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## Eternal Truth and the Mutations of Time: Archival Documents and Claims of Timeless Truth

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**Abstract.** Philosophical texts regarded as «inspired» present special difficulties for textual editors and intellectual historians that can be mitigated by the study of archival documents. The works of the philosopher and *yogī* Aurobindo Ghose are considered important contributions to twentieth-century Indian literature and philosophy. Some of his followers regard them as inspired and therefore not subject to critical study. Aurobindo himself accepted the reality of inspiration but also thought that inspired texts, such as the *Bhagavad Gītā*, contain a temporal as well as an eternal element. Aurobindo's papers are preserved in the Sri Aurobindo Ashram Archives, which took shape during the 1970s. Editions of Aurobindo's books published between his death in 1950 and 1977 were issued without consulting his manuscripts, early editions, etc., and therefore contain transmission errors, subjective emendations, etc. The editors of texts issued after 1977 followed the established methodology of textual criticism and so eliminated many obvious errors. Some of Aurobindo's readers refused to accept the new editions, and agitated for the restoration of the earlier texts, going so far as to file legal cases against the editors and the administrators of his ashram or spiritual community. A nuanced approach to the editing of texts regarded by some as inspired must take the sentiments of readers into consideration while insisting on scholarly rigour.

**Keywords.** Aurobindo Ghose, archives, textual editing, biography, inspiration, Indian philosophy, manuscripts, Bhagavad Gita.

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Sri Aurobindo (1872-1950) is well known in India as a revolutionary politician, a *yogī*, and a spiritual leader. In academic circles in the West, he is best known as the author of books on philosophy, spirituality, and other topics. To members of his *āśram* or spiritual community, he is regarded first and foremost as a divinely inspired seer if not an incarnation of the Divine. I do not propose to examine the origin or applications of this belief. My subject is the special problems that arise when a philosophical author is regarded by his or her readers not just as a thinker and writer but as a divinely inspired sage. This attitude puts special demands on archivists

charged with preserving his manuscripts and editors who produce texts based on these documents.

### 1. REVELATION AND INSPIRATION IN THE WEST AND THE EAST

Before examining the practical problems involved in editing texts that many readers believe to be divinely inspired, I will look briefly at the ideas of revelation and inspiration in two religious traditions: the Judeo-Christian and the Hindu. Jews believe that the Torah was revealed by God to Moses on Mount Sinai, and that other prophets, such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, also were spokesmen of God. Christians accept this idea and add that the apostles were divinely inspired when they wrote the Gospels and Epistles. The apostle Paul wrote to his companion Timothy that all scripture is “God-breathed” (*theopneustos*) (2 Tim 3:16). In the Vulgate this was rendered *divinitus inspirata*, which became “divinely inspired” in English. During the Renaissance the idea of inspiration crossed over from theology into secular literature. French critics Thomas Sébillot (1512–1589) and Pontus de Tyard (c.1521–1605) gave inspiration a central place in their theories of poetics (Holyoake [1972]). Some poets of the Romantic period in England conceived of inspiration as a breath of creative energy that moved the poet’s soul as the wind played upon the strings of an Aeolian harp (Abrams [1957]: 114).

Aurobindo, who was educated entirely in England, was familiar both with the Biblical idea of revelation and Romantic idea of inspiration. After returning to India in 1893, he encountered other, typically Indian, ideas of revelatory or inspired language. Orthodox Hindus believe that the hymns of the Vedas are *apauruṣeya*, «not originating from a person». The *ṛṣis* or «seers» of the hymns did not compose them but perceived them in their pre-existent perfection. All schools of classical Indian philosophy regard the Vedas as *śruti* or inspired «hearing». Philosophical statements that are founded on *śruti* cannot in principle be challenged. Other significant texts are known

as *smṛti*, «that which is remembered». *Smṛiti* comprises the epics, the myths collected in the *Purāṇas*, books of customary law, commentaries on scripture, and other works sanctioned by tradition. In philosophy such works have considerable authority but are not considered infallible.

The distinction observed in Hindu thought between *śruti* and *smṛti* is similar in some respects to the distinction in Catholic theology between scripture and tradition. In both religions the foundational texts—the Vedas, the Bible—are regarded as revelation from a superhuman source. The human recipients of these texts—the *ṛṣis*, the prophets—are looked upon as divinely inspired. In both religions, propositions based on scripture are treated as unchallengeable dogmas. This approach is at odds with that of most post-sixteenth-century European philosophy, which regards no written authority as infallible—though, if we want to be honest, we would have to admit that many followers of thinkers such as Marx and Freud regard them as unquestionable authorities and treat their teachings as dogmas.

