

Chapter Two

In this part we turn to poetry itself after perceiving the conditions hostile to its value peculiar to this age in India. Let us recall what we said earlier – that poetry is inseparable from life, and that it is a value to us, and that it cannot be understood without the habit of reading it. They are claims for poetry, and we must substantiate them. What exactly does poetry offer to us? That is the question that engages us hereafter. Many things can be said and have been said about poetry. But the point is to tell the relevant from the irrelevant. Rather, we must get a point relevant to poetry, and not ideas about it. Usually poetry is a tempting subject for loose discourse of generalities or for academic discourse of theories and ideas. Poetry must prove its value by what it offers. As human achievement, it must justify its claims. Here we must avoid saying things which are external to it; usually, high-sounding impressive ideas on poetry, which were once common, and also admired, are not at a discount. Theories still hold their ground in the academic world. Ideas of philosophy, psychology, and anthropology are a matter of changing fashion in the literary criticism of poetry. Metaphysical theories of poetry are rare nowadays, but abstract statements on the nature and importance of poetry seem unavoidable. It is common to talk about poetry without reading much of poetry. Many people make insufferable remarks on poetry as if it is a national pride. Usually they speechify on arts; it is note-worthy that most of them are public figures. In India there is a quaint discourse of self-elating statements of idealism and spiritualism on poetry. I say that for the Indian, the best things on poetry are the inspirational ideas, lofty ideals, and spiritual intimations. I forget to mention in this context, the deep-rooted habit in many academics of making self-flattering comments on poetry. My own observation is that poetry is now so unimportant that no one makes any effort to say something worthwhile, and that no one can be engaged in it. In such a condition false things will be said on the question of poetry. Great poetry is the greatest achievement, whether you accept Shelley's wider definition of it or not. Such a praise of poetry will receive sentimental approval but poetry will not be read with any concentration. The condition in which we can be meaningfully related to poetry doesn't exist: poetry requires concentration but our interests and preoccupations do not allow for it. An educated man must have read a few poems at school for the sake of his examinations. As an adult he has neither the taste nor the time for poetry. But he can engage himself in sensational fiction. Yes, his level of mind is a great condition against poetry. There is then only an academic concern for poetry, but it lacks the spirit of life; we will have a few more things later to say on this point. What is relevant to conclude here is that in our circumstances poetry isn't a true object of attention influencing the mind. Of course poetry is praised as the teaching profession is praised in India, though no one wants to be a teacher if one can get a job of position elsewhere. Let me not be considered harsh if I remark that you are reading these poems without a real interest in poetry. I won't blame you for that. At your age you do certain things, for which you aren't always responsible. You didn't grow up in a country in which the reading of poetry was a vital part of finer life - you aren't receiving your education in a country with a finer life impinging on you. But this country should have been one in which you could be reading your poems with interest in poetry, and you could be cultivating habits related to a finer life. But the Western impact changed the fate of India, and you have to struggle to change your consciousness which has been formed, like that of the general educated Indian, following the Western impact, if you wish to read poetry for the enrichment of your mind. Your effort to read these poems must be related to another effort you have to make in altering your mind; let me warn you that your first effort will be wasteful without this later effort for producing good results. Until we create the condition for changing our life-style of modern choices by learning – by perception and thought – poetry will be read mechanically without its effect, and it will not be noticed as important.

Our present consciousness cannot perceive that poetry offers us life which is vital to the mind. There can never be a finer life without the impact of poetry. Poetry may not reach each mind, but its power to enrich us is there in the Mind in the civilization. We don't judge a value like poetry or music or philosophy by deciding whether or not the majority of mind want it. On the other hand, we judge the value by its being essential for the Mind. There is no civilization without the Mind and the vice-versa. The individual minds are related to the Mind and to the civilization; they cannot survive without this relation. Life is directed by the Mind, which is the energy of intelligence, perception and thought within a given civilization. Only in pre-civilization times and in degenerate times after the advent of civilization do minds act without the force of the Mind acting on them. No doubt, the mind is individual, but how is it a Mind? Where does it get its

