day when sacred Ilios shall perish)

but in its depths, not with any outward vehemence. In the fourth quotation:

Heard Thetis' foul petition and wished in any wise
 The splendour of the burning ships might satiate his eyes

the first line has the ordinary ballad movement and diction and cannot rank, the second is fine poetry, vivid and impressive, with a beginning of grandeur — but the nobility of Homer, Virgil or Milton is not there. The line strikes at the mind with a great vehemence in order to impress it — nobility in poetry enters in and takes possession with an assured gait, by its own right. It would seem to me that one has only to put the work of these greater poets side by side with Chapman's best to feel the difference. Chapman no doubt lifts rocks and makes mountains suddenly to rise — in that sense he has elevation or rather elevations; but in doing it he gesticulates, wrestles, succeeds finally with a shout of triumph; that does not give a noble effect or a noble movement. See in contrast with what a self-possessed grandeur, dignity or godlike ease Milton, Virgil, Homer make their ascensions or keep their high levels.

Then I come to Arnold's examples of which you question the nobility on the strength of my description of one essential of the poetically noble. Mark that the calm, self-mastery, beautiful control which I have spoken of as essential to nobility is a poetic, not an ethical or Yogic calm and control. It does not exclude the poignant expression of grief or passion, but it expresses it with a certain high restraint so that even when the mood is personal it

yet borders on the widely impersonal. Cleopatra's words³ are an example of what I mean; the disdainful compassion for the fury of the chosen instrument of self-destruction which vainly thinks it can truly hurt her, the call to death to act swiftly and yet the sense of being high above what death can do, which these few simple words convey has the true essence of nobility. "Impatience" only! You have not caught the significance of the words "poor venomous fool", the tone of the "Be angry and despatch", the tense and noble grandeur of the suicide scene with the high light it sheds on Cleopatra's character. For she was a remarkable woman, a great queen, a skilful ruler and politician, not merely the erotic *détraquée* people make of her. Shakespeare is not good at describing greatness, he poetised the *homme moyen*, but he has caught something here. The passage stands comparison with the words of Antony "I am dying, Egypt, dying" (down to "A Roman by a Roman, valiantly vanquished") which stand among the noblest expressions of high, deep, yet collected and contained emotion in literature — though that is a masculine and this a feminine nobility. There is in the ballad of Sir Patrick Spense the same poignancy and restraint — something that gives a sense of universality and almost impersonality in the midst of the pathetic expression of sorrow. There is a quiver but a high compassionate quiver, there is no wail or stutter or vehemence. As for the rhythm, it may be the ballad "alive", but it is not "kicking" — and it has the overtones and undertones which ballad rhythm has not at its native level. Then for the other example you have given — lines didactic in intention can be noble, as for instance, the example quoted by Arnold from Virgil,

Disce, puer, virtutem ex me verumque laborem,
Fortunam ex aliis

³ *If thou and nature can so gently part,
The stroke of death is as a lover's pinch
Which hurts and is desired. . . .
. . . Come, thou mortal wretch,
With thy sharp teeth this knot intricate
Of life at once untie. Poor venomous fool,
Be angry and despatch.*

— Shakespeare, Antony and Cleopatra

or the line quoted from Apollo's speech about the dead body of Hector and Achilles' long-nourished and too self-indulgent rage against it

tlēton gar Moirai thumon thesan anthrōpoisin.

These two lines

Still raise for good the supplicating voice,
But leave to heaven the measure and the choice,

are less fine and harmonious in their structure; there is something of a rhetorical turn and therefore it reaches a lower height of nobility, but nobility there is, especially in the second line of the couplet. I do not find it cold; there is surely a strong touch of poetic emotion there.

