The Poet and the Poem

Power of Expression and Spiritual Experience

All depends on the power of expression of the poet. A poet like Shakespeare or Shelley or Wordsworth though without spiritual experience may in an inspired moment become the medium of an expression of spiritual Truth which is beyond him and the expression, as it is not that of his own mind, may be very powerful and living, not merely aesthetically agreeable. On the other hand a poet with spiritual experience may be hampered by his medium or by his transcribing brain or by an insufficient mastery of language and rhythm and give an expression which may mean much to him but not convey the power and breath of it to others. The English poets of the 17th century often used a too intellectual mode of expression for their poetry to be a means of living communication to others — except in rare moments of an unusual vision and inspiration; it is these that give their work its value. 8 July 1935

Experience and Imagination

But is it necessary to say which is which?¹ It is not possible to deny that it was an experience, even if one cannot affirm it — not being in the consciousness of the writer. But even if it is an imagination, it is a powerful poetic imagination which expresses what would be the exact feeling in the real experience. It seems to me that that is quite enough. There are so many things in Wordsworth and Shelley which people say were only mental feelings and imaginations and yet they express the deeper

¹ Someone said to the correspondent, in regard to a certain poem: “This may not be an experience at all; who knows if it is not an imagination, and how are we to say which is which?” — Ed.
seeings or feelings of the seer. For poetry it seems to me the point is irrelevant. 27 May 1936

Poetic Expression and Personal Feeling

What you say is quite true. Poets are mediums for a force of vision and expression that is not theirs, so they need not feel except by reflection the emotions they utter. But of course that is not always the case — sometimes they express what they feel or at any rate what a part of their being feels. 25 September 1934

What the poets feel when writing (those who are truly inspired) is the great Ananda of creation, possession by a great Power superior to their ordinary minds which puts some emotion or vision of things into a form of beauty. They feel the emotion of the thing they express, but not always as a personal feeling, but as something which seizes hold of them for self-expression. But the personal feeling also may form a basis for the creation. 26 September 1934

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These designations, a magnified ego, an exalted outlook of the vital mind, apply in sadhana, but hardly to poetic expression which lifts or ought to lift to a field of pure personal-impersonal bhāva. An utterance of this kind can express a state of consciousness or an experience which is not necessarily the writer’s personal position or ego attitude but that of an inner spirit. So long as it is so the question of ego does not arise. It arises only if one turns away from the poem to the writer and asks in what mood he wrote it and that is a question of psychological fact alien to the purpose of poetry. 29 June 1935

The Two Parts of the Poetic Creator

Your poem2 is forcible enough, but the quality is rather rheto-

2 To a German Soldier Left Behind in Retreat by Arjava. — Ed.
rical than poetic. Yet at the end there are two lines that are very fine poetry

Gay singing birds caught in a ring of fire

and

A silent scorn that sears Eternity.

If you could not write the whole in that strain, which would have made it epic almost in pitch, it is, I think, because your indignation was largely mental and moral, the emotion though very strong being too much intellectualised in expression to give the poetic intensity of speech and movement. Indignation, the saevo indignatio of Juvenal, can produce poetry, but it must be either vividly a vital revolt which stirs the whole feeling into a white heat of self-expression — as in Milton’s famous sonnet — or a high spiritual or deep psychic rejection of the undivine. Besides, it is well known that the emotion of the external being, in the raw as it were, does not make good material for poetry; it has to be transmuted into something deeper, less externally personal, more permanent before it can be turned into good poetry. There are always two parts of oneself which collaborate in poetry — the instrumental which lives and feels what is written, makes a sort of projective identification with it, and the Seer-Creator within who is not involved, but sees the inner significance of it and listens for the word that shall entirely express this significance. It is in some meeting-place of these two that what is felt or lived is transmuted into true stuff of poetry. Probably you are not sufficiently detached from this particular life-experience and the reactions it created to go back deeper into yourself and transmute it in this way. And yet you have done it in the two magnificent lines I have noted, which have the virtue of seizing the inner significance behind the thing experienced in the poetic or interpretative and not in the outward mental way. The first of these two lines conveys the pathos and tragedy of the thing and also the stupidity of the waste much more effectively than pages of denunciation or comment and the other stresses with an extraordinary power in a few words the problem as
flung by the revolting human mind and life against the Cosmic Impersonal.

The detachment of which you speak, comes by attaining the poise of the Spirit, the equality, of which the Gita speaks always, but also by sight, by knowledge. For instance, looking at what happened in 1914 — or for that matter at all that is and has been happening in human history — the eye of the Yogin sees not only the outward events and persons and causes, but the enormous forces which precipitate them into action. If the men who fought were instruments in the hands of rulers and financiers, these in turn were mere puppets in the clutch of those forces. When one is habituated to see the things behind, one is no longer prone to be touched by the outward aspects — or to expect any remedy from political, institutional or social changes; the only way out is through the descent of a consciousness which is not the puppet of these forces but is greater than they are and can compel them either to change or disappear.

