It is a matter of amusement that a person like Sri Aurobindo who has substantially contributed to the understanding, consolidation, propagation, and furthering of Indian thought should still be a marginal figure in academia. Sri Aurobindo’s contribution deserves a dispassionate assessment. Volume 27 of the Complete Works contains his “Letters on Poetry and Art” which can be examined for the potential for a theory of poetry. As letters, they are informal responses. However, they are also responses to specific and thoughtfully worded questions from individuals who have engaged Sri Aurobindo in serious discussions on the issues concerning poetry and the arts. An Indian academic is forged in a system of education that is more Western, in character, than Indian. Hence, the present concern to explore the potential for a theory of poetry among Indian scholars and theoreticians. There is the large corpus of Indian aesthetic ideas and theories that have been ignored or relegated to a position behind the Western ideas and theories. So much so, the average scholar shows a greater familiarity with Plato, Aristotle, Coleridge, Arnold and is wanting in the knowledge of Anandavardana, Bharatrihari, or, even, Sri Aurobindo. The present article examines the Letters in Volume 27 for the purpose of cataloguing the major concerns, themes, philosophical categories that inform the discussions, and theoretical issues that such a project would generate.

Keywords
Sri Aurobindo, letters, theory, pure transcript, writing, waiting
The present project examines the viability of a theory of poetry from the perusal of the *Letters on Poetry and Art* which forms Volume 27 of the *Complete Works*. This volume incorporates material from three earlier collections titled *Letters on Poetry: Literature and Art, Letters on “Savitri, “* and *On Himself*. In all, there are more than 500 letters, in which Sri Aurobindo has, now laconically, now elaborately, dwelt on subjects relating to the arts, especially, poetry. They range from poetic creation to sources of inspiration to technique to artistry, rhythm, style, diction to form as well as disciplinary concerns like *Sadhana*, reading, writing, language, and yoga. There are also attempts at synthesis like reading and *Sadhana*, writing and *Sadhana*, poetry and *Sadhana*, and language study and yoga.

The *Letters* may be reckoned as a valuable source for constructing a theory of poetry which will be, if not unique, at least a definite departure from the Western theoretical positions. Of course, the ideas about the aspects of poetry are not as sustained, developed, and complete as they obtain in the Future Poetry. Whereas the latter is more reflective and carries the shape of personal introspection, the former is more responsive to the concerns of fellow travelers in the Word and in the World. So, there is an engagement, a dialogue, an interaction between the well-considered question and the appropriate response. There is also the possibility of keener application to problems because at the time of replying to each of his interlocutors, Sri Aurobindo was responding to a given problem where all the other issues would be kept in abeyance. Perhaps, even he was unaware of the multitude of issues identified and attended while the beautiful conversation on poetry, with multiple interlocutors, was unfolding.

In this respect, the *Letters* may be seen to resemble Plato’s *Republic* or Sir Philip Sidney’s *An Apology for Poetry*. Both these seminal texts are responses to questions; the question with the irresistible invitation to Socrates to dwell on the power of poetry and the “other” question which is an indictment of Poetry as a worthy occupation. Plato’s concern is more about the health of the city-state whereas Sidney’s must be reckoned as the health of the individual. Plato’s indictment of the poet and Sidney’s defense of the poet imply concerns which can be metaphorized as the State of Athens as an Individual (in an anthropomorphic sense) and the state of the individual (in the context of Renaissance humanism), respectively. What we see is the juxtaposition of entities that are founded on the principle of integrity if they have to exist at all; the contrary is suggestive of disruption, disintegration, and the Yeats-ian image of “things fall[ing] apart.” Poetry is the form of the symbolic integration of the state and the individual. The fact that Volume 27 begins with the origin of poetry and moves toward *Sadhana* and yoga suggests the crucial integration of elements that are not, apparently, compatible.