power and intelligence? Surely it gets it from outside it – well from the Mind from which life and energy for perception, intelligence and thought can be drawn. An individual mind, to achieve a finer life, has to go on knowing more and more and feeling deeper and deeper by receiving fresh energy every time from the Mind. There is no Mind in any race which cannot boast of great achievements, and the Mind, embodying great achievements, is creative of intelligence and the power to feel and think. By its generative principle, the Mind transforms the individual minds. Poetry belongs to the Mind, but commerce doesn't. Science, up to the end of the Nineteenth century, belonged to The Mind, but not in this century. What belongs and what doesn't belong to the Mind is determined by testing if it fosters a vital relation between the Mind and the minds. Today, look at any one, you will find something inhuman in his face, well, anyone like the educated Indian; it is because he doesn't belong to the Mind, and is not in a vital relation to it. He cannot even conceive of experiences, which link each one with the other; and cannot even understand that living means learning, knowing, and feeling, which are possible for the mind drawing its nourishments from the Mind. Learning, knowing and feeling which are essential for living, cannot be possible except in a vital relation to the Mind; to understand the point here, let them be emphasized and identified as such. In and through them, human life expresses itself by contrast, it doesn't express itself in and through the knowledge of commerce, medicine and engineering, which aren't inessential by any means, but which do not engender power for the mind, strengthening it in its learning, knowing and feeling. Certainly, poetry belonging to the Mind does generate this power, which raises the level of living, and vitalizes the humanity of man. Poetry isn't knowledge like the subjects, which mentioned above; but their use is so much in evidence that poetry without any use like theirs, appears to the Indian philistines little more than a trifle. The Indian philistine, who is the real and major problem in India is one with a mind separated from the Mind mainly by the changes produced by the Western impact. Whatever is to be conceived of in thought and whatever is to be felt by sensibility is taken to be abstract and unreal, because he cannot observe them as physical items. Note here something interesting; what is true and essential is dubbed as abstract and unreal, but at the same time, in his ideological discourse, he makes abstract statements based on his famous ideas; he cannot see anything abstract and ridiculous here, because, they are his own, but what he cannot understand, is condemned as abstract. He loves rhetorical speeches on pseudo-problems facing humanity and on unidentifiable moral questions – particularly, he enjoys thundering speeches aimed at society in the abstract and at human vices, like the Turkish bath. Knowledge for him, is the knowledge of physical items; it is to this effect that science has influenced him. Ideas mean ideas of social justice and political organization, and of course, scientific ideas. Thinking is planning and programming – it is debased thinking, nothing more than a civil servant's ideas and a contractor's planning. Acting for the philistine is more important than anything else, as if reading and learning when they are not connected with utilitarian subjects, is insignificant. This philistine, with his ideas, his spirit, his will, and his self-estimate cannot identify the value of poetry nor can he recognize its identification, if pointed out, and the majority being on his side he can afford to dismiss the value of poetry with his nose in the air. Possessing a mind which has broken off with the Mind, he cannot imagine a value for anything which doesn't justify itself by its use in practical affairs. Living is conceived of as planning, acting and possessing; but the sense of human relations in a finer life is too abstruse for his clear, practical mind. That human life is both living in human relations, and planning and acting doesn't seem to be rational to the Indian philistine. What is rational for him is planning, acting, and possessing and what is most unimportant is the consideration of human relations. That there is a mind which is not a mind unless it has undergone growth and formation, and that for its growth and formation, civilization with its achievements, the Mind, is indispensable, wont carry weight with him. His attention is too fixed on wealth and status and on industrial progress to be sensitive to the defense of poetry, and he is too preoccupied with ideas of social reform, scientific ideas, and democratic ideas, to grasp a point about poetry and to be struck by its power. He is too fixed on them to be intelligent. What we oppose is the philistine line of being brought up to be an individualist, a careerist, and perhaps later, a psychological case; but we favour the line of an Indian being brought up and educated to be an Indian in vital relation to the values of the Indian civilization, let him be what wants to be - a doctor or an engineer or a civil servant or an industrialist. I believe that a true consciousness of the Indian philistine's character is very important for reading and understanding poetry. India is dominated by the Indian philistine, and so poetry is not a matter of importance in India. What he holds to be important is against the values which we are defending. By learning now those things in India to which we have been specially blind, we must take a position and relate ourselves to poetry as men with a capacity to know and feel more deeply.