17 July 1931

**Personal Character and Creative Work**

The statement that a man’s poetry or art need not express anything that has happened in his outer personal life is too obvious to be made so much of; the real point is how far his work can be supposed to be a transcript of his inner mind or mental life. It is obvious that his vital cast, his character may have very little to do with his writing, it may be its very opposite. His physical mind also does not determine it; the physical mind of a romantic poet or artist may very well be that of a commonplace respectable bourgeois. One who in his fiction is a benevolent philanthropist and reformer full of sentimental pathos, gushful sympathy or cheery optimistic sunshine may have been in actual life selfish, hard, even cruel. All that is now well known and illustrated by numerous examples in the lives of great poets and artists. It is evidently in the inner mental personality of a man that the key to his creation must be discovered, not in “his” outward mind or life or not solely or chiefly these. But a poem or work of art need not be (though it may be) an exact transcription of a
mental or spiritual experience; even, if the creating mind takes up an incident of the life, a vital impression, emotion or reaction that had actually taken place, it need not be anything more than a starting point for the poetic creation. The “I” of a poem is more often than not a dramatic or representative I, nothing less and nothing more. But it does not help to fall back on the imagination and say that a man’s poetry or art is only the web of his imagination working with whatever material it may happen to choose. The question is how the imagination of a poet came to be cast in this peculiar mould which differentiates him as a creator not only from the millions who do not create but from all other poetic creators. There are two possible answers. A poet or artist may be merely a medium for a creative Force which uses him as a channel and is concerned only with expression in art and not with the man’s personality or his inner or outer life. Or, man being a multiple personality, a crowd of personalities which are tangled up on the surface, but separate within, the poet or artist in him may be only one of these many personalities concerned solely with its inner and creative function; it may retire when the creative act is over leaving the field to the others. In his work the poet personality may — or may not — use the experiences of the others as material for his work, but he will then modify them to suit his own turns and tendencies or express his own ideal of self or ideal of things. He may too take a hand in the life of the composite personality, meddle with the activity of the others, try to square their make-up and action with his own images and ideals. In fact there is a mixture of the two things that makes the poet. Fundamentally he is a medium for the creative Force, which acts through him and uses or picks up anything stored up in his mind from its inner life or its memories or impressions of outer life and things, or anything subconscious, subliminal or superconscious in him, anything it can or cares to make use of and it moulds it as it chooses for its purpose. But still it is through the poet personality in him that it works and this poet personality may be either a mere reed through which the Spirit blows but which is laid aside after the tune is over or it may be an active power having some say even in the surface
mental composition and vital and physical activities of the total composite creature. In that general possibility there is room for a hundred degrees and variations and no rule can be laid down that covers all possible or actual cases. 7 November 1935

**Literary Style and Hereditary Influences**

It seems to me that this statement is quite untrue. A man’s style expresses himself, not the sum and outcome of his ancestors. 24 January 1937

**Life-Experience and Literary Creation**

Emotion alone is not enough for producing anything that can be called great creation. It can bring out something lyrical and slight or subjectively expressive and interpretative; but for a great or significant creation there must be a background of life, a vital rich and stored or a mind and an imagination that has seen much and observed much or a soul that has striven and been conscious of its strivings. These or at least one or other of them are needed, but a limited and ignorant way of living is not likely to produce them. There may indeed be a lucky accident even in the worst circumstances — but one cannot count on accidents. A George Eliot, a George Sand, a Virginia Woolf, a Sappho, or even a Comtesse de Noailles grew up in other circumstances. 30 April 1933

*What a stupidly rigid principle!* Can Buddhadev really write nothing except what he has seen or experienced? What an

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3 “For style in the full sense is more than the deliberate and designed creation, more even than the unconscious and involuntary creation, of the individual man who therein expresses himself. The self that he thus expresses is a bundle of inherited tendencies that came the man himself can never entirely know whence.” — Havelock Ellis, *The Dance of Life* (London: Constable, 1923), p. 175.

4 The Bengali writer Buddhadev Bose remarked that great literature could not be produced by people living in entire seclusion in Pondicherry. — Ed.
unimaginative man he must be! And how dull his stories must be and how limited.

I wonder whether Victor Hugo had to live in a convicts’ prison before he created Jean Valjean. Certainly one has to look at life, but there is no obligation to copy faithfully from life. The man of imagination carries a world in himself and a mere hint or suggestion from life is enough to start it going. It is recognised now that Balzac and Dickens created out of themselves their greatest characters which were not at all faithful to the life around them. Balzac’s descriptions of society are hopelessly wrong, he knew nothing about it, but his world is much more striking and real than the actual world around him which he misrepresented — even life has imitated the figures he made rather than the other way round.

Besides who is living in entire seclusion in Pondicherry? There are living men and women around you and human nature is in full play here as much as in the biggest city — only one has to have an eye to see what is within them and the imagination that takes a few bricks and can make out of them a great edifice — one must be able to see that human nature is one everywhere and pick out of it the essential things or the interesting things that can be turned into great art. 26 May 1934

The Illusion of Realism

I am afraid your correspondent is under the grip of what I may call the illusion of realism. What all artists do is to take something from life — even if it be only a partial hint — and transfer it by the magic of their imagination and make a world of their own; the realists, e.g., Zola, Tolstoy, do it as much as anybody else. Each artist is a creator of his own world — why then insist on this legal fiction that the artist’s world must appear as an exact imitation of the actual world around us? Even if it does so seem, that is only a skilful make-up, an appearance. It may be constructed to look like that — but why must it be? The characters and creations of even the most sternly objective fiction, much more the characters and creations of poetry live by
the law of their own life, which is something in the inner mind of their creator — they cannot be constructed as copies of things outside.

30 January 1933