The two key orientations of this study would be the reference to an Indian ethos as well as the integration that poetry symbolizes. Both these orientations are informed by the reading of the *Letters*. They help us understand better the kind of poetry that Sri Aurobindo had conviction about, the poet who would accomplish the rite of bringing the poem into being, and the significance of yoga and *Sadhana* in this process. What the orientations would further enable is an understanding of a scale of possibilities in language where at one end is the predominance of the outer mind/consciousness that results in a “mental manufacture” and at the other end is the Overmind where pure inspiration performs a *lila* that culminates in a “Pure Transcript.” Between these two points is an expansive space with infinite levels of consciousness and performance corresponding to the infinite possibility for perfection that is present in man.

The ground that needs to be immediately cleared is that of theory itself. We would be on firmer ground if we can decide whether it is consistent with what a Jonathan Culler would mean by “Theory.” Culler (2000) would first admit that theory is “a body of thinking and writing whose limits are exceedingly hard to imagine” (p. 3). He illustrates the moves of theory by showing how a Foucault or a Derrida theoretically explain and expose the actual complicity between sex and power (though it appears that power is resisted by sex) and how writing (much against the claim of Rousseau) is, by Rousseau’s own confession, not a supplement to speaking but its superior other. Culler’s position on theory, though erudite and persuasive, appears to promise much on the side of theory’s possibility while, in an even measure, limits the theoretical moves to an investigative and diagnostic approach that serves to uncover, recover, revise, and rewrite an existing situation where the gap between the apparent and the actual needs to be filled with informed skepticism.

One is not sure whether such a notion about theory would help in constructing a theory of poetry using the *Letters* of Sri Aurobindo. The reason for investing in an alternative position is the fact that the *Letters* are not mere language constructs that may satisfy a Derridean skepticism for the contradictions ingrained in language. Nor are they manifestations of an intricate and invisible web of forces that compel resistance from above when they have actually orchestrated a complicity (that resembles resistance). There is a definite transcendental realm in the scheme of Sri Aurobindo, which the spirit of the *Letters* embodies that renders a Derridean skepticism a move predisposed to challenge and subvert. There is also an engagement with the self in more self-evaluating terms that is not satisfactorily answered by theories that believe in systems that control and coerce individuals. So, a theory about poetry based on the *Letters* of Sri Aurobindo locates the individual in a more substantial manner than that of the Derridean skeptic with respect to what he or she can do as well as providing a more expansive location for the individual where he or she is not coerced by larger forces, symbolized by the state, that remind him or her on what they cannot do.

The purposes of a theory would require a revaluation of accepted alignments. The Western poetic theories are, with respect to the Indian academy, aligned from Plato through Aristotle to Horace to Longinus to Sidney to Dryden, to Wordsworth, to Coleridge, to Arnold, to Eliot to Yeats to Seamus Heaney. There are, of course, the American poets like
Emerson, Whitman, Edgar Poe, and Robert Frost who have
discoursed on poetry. There is a transcendent regional in
Plato’s scheme which is brought down to earth through an
Aristotelian unseating of the Gods to privilege the conceit of
the poet. Since that crucial intervention which Philip Sidney
(1988) records as “Her world is brazen, the poets only deliv-
era golden” (p. 8), the poet has been recognized as a Maker,
a Prophet. Even, when Wordsworth strikes the notes of rebel-
lon by characterizing the poet as “man speaking to man,”
the hagiography of the poet as “the maker” is unmistakable and
this strain is sustained through to Seamus Heaney (1980),
who narrates the midwifery of the poet in the making of
Omphalos, which is the Greek word meaning the navel, and
hence the stone that marked the center of the world, and repeat
it, omphalos, omphalos, omphalos, until its blunt and falling
music becomes the music of somebody pumping water at the
pump outside our backdoor. (p. 17)

Then, there are the classic deceptions committed by poets
who have chosen to unwrap for the aspiring poet the secrets from
the omphalos of Helicon: The first, is Poe’s (1987) abstract title “The Philosophy of Composition” where he declares how a poem can be turned into a concrete reality “with the precision and rigid consequence of a mathematical formula” (p. 229) The second is a rather concrete title of Frost,
“The Figure a Poem Makes,” for an abstract understanding of
poetry that must begin in delight and end in wisdom. However,
what we see in these happy deceptions is the fact of the poet as
the craftsman who can give flesh to the word.