Poetry is not a question of knowledge like medicine, engineering, and commerce. It is a power, essential for living. As long as we don't desire finer life, we can do without it, as in fact we do now. By preparation we must have access to this power, and the most important thing we have gained for preparation is the position in which we place ourselves after learning about the conditions following the Western impact which have brought about the growth of the Indian philistinism. We need not read poetry any longer as philistines, and we aren't unconscious of the conditions that make us false. But still we have to acquire the discipline for reading poetry, as in our education there is no provision for it. What we have mainly learnt so far is about the conditions outside poetry hostile to it and about poetry as a value to the mind. We have also observed the place of poetry within the civilization, while touching on what poetry offers to us. We have to learn a good deal more and by practice in reading poetry, we might be equal to assessing it. To think that it is easy to read and judge poetry would be self-deceiving. That poetry is difficult to read is natural. Reading and discussing it without being false in spirit is a transforming activity in which the value to our mind lies. Since poetry is power, it has to be drawn, as if it is a struggle to do so; the reward is that the power drawn and absorbed makes us men of our civilization and it creates in us a desire for finer life. To live without the impact of poetry is the same to live as a prey to psychological impulses of individualism and to ideological ideas, not knowing ultimately where we are going. The power of poetry is against the false spirit, false moves and illusions. By it, the mind can become creative, acquiring standards and reviewing its own position. Poetry gives us a chance to live a fuller life, like classical music. Man as God creates poetry, and men must read it in order to live as passionate men. It is man turned clever, selfish, and nasty who furnishes the knowledge of commerce. Man must be greedy to work for the knowledge of science. Knowledge of these subjects is dangerous to the mind unless it is empowered by cultural habits and education to assess its scope and limitations. In our time there is no chance that the mind could ever be empowered so as to be possessed of the discriminating and judging ability. So, we have to struggle with poetry to make it yield its results to us.

If we drop the idea that poetry is knowledge and consider that it is a power with its effect which is valuable to us, we have made only some advance, and there are still many confusions to be cleared. There are confusions because there are one-sided or far-fetched or false ideas on poetry, which are mistaken to be true. Conceiving of poetry rightly is a challenging task for one has to do hard work to achieve it. We have to conceive of it rightly to be influenced by it. In considering and appraising the nature and importance of poetry which we hold to be a power in helping us to know and feel more deeply, and in estimating the worth of the knowledge of any subject, our point of departure is the mind in vital relation to the values of its civilization. Our consciousness is often a false consciousness because for one thing it lacks a true point of view from which it can learn about a matter and make a point on it, and for another it satisfies itself with ideas, refusing to go further to perceptions and thought. It is mainly false, because it does not take the trouble to lean that truth cannot be seen but must be thought about. Learning is very important for living, particularly learning related to thinking and feeling; and it must be distinguished from many crude forms of knowledge. What we have at our disposal through modern education is essentially a crude form of knowledge, as what is claimed to be knowledge is hardly ever stated in a form in which it can be a value. Learning is knowledge which has become a value. Knowledge must be restricted to that which is stated so as to become a value. We very much suffer from false identification in recognizing and approving of knowledge. Here, two distinctions must be carefully kept in view. Real knowledge must be distinguished from pseudo-knowledge, and the power of poetry from real knowledge. From real knowledge you can sense the power of poetry. In argument you cannot establish a clear-cut distinction between real knowledge and pseudo-knowledge but one's mind must be so trained as to sense the distinction unmistakably. Here, an example that comes to my mind now might be helpful. Compare Arnold's essay or Wordsworth with any of the essays written on him by modern academic critics. Arnold's essay is a true knowledge of perception and standards from which you can sense the power of Wordsworth's poetry, while, though not all of the academic essays are phoney, yet they have too little life, too little spirit, and too little thought. Lionel Trilling's essay cannot stand comparison with Arnold's; for Trilling has no mind equal to grasping the power of Wordsworth's poetry to demonstrate to the reader. Trilling with his American academism could not approach Wordsworth with the spirit of civilization and with concern for civilization and had to choose ideas in Wordsworth. On the contrary Arnold could read Wordsworth with the spirit of civilization and with concern for the civilization, why? Because he has a very fine and deep consciousness of literature with a real interest in life - and he can estimate poetry by its life. It is difficult to elaborate the vital difference between the two, and grasping the difference is an excellent preparation for reading poetry. It is