I may say however that grandeur and nobility are kindred but not interchangeable terms. One can be noble without reaching grandeur — one can be grand without the subtle quality of nobility. Zeus Olympius is grand and noble; Ravana or Briareus with the thousand arms is grand without being noble. Lear going mad in the storm is grand, but too vehement and disordered to be noble. I think the essential difference between the epic movement and ballad rhythm and language lies in this distinction between nobility and force — in the true ballad usually a bare, direct and rude force. The ballad metre has been taken by modern poets and lifted out of its normal form and movement, given subtle turns and cadences and made the vehicle of lyric beauty and fervour or of strong or beautiful narrative; but this is not the true original ballad movement and ballad motive. Scott's movement is narrative, not epic — there is also a lyrical narrative movement and that is the quality reached by Coleridge, perhaps the finest use yet made of the ballad movement. It is doubtful whether the ballad form can bear the epic lift for more than a line or two, a stanza or two — under the epic stress the original jerkiness remains while the lyric flow smooths it out. When it tries to lift to the epic height, it does so with a jerk, an explosive leap or a quick canter; one feels the rise, but there is still something of the old trot underneath the movement. It is at least what I feel

throughout in Chesterton — there is a sense of effort, of disguise with the crudity of the original material still showing through the brilliantly coloured drapery that has been put upon it. If there is no claim to epic movement, I do not mind and can take it for what it can give, but comparisons with Homer and Virgil and the classic hexameter are perilous and reveal the yawning gulf between the two movements. As to the line of fourteen syllables, Chapman often overcomes its difficulties but the jog-trot constantly comes out. It may be that all that can be surmounted, but Chapman and Chesterton do not surmount it — whatever their heights of diction or imagination, the metre interferes with their maintenance, even, I think, with their attaining their full eminence. Possibly a greater genius might wipe out the defect — but would a greater genius have cared to make the endeavour?

I have left myself no space or time for Chesterton as a poet and it is better so because I have not read the poem [*The Ballad of the White Horse*] and know him only by extracts. Your passages establish him as a poet, a fine and vivid poet by intervals, but not as a great or an epic poet — that is my impression. Sometimes I find your praise of particular passages extravagant, as when you seem to put Marlowe's mighty line

See, see where Christ's blood streams in the firmament

and Chesterton's facetious turn about the stretched necks and burned beards on a par. Humour can be poetic and even epic, like Kaikeyi's praise of Manthara's hump in the Ramayana; but this joke of Chesterton's does not merit such an apotheosis. That is ballad style, not mighty or epic. Again all that passage about Colan and Earl Harold is poor ballad stuff — except the first three lines and the last two — poor in diction, poor in movement. I am unable to enthuse over

It smote Earl Harold over the eye
And blood began to run.

The lines marrying the soft sentimentalism of the "small white daisies" with the crude brutality of the "blood out of the brain" made me at first smile with the sense of the incongruous, it

seemed almost like an attempt at humour — at least at the grotesque. I prefer Scott's *Marmion*; in spite of its want of imagination and breadth it is as good a thing as any Scott has written; on the contrary, these lines show Chesterton far below his best. The passage about the cholera and wheat is less flat; it is even impressive in a way, but impressive by an exaggerated bigness and forced attempt at epic greatness on one side and a forced and exaggerated childish sentimentalism on the other. The two do not fuse and the contrast is grotesque. This cholera image might be fine out of its context, it is at least powerful and vivid, but applied to a man (not a god or a demigod) it sounds too inflated — while the image of the massacrer muttering sentimentally about bread while he slew is so unnatural as to tread on or over the borders of the grotesque — it raises even a smile like the poor small white daisies red with blood out of Earl Harold's brain. I could criticise farther, but I refrain. On the other hand, Chesterton is certainly very fine by flashes. His images and metaphors and similies are rather explosive, sometimes they are mere conceits like the "cottage in the clouds", but all the same they have very often a high poetic quality of revealing vividness. At times also he has fine ideas finely expressed and occasionally he achieves a great lyrical beauty and feeling. He is terribly unequal and unreliable, violent, rocketlike, ostentatious, but at least in parts of this poem he does enter into the realms of poetry. Only I refuse to regard the poem as an epic — a sometimes low-falling, sometimes high-swinging lyrical narrative is the only claim I can concede to it.

2 February 1935

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"Noble" has a special meaning, also "elevation" is used in a certain sense by Arnold. In that sense these words do not seem to me to be applicable either to Chapman or to the ballad metre. Strong, forceful, energetic, impressive they may be — but nobility is a rarer, calmer, more self-mastered, highly harmonious thing than these are. Also nobility and grandeur are not quite the same thing.