The Western alignment looks at the poet as the one who
makes, as the one who writes. Other than Coleridge who is
believed to have terminated the process of poetic transcription
following the interruption from the man from Porlock, most poets
have persisted with the urge, like Wordsworth (1962) who even after wondering “Wither is fled the visionary gleam?/Where is it now, the glory and the dream?” (p. 178) have proceeded to complete the poem. Wordsworth is struck
by the sense of despair in 1802 but perseveres to complete the
“Immortality Ode” in 1807. This anecdote does affirm
the determination of the poet to finish the job of crafting a
verbal icon. It also underlines the suggestion that the poet is
not always as sensitive to the inner call like Coleridge at the
time of composing “Kubla Khan.” The Western alignment is
more consistent with the image of a Wordsworth determined
to manufacture the poem as an artifact than with a Coleridge
who symbolizes the readiness to give up once the impulse
dries up. The difference between Coleridge and Wordsworth
is the difference between a transcription and a manufacture.

The construction of an Aurobindo-nian theory of poetry
will be possible only after the ideological framework is set up.
Now, the ideological framework of Sri Aurobindo can only be
configured in terms of large fields in the present context. The
scope of the present article does not allow for a detailed delineation of each of the fields that Sri Aurobindo was involved in
and committed to as the very purpose of his life. However, for
enabling the logic of the theory emerging out of the ideologi-
cal framework, one may point to Sri Aurobindo’s complete
absorption of Western education, which also marks the begin-
ing of his quest for the vital truth about man.

His journeys into the mind, where he confronts the issues
about the mind’s constructions like the potency of medita-
ation, the realization about the ascent of consciousness, the
shape of the universal mind, the limits of psychoanalysis,
and the passage toward supramental vision and supramental
power, are journeys toward the “interior landscape” (a phrase
used by A. K. Ramanujan) that also map the emergence of a
distinct terrain of knowledge which can lend greater cre-
dence to the intellectual engagements in the humanities. How
ever can one understand the triadic approach by Sri
Aurobindo to link the individual with the field of conscious-
ness and the poetic traditions?

For instance, Sri Aurobindo constructs a triad starting with
the romantic poetic tradition which, according to him, is an
“instinctive” field of consciousness that occupies the individual
at the level of the body. This triadic relationship is suggested by
Wordsworth in “Tintern Abbey” as “sensations sweet/Felt in the
blood.” A more evolved triad is the classical tradition that cor-
responds to the “intelligent” field of consciousness and it occu-
pies the individual at the level of the “mind.” Wordsworth’s
second category would be “sensations sweet/ . . . Felt along the
heart.” Sri Aurobindo’s third and highest triadic relationship
would be the “real” tradition that emerges out of the “intuitive”
field of consciousness and which corresponds to the “yogic”
stage of evolution of the individual/poet. This is suggested by
the highest, ineffable stage that Wordsworth reached in these
words: “Sensations sweet/ . . . And passing even into my purer
being/With tranquil restoration.”

It would suffice to register here, for any future elabora-
tion, that Sri Aurobindo’s Letters carry the potential for the
theory of poetry that stands on three guiding principles: First,
the theory of poetry outlined by Sri Aurobindo; second, the
evaluation of English poetry (by which Sri Aurobindo means
poetry by the English poets); and finally, the future of poetry
which he calls the “Future Poetry.”

The first stage of the ideological framework would involve
the delineation of the idea of “soul-poetry” manifested as the
“mantra.” This is directly related to Sri Aurobindo’s ideas on
the “essence” of poetry that springs forth from “rhythm” and
“movement” of speech that evolve beyond the merely pleasur-
able to the truly incantatory. The poetic theory would then
admit only such “style” and “substance” as would contribute to
the “poetic vision” evoked by the mantra.