an excellent preparation or rather discipline for reading and understanding poetry, well, because you will observe two different minds with differing interests, and you will perceive that one has the vitality of the past and a deep interest in human life and the other has no more than an academic interest, and little more than a false spirit, to bring to bear upon his reading of Wordsworth. The difference in their reading of Wordsworth is vital to the students of poetry. The discipline for reading poetry consists in reading poetry with a real interest in life till you acquire the habit of reading it and the ability to judge it by its life. Poetry is a great achievement of civilization; by reading and understanding it it is possible not to have a false consciousness and a false spirit, and we acquire a sense of life, disregarding self-interest. It is a big claim for poetry but you can see that it is not an exaggerated claim, if you are a disciplined reader of poetry. With self-interests dominating the mind (self-interests are just the same as philistine interests) you can never get anything out of poetry. Poetry must interest you in such a way that it should affect your other interests. You cannot read poetry with your interest in poetry being kept aloof from any other interest. Trilling kept his interest in poetry aloof from his other interest, but in Arnold there was no such division. Poetry is useless unless it affects and modifies your life. It mustn't change you like an attractive idea but act like the subtle pressure of intimation.

There is another point of discipline on which I insist. It is this: when one talks, for instance, on *Hamlet*, one forgets the poetry in which one reads his character, and expresses opinions as if there is no difference between *Hamlet* in poetry and *Hamlet* in prose. *Hamlet* in prose is worth nothing to us. The poetry of *Hamlet* is far more important than Hamlet the character. We agree that both are inseparable – as an idea – but when we consider the character, the poetry fades away from our mind. Here we meet with one danger, namely, the danger of reading ideas into the poetry of the character, and still worse, of applying theories. What the character intimates in poetry is what concerns us; in this sense, the word 'character' is misleading, since it evokes in us certain references, the range of which is so wide that the richness of character is lost to us as we, in a scholarly fashion, consider Hamlet in many irrelevant ways. Then, the spirit that sends us to Hamlet is not the spirit of life, we read Hamlet as pseudo-scholars. Judge Hamlet by his life in poetry. Academic interpretation kills the life of the character. Hamlet is a problem – not a literary problem for us because he means so much. A sense of Hamlet's life in its puzzling richness is the priceless gift Shakespeare has left to us. It must affect the organizing principle of our mind. Mastering Hamlet's poetry is necessary not only to have a standard for poetry itself, but also for conceiving of life. Its power is greater than you can possess by any other means. It is not an isolating but integrating power, which is contrary to the effect of the knowledge of other subjects. Not the broad tendency, but the subtle points in a character, are what make the art rich. If you don't master Shakespeare's poetry, Hamlet gets out of control, and you find him fitting many ideas and theories in your head. It is very difficult to read *Hamlet* meaningfully without a hard-earned discipline. To be disciplined in reading and interpreting *Hamlet* is to be disciplined in living. The mind which acquires this discipline is a human mind in vital relation to the Mind, but when the mind is without this discipline and outside any positive relation to the Mind, it is psychological, individualistic, and inhuman – it is the modern mind which has no use for the power of poetry, that makes it feel and know more deeply. It is the mind of practical affairs in commercial industrialism between which and values of human achievement there is an inevitable break-up. As great human achievement poetry yield power, essential for life, but no knowledge of any subject on which we place so much premium because of its application in practical affairs can do that for us. Since we do not have a sense of life in which we perceive the role of poetry, we are not convinced of the claims here made for it. To have a sense of living that the more refined and vitalized a mind is, the finer the life it can lead, will alone convince us of the importance of poetry. One must have a consciousness of the necessity of values to be sensible in any argument on poetry. The human mind cannot be human unless it is grown up and organized on the basis of human achievements. Consider the human mind, to be found everywhere now, that has nothing other than modern education, science or commerce subjects, and later a job in commercial industrialism; consider it carefully in its character of modernism absolutely estranged from the past and its achievements, doesn't it appear hideous! You might never have considered it in this light before, you yourself being possessed of the progressive spirit and the progressive ideas of the Indian philistine. Poetry, when it is read with the right discipline, can recover us from the modernism of the philistine mind. You may not read *Hamlet*; but if you read it as a philistine, you will only know Hamlet's story and some ideas, perhaps. You must read it while liberating yourself from philistinism; here lies the secret of the discipline for pursuing literature. The organization of such poetry as we have in *Hamlet* is bound up with the growth and organization of our mind. Describing, then, *Hamlet*, in academically established terms or in literary jargon, could be very