2 February 1935

Austerity and Exuberance

I am still at a loss what to answer about উভাস, because I still don't understand exactly what your correspondent is aiming at in his criticism. There is not more *ucchvāsa* in Bengali poetry than in English, if by the word is meant rhetoric, free resort to imagery, prolix weaving of words and ideas and sentiments around what one has to say. Indian poetry in the Sanskrit languages — there are exceptions of course — was for the most part more restrained and classic in taste or else more impressionist and incisive than most English poetry; the qualities or defects noted above came into Bengali under the English influence. I don't see therefore the point of his remark that the English language cannot express the Indian temperament. It is true of course to a certain extent, first, because no foreign language can express what is intimate and peculiar in a national temperament, it tends at once to become falsified and seems exotic, and especially the imagery or sentiment of one language does not go well into that of another; least of all can the temperament of an Oriental tongue be readily transferred into a European tongue — what is perfectly simple and straightforward in one becomes emphatic or over-coloured or strange in the other. But that has nothing to do with *ucchvāsa* in itself. As to emotion — if that is what is meant, — your word effusiveness is rather unfortunate, for effusiveness is not praiseworthy in poetry anywhere; but vividness of emotion is no more reprehensible in English than in Bengali poetry. You give as examples of *ucchvāsa* among other things Madhusudan's style, Tagore's poem to me, a passage from Gobinda Das. I don't think there is anything in Madhusudan which an English poet writing in Bengali would have hesitated to father. Tagore's poem is written at a high pitch of feeling perfectly intelligible to anyone who had passed through the exaltation of the Swadeshi days, but not more high pitched than certain things in Milton, Shelley, Swinburne. In Gobinda Das's lines, — let us translate them into English

Am I merely thine? O Love, I am there clinging
 In every limb of thee — there ever is my creation and my
 dissolution,

the idea is one that would not so easily occur to an English poet, it is an erotic mysticism, easily suggested to a mind familiar with the experiences of Vedantic or Vaishnava mystics; but this is not effusiveness, it is intensity — and an English writer — e.g. Lawrence — could be quite as intense but would use a different idea or image. 1 October 1932

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It is not easy to say precisely what is austerity in the poetic sense — for it is a quality that can be felt, a spirit in the writer and the writing, but if you put it in the strait-waistcoat of a definition — or of a set technical method — you are likely to lose the spirit altogether. In the spirit of the writing you can feel it as something constant, — self-gathered, grave and severe; it is the quality that one at once is aware of in Milton, Wordsworth, Aeschylus and which even their most fervent admirers would hardly attribute to Shakespeare, Shelley, Keats, Tennyson, Euripides. But there is also an austerity in the poetic manner and that is more difficult to describe or to fix its borders. At most one can say that it consists in a will to express the thing of which you write, thought, object or feeling, in its just form and exact power without addition and without exuberance. The austerer method of poetry avoids all lax superfluity, all profusion of unnecessary words, excess of emotional outcry, self-indulgent daub of colour, over-brilliant scattering of images, all mere luxury of external art or artifice. To use just the necessary words and no others, the thought in its simplicity and bare power, the one expressive or revealing image, the precise colour and nothing more, just the exact impression, reaction, simple feeling proper to the object, — nothing spun out, additional, in excess. Any rioting in words, colour, images, emotions, sound, phrase for their own sake, for their own beauty, attraction, luxury of abundant expression or creation would, I suppose, be what your friend means by

ucchvāsa. Even, an extreme contemporary tendency seems to condemn the use of image, epithet, colour, pitch or emphasis of any kind, except on the most sparing scale, as a vice. Length in a poem is itself a sin, for length means padding — a long poem is a bad poem, only brief work, intense, lyrical in spirit can be throughout pure poetry. Milton, for example, considered austere by the common run of mortals, would be excluded from the list of the pure for his sprawling lengthiness, his epic rhetoric, his swelling phrases, his cult of the grandiose. To be perfect you must be small, brief and restrained, meticulous in cut and style.