After positing the ideological framework, Sri Aurobindo
comments on the “national evolution” of poetry based on
which he evaluates the “character” of English poetry and the
course it describes from the time of Chaucer through modern
literature through the Victorian poets to the “new birth” of
Decadence. In this regard, Sri Aurobindo characterizes the
poets, Keats and Shelley, Byron and Wordsworth, and, finally,
Blake and Coleridge as the “poets of the Dawn”; each pair
suggesting a particular stage of evolution from the body rep-
resented by Keats and Shelley to the mind represented by
Byron and Wordsworth to the highest stage in English poetry
which only Blake and Coleridge could come close to achieving. Sri Aurobindo feels that the last pair was wanting in “the gravity and enduring substance.”

What Sri Aurobindo implies through the apparent vagueness in the phrase, “the gravity and enduring substance” can be understood when one explores his ideas about “Future Poetry” about which he has spoken and written extensively. The idea of the Future Poetry can be configured through an exploration of the “ideal spirit” of poetry; the idea of “poetic truth”; the “breath” that brings into consciousness, the greater life; the “soul of poetic delight and beauty”; the “power” of the spirit that infuses the poetry of “mantra”; its “form” and the precise relationship between the “word and the spirit.”

The Letters, thus, become a viable site for the construction of a theory of poetry, provided one decides on a three-stage approach beginning with the ideological framework, the application of the ideas on poetic performance, and, finally, relocating the interaction with the framework of Sri Aurobindo’s ideas about the poetry of the future where he determines the role of the poet as the conductor or the medium for the meeting of the individual mind with the universal mind that brings about the evolution of consciousness.

What this author posits is that a theory of poetry based on the Letters must shift from a Western alignment where the poet is the person who writes toward a different understanding of the poet provided by Sri Aurobindo. An excerpt from the letter dated June 2, 1931, on “Poetic Creation” reads as follows:

> When the source of inspiration is in the heart or the psychic there is more easily a goodwill in the vital channel, the flow is spontaneous; the inspiration takes at once its true form and speech and is transmitted without any interference or only a minimum of interference by the brain-mind, that great spoiler of the higher or deeper splendours. . . . The poet labours in anguish to get the one true word, the authentic rhythm, the real divine substance of what he has to say, while all the time it is waiting complete and ready behind; but it is denied free transmission by some part of the transmitting agency which prefers to translate and is not willing merely to receive and transcribe. (Sri Aurobindo, 2004, p. 6)

The excerpt talks about poetic creation and the role of the poet. It does talk about the poet as a writer but only when he is unable to allow the self to respond to the inspired call from the subtle plane. The poet as a writer is one who fails to keep the outer mind in check and presides over the spoiling of the inspiration as it flows through the creative vital. By implication, then, the poet in the scheme of Sri Aurobindo (2004) would be a medium who allows the process of creation to happen where his intellect, intuition, and illumined mind do have a role to play; only, that the proportion to which the elements of integration are controlled by the poet would determine whether the poem is going to be a “pure transcript” or a “mental manufacture” (p. 5). The shift in the theoretical alignment toward Sri Aurobindo’s understanding of poetry and the role of the poet would mean a radical shift in the understanding of the poet as a writer to the poet as the enabling creative spirit that waits for the manifestation of beauty: from the poet who writes to the poet who waits.

Did Matthew Arnold mean the same when he talked about the Scholar Gypsy waiting for the spark from heaven to fall? Or, did T. S. Eliot mean the same when he talked about the “awful daring of a moment’s surrender”? Where they also aligning themselves to an Eastern thinking where the body is a medium through which the spirit expresses the splendor of truth? These are questions that will become interesting when one is persuaded that the more popular notion of the poet as the “master craftsman” as Eliot chose to call Ezra Pound changes toward a notion of the poet as the integrated self that waits.

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