misleading, and it may never allow you to get involved with the play. Reading an achievement like *Hamlet* is fighting for life and opposing what must be opposed in the interests of life. Reading it is an even of incalculable importance. Reading it is living differently, and more fully than before, and its mastery is one of the great values of human life. Here, there are two things to be gained from an awareness of an academic discussion on *Hamlet*; we will see its degree of relevance and we will learn the details of the play more sharply.

What we must guard against is the usual practice of getting a surface sense of a poem and a few ideas in addition, which could be very distorting or very inadequate to the content of the poem. I talked earlier of hard-earned discipline; it alone helps us. But we must give up our accustomed idea of discipline being identified with obedient behaviour, or with the prudent spirit, or with the superficial manners one gets in a missionary school. The discipline I think of is quite opposed to the philistine idea of discipline. It is a preparation and a force of energy for living, for perception and thought in the interests of life; by this discipline you can have access to the power of poetry. The reading of *Culture and Anarchy* is infinitely far better preparation and a force of energy for getting access to the power of poetry than all the ideas and theories bandied about in the American academic discourse. The preparation one has for a career in commercial industrialism in the modern Indian circumstances sends one away from poetry as well as from other achievements. It is very much akin to the training that circus animals receive. There is no mistaking here; we must be firm on Indian philistinism, which is ruinous to the Indian life and the Indian mind. Reading poetry is the point (so also listening to classical music) at which today we face the problem of losing the values of civilization by the threat of the modern spirit of the modern lifestyle. Poetry, like Music, is the sustenance for the human mind to keep its human character. To be roused against the Indian philistinism is to be sane and the spirit so roused will draw its strength from the values ignored by philistinism.

We said that poetry is a human achievement, that it is a power essential for living, and that it is one of the values of civilization. This is praise enough for poetry, but it can be objected that it lacks content, being tainted by abstractness and an insufficient basis. Surely, it is difficult to convince any one that they are the remarks that apply to poetry in general. But that they are the remarks that apply to the best poetry could be shown to anyone who has sensed the real connection between value and living. It may here be noted unambiguously that anyone with a false spirit would not take poetry seriously or heed any argument in its favour which contradicts common place or fashionable or academic ideas of poetry. One who wants validity for my statements at the level of unquestionable data with supporting references will be so disappointed that he may find himself to be right as well as relieved by accusing me of having made facile or sweeping generalizations. If one is guilty of being false in spirit my statements put such a one on the defensive, and one behaves strategically side-stepping the issue and inciting attitudes rather than arguing the case. There is a great scope for misunderstanding in the discussion of poetry, and a number of bad points for justifying any stand one pleases to take for any reason are readily available. The possibility of making statements which are neither generalizations nor logical inferences does not strike us at all, for we are accustomed to easy-to-follow statements. Moreover, it seems to be our habit to be pleased with statements when they have an appeal for us or when we can dispute them by clutching at their weak point. The point of discipline for reading poetry is to liberate oneself from the false spirit one naturally comes to be possessed of in this age, and the knowledge of this false spirit that dominates one is a knowledge which is discipline itself. Knowing the spirit here means changing and disciplining oneself. By this spirit we don't at all learn enough to talk sense, since we get ideas easily and believe in them, being denied the ability to question them. Here, the effect of our ideas on our use of language is disastrous. Because of these ideas we couldn't be relevant in our discourse, that is, instead of getting the relevant categories to advance in argument, we up in the circularity of the argument; and again, because of them we cannot use words with definite references, and our terms are vaguely relevant but even then in appeals only. In a way we are bound to misuse language though unconsciously. The condition of our ideas and of our misuse of language evidently cannot make us good readers of poetry. A nation with commercial industrialism and its spirit, with newspapers, with cinema, with the progressive views attracting every mind, and with its mind attracted towards Westernization, cannot produce a good reader of poetry. One has to be a man to be a good reader. Now we have to be men through the discipline required for poetry. We don't care for poetry, being philistines. And we are too bad, as men, to be good readers, to be frank about our modern condition.