This extremism in the avoidance of excess is perhaps itself an excess. Much can be done by bareness in poetry — a poetic nudism if accompanied by either beauty and grace or strength and power has its excellence. There can be a vivid or striking or forceful or a subtle, delicate or lovely bareness which reaches to the highest values of poetic expression. There can be also a compact or a stringent bareness — the kind of style deliberately aimed at by Landor; but this can be very stiff and stilted as Landor is in his more ambitious attempts — although he did magnificent things sometimes, like his lines on Rose Aylmer, — you can see there how emotion itself can gain by a spare austerity in self-expression. But it is doubtful whether all these kinds — Wordsworth's lyrics, for example, the "Daffodils", the "Cuckoo" — can be classed as austere. On the other hand there can be a very real spirit and power of underlying austerity behind a considerable wealth and richness of expression. Arnold in one of his poems gives the image of a girl beautiful, rich and sumptuous in apparel on whose body, killed in an accident, was found beneath the sumptuousness, next to the skin, an under-robe of sackcloth. If that is admitted, then Milton can keep his claim to austerity in spite of his epic fullness and Aeschylus in spite of the exultant daring of his images and the rich colour of his language. Dante is, I think, the perfect type of austerity in poetry, standing between the two extremes and combining the most sustained severity of expression with a precise power and fullness in the language which gives the sense of packed riches — no mere bareness anywhere.

But after all exclusive standards are out of place in poetry; there is room for all kinds and all methods. Shakespeare was to the French classicists a drunken barbarian of genius; but his spontaneous exuberance has lifted him higher than their willed severity of classical perfection. All depends on the kind one aims at — expressing what is in oneself — and an inspired faithfulness to the law of perfection in that kind. That needs some explanation, perhaps, — but I have here perforce to put a dash and finish —

8 October 1932

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I said that Aeschylus like Milton was austere *au fond* — there is as in Dante a high serious restrained power behind all they write; but the outward form in Milton is grandiose, copious, lavish of strength and sweep, in Aeschylus bold, high-imaged, strong in colour, in Dante full of concise, packed and significantly forceful turn and phrase. These external riches might seem not restrained enough to the purists of austerity: they want the manner and not the *fond* only to be impeccably austere. I did not mean that Dante reached the summit of austerity in this sense; in fact I said he stood between the two extremes of bare austerity and sumptuousness of language. But even in his language there is a sense of *tapasyā*, of concentrated restraint in his expressive force. Amal in his translation [*from Dante*] has let himself go in the direction of eloquence more than Dante who is too succinct for eloquence, and he uses also a mystical turn of phrase which is not Dante's — yet he has got something of the spirit in the language, something of Dante's concentrated force of expression into his lines. You have spread yourself out more even than Amal, but still there is the Dantesque in your lines also, — very much so, I should say; with only this difference that Dante would have put it into fewer words than you do. It is the Dantesque stretching itself out a little — more large-limbed, permitting itself more space.

Aeschylus' manner cannot be described as *ucchvāsa*, at least in the sense given to it in my letter. He is not carefully restrained and succinct in his language like Dante, but there is a certain royal measure even in his boldness of colour and image which

has in it the strength of *tapasyā* and cannot be called *ucchvāsa*. I suppose in Bengali this term is used a little indiscriminately for things that are not quite the same in spirit. If mere use of bold image and fullness of expression, epithet, colour, splendour of phrase is *ucchvāsa*, apart from the manner of their use, I would say that austerity and *ucchvāsa* of a certain kind are perfectly compatible. At any rate two-thirds of the poetry hitherto recognised as the best in different literatures comes of a combination of these two elements. If I find time I shall one day try to explain this point with texts to support it.

I don't know the Bengali for austerity. গাষ্ঠীর্ষ and other kindred things are or can be elements of austerity, but are not austerity itself. *Anucchvāsa* is not accurate; one can be free from উদ্ভাস without being austere. The soul of austerity in poetry as in Yoga is আন্তঃসংযম all the rest is variable, the outward quality of the austerity itself may be variable. 9 October 1932

Sentimentality and Clichés

It is all right as it is except the first lines, “. . . so grief-hearted . . . *strangely* lone”, strike at once the romantically sentimental note of more than a hundred years ago which is dead and laughed out of court nowadays. Especially in writing anything about vital love, avoid like the plague anything that descends into the sentimental or, worse, the namby-pamby. 30 May 1932

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“Young heart”, “thrilled companionship”, “warm hour . . . lip to lip”, “passionate unease” are here poorly sensuous *clichés* — they or any one or two of them might have been carried off in a more moved and inspired style, gathering colour from their surroundings or even a new and rich life; but here they stand out in a fashionable dressed-up insufficiency. This secret of fusing all in such a white heat or colour heat of sincerity of inspiration that even the common or often-used phrases and ideas catch fire and burn brilliantly with the rest is one of the secrets of the true poetic afflatus. But if you stop short of that inspiration and

begin to write only efficient poetry, then you must be careful about your “P”s and “Q”s.