But desiring to be men, we must care for it, and learn things patiently to be good readers of poetry. To know the value of poetry and desire a change by its power is no less than to save our civilization.

I must make a point here. But our philistines' use of language is a great hindrance which we must overcome if we wish to read poetry and benefit by reading it. It distances us from the creative use of language. Our lack of respect for language and our lack of concern for it go to show that poetry is far from being a serious matter for us. Take, for example, this philistine idea of language (you meet it everywhere in India) that "after all it is only for the communication of ideas" – meaning that up to whatever degree we know it, it is good enough for such a communication and that no special effort is needed to learn it. Not the dismissal of the value of language by 'after all'. "For the communication of ideas" is one of the many phrases used in India for their impressiveness and for inciting an attitude so that a disturbing argument can be clinched. It is a phrase, however impressive and sufficient in its apparent meaning in common parlance, that ignores the richness or achievements in language and their claim for our attention. It originates from our false spirit preferring science, technology and commerce. If Shakespeare is ignored, nothing may happen; but it is being cretin to say that we learn a language for "the communication of ideas" and so, can exclude Shakespeare (or any great achievement) since learning him doesn't make any difference to this purpose of language. Our hold on language is proportionate to our hold on past achievements. We cannot be interested in either without having the interest of life at heart. But we only seek our philistine interests with scant respect for language and without any sense of the past achievements. At the most our words have only the communicable sense very much related to practical affairs but they have not the energy of perception, thought, and feeling. Our discourse has been so little vitalized by the potential creativity of the spoken idiom that when we speak, we are not sane and vigorous speakers, but we are affected or stilted, or official, or formal, or more often crankish. There has been no standard for our speech, for there has been no standard-setting centre of intelligence. Some people have such wild emotions as to storm like mad dogs or to indulge in sentimental palaver; some other are only strategic and not forward; however, like the earlier, these also have only a false spirit in expression. But rarely do we meet with a subtle distinction or delicate feeling or compelling perception or forceful thought in our expression. Both in our modern living and in our modern discourse we have nothing but habits hostile to poetry. From creative achievements if we set out mind on getting what they can offer, our living as well as our discourse will be changed. The emotions related to practical affairs have so great a sway over us that our mind presently has no linking objectives with feeling, thought and perception. Our sentences with their ideas look like links in an iron chain, because they don't have the marrow of real spirit and intelligence. Our modern style of living and modern discourse betray the cretinism of the so-called progressive views or ideas; we are by this too many levels below that of reaching poetry and sensing its power. We have to get the strength of the past achievements for our mind and we have to get the spirit of living in vital human relations in order to be good readers of poetry. Another way of putting it is that we must be real men placing ourselves in a vital relation to our civilization, since we have been displaced from that relation by the Western impact. You cannot read poetry with your mind as it is now and with your spirit as it is now. You must undergo some vital change, and you must see the necessity of it, coming to the awareness of what has happened to you – to the awareness that instead of being Indians with the spirit and vitality of the Indian civilization, you have been de-indianised by the great historical event of the Western impact and that you have been self-blind and unable to see how much life you have lost and how you are without the force of identity, being fascinated by modernism and absorbed in practical affairs. Historically speaking, there has been a willful, arrogant denial of the Indian values by the Indians. Unless this historical change is changed, there is no possibility of becoming sane. The condition of sanity is the first and foremost condition for reading and understanding poetry.