19 March 1932

Undignified Words

I dispute the legitimacy of the comment.⁴ It is based on a conventional objection to undignified and therefore presumably unpoetic words and images — an objection which has value only when the effect is uncouth or trivial, but cannot be accepted otherwise as a valid rule. Obviously, it might be difficult to bring in “bobbing” in an epic or other “high” style, although I suppose Milton could have managed it and one remembers the famous controversy about Hugo’s “*mouchoir*”. But in poetry of a mystic (occult or spiritual) kind this does not count. The aim is to bring up a vivid suggestion of the thing seen and some significance of the form, movement, etc. through which one can get at the life behind and its meaning; a familiar adjective here can serve its purpose very well as a touch in the picture and there are occasions when no other could be as true and living or give so well the precise movement needed.

It is the same with the metre — an identical principle applies, a natural kinship between the subject or substance of the poem and its soul-movement. For instance, a certain lightness, a suggestion of faery dance or faery motion may be needed as one element and this would be lost by the choice of a heavier more dignified rhythm. After all, subject to a proper handling, that is the first important desideratum, an essential harmony between the metrical rhythm and the thing it has to express.

5 February 1932

Sensuousness and Vulgarity

পূর্ণক্ৰম, if it means the breasts, would be described in English as sensuous but not as vulgar. The word vulgar is only used for coarse and crude expressions of the sensual, trivial or ugly. But

⁴ Someone commented, apropos of a poem written by the correspondent: “There is one adjective I take objection to, ‘bobbing globelets’.” — Ed.

it does not seem to me that it should naturally be taken = breast, but indicate the whole vital and physical being regarded as a vessel or jar which can be filled with honey or water or poison. Nothing vulgar in that.

30 January 1937

Erotic Poetry

An expression of the lower vital lashed to imaginative fury is likely to produce not poetry but simply “sound and fury”, — “tearing a passion to tatters” — and in its full furiousness may even rise to rant and fustian. Erotic poetry more than any other needs the restraint of beauty and form and measure, otherwise it risks being no longer poetic but merely pathologic.

14 June 1932

Poetry and Philosophy

What does your correspondent mean by “philosophy” in a poem? Of course if one sets out to write a metaphysical argument or treatise in verse like the Greek Empedocles or the Roman Lucretius, it is a risky business and is likely to land you into prosaic poetry which is a less pardonable mixture than poetic prose! Even when philosophising in a less perilous way, one has to be careful not to be flat or heavy. It is obviously easier to be poetic when singing about a skylark than when one tries to weave a robe of verse to clothe the attributes of the Brahman! But that does not mean that there can be no spiritual thought or no expression of truth in poetry; there is no great poet who has not tried to philosophise. Shelley wrote about the skylark, but he also wrote about the Brahman. “Life, like a dome of many-coloured glass” is as good poetry as “Hail to thee, blithe Spirit!”. There are flights of unsurpassable poetry in the Gita and the Upanishads. These rigid dicta are always excessive and there is no reason why a poet should allow the expression of his personality or the spirit within him or his whole poetic mind to be clipped, cabined or stifled by any theories or “thou shalt not”s of that character.

7 December 1931

I can take no stock in your friend's theories — at that rate half the world's poetry would have to disappear. And what is meant by philosophy — there is none in your poem, there is only vision and emotion of spiritual experience, which is a different thing altogether. Truth and thought and sight cast into forms of beauty cannot be banished in that cavalier way. Music and art and poetry have striven from the beginning to express the vision of the deepest and greatest things and not the things of the surface only, and it will be so as long as there are poetry and art and music. 27 February 1932

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The only remedy is to extend the philosophy through the whole poem so as to cure the disparateness. Also it must be a figured philosophy. Philosophy can become poetry if it ceases to be intellectual and abstract in statement and becomes figured and carries a stamp of poetic emotion and vision. 14 June 1938