In modern India, spiritual leaders are sometimes regarded as latter-day *ṛṣis*, and their works accorded something of the sanctity that is attached to the Vedas. Among those given this treatment are Ramakrishna Paramahansa (1836–1886) and Sri Aurobindo. To their followers their words are no less infallible than those of the Vedas. But there are two important differences between those ancient texts and the works of the two modern teachers. First, the Vedas, being unauthored, are their own authority. In contrast, the words of Ramakrishna and Aurobindo are considered authoritative because they are expressions of truths that the teachers perceived while absorbed in spiritual experience. This modern take on the idea of inspiration was popularized by Ramakrishna’s disciple Vivekananda and has become the standard explanation of inspiration among non-traditional Hindus and some Western scholars of religion. The second difference is that the Vedas were preserved by oral transmission for countless generations before being written down. The texts of the two modern teachers are preserved in

books that were published during their lifetimes. Disciples of Ramakrishna wrote down contemporaneous or near-contemporaneous accounts of his talks, which were published in Bengali and translated into other languages. Aurobindo wrote or dictated all of his important works and published many of them during his lifetime. Other works were transcribed from his manuscripts and published after his death.

## 2. AUROBINDO'S IDEAS ABOUT INSPIRATION

Aurobindo never claimed his writings were divinely inspired, but he did believe that inspiration had a role to play in the writing of poetry and prose. In an early (c. 1902) note, not published during his lifetime, he described the characteristics of inspiration:

*There is a sudden exaltation, a glow, an excitement and a fiery and rapid activity of all the faculties; every cell of the body & of the brain feeling a commotion and working in excited unison under the law of something which is not themselves; the mind itself becomes illuminated as with a rush of light and grows like a crowded and surging thoroughfare in some brilliantly lighted city, thought treading on the heels of thought faster than the tongue can express or the hand write or the memory record them.* (Aurobindo [2003]: 268)

This is similar to descriptions of inspiration in the works of Romantic writers such as William Wordsworth and Percy Bysshe Shelley (Abrams [1957]: 116-120). Unlike those poets, the young Aurobindo resisted the temptation to ascribe inspiration to a superhuman agency: «The impression we get is that thoughts are being breathed into us, expressions dictated, the whole poured in from outside» but «such an impression is purely sensational. It is always the man's own spirit that is speaking» (Aurobindo [2003]: 269).

Over the three next decades, Aurobindo's ideas about inspiration changed. In *The Future Poetry*, a treatise on poetics first published serially between 1917 and 1920, he wrote: «What we mean by inspiration is that the impetus to poetic

creation and utterance comes to us from a super-conscious source above the ordinary mentality, so that what is written seems not to be the fabrication of the brain-mind, but something more sovereign breathed or poured in from above» (Aurobindo [1997b]: 183). He enlarged on this idea in a letter of 1931: There were, he said, «three elements in the production of poetry: there is the original source of inspiration, there is the vital force of creative beauty ... there is, finally, the transmitting outer consciousness of the poet». The most perfect poetry came «when the original source is able to throw its inspiration pure and undiminished into the vital [the life-force] ... while the outer consciousness is entirely passive and transmits without alteration what it receives» (Aurobindo [2004]: 6). This sounds rather like the Vedic idea of inspiration: something pre-existent that expresses itself without human intervention. But Aurobindo clarified that it was «not necessary to presuppose anything of the kind to explain the phenomena of inspiration». Inspired poetry comes into being through contact between «the human instrument» on the one hand and «the source of inspiration» on the other (Aurobindo [2004]: 7).

Aurobindo described the writing of philosophy in similar terms. In a note of 1942 he wrote that the first source of his philosophy was his reading of the Upanishads, the *Bhagavad Gītā*, and the Vedas. This reading was not passive: «I tried to realize what I read in my spiritual experience», he explained. The other source of his philosophy «was the knowledge that flowed from above when I sat in meditation, especially from the plane of the Higher Mind when I reached that level». The ideas from this Higher Mind «came down in a mighty flood which swelled into a sea of direct Knowledge always translating itself into experience, or they were intuitions starting from experience and leading to other intuitions and a corresponding experience» (Aurobindo [2006]: 113). Here again he made it clear that the writing was a joint production of intuitive knowledge from higher planes of consciousness and his human intellect.

### 3. PHILOSOPHICAL TRUTH AND HISTORICAL CONTINGENCY

In *Essays on the Gita* (1922), a discursive commentary on the *Bhagavad Gītā*, Aurobindo wrote that there was undoubtedly «a Truth one and eternal» that was the source of all other truth but that this Truth could not be «shut up in a single trenchant formula». Every scripture contained «two elements», one «eternal and imperishable and applicable in all ages and countries», the other «temporary, perishable, belonging to the ideas of the period and country in which it was produced». And this temporal element was itself «subject to the mutations of Time»: the minds that transmitted the ideas over the course of the years were «always leaving old expression and symbol for new» or, if they used the old, they completely changed their connotations and associations and thus the contemporary understanding of the text (Aurobindo [1997a]: 4).

Few modern critics would accept the idea that there is a single eternal or universal truth. Most would, however, concede that every philosophical text is an attempt to express ideas or experiences that are valid for a group or society or even humanity as a whole. On the other hand, virtually all modern critics would accept the idea that texts are historically contingent. They are produced at a given time by a given author (or group of authors), who exist within a particular historical framework: what Edmund Husserl called the *Bewußtseinshorizont* or «consciousness horizon» (Kwan [2004]: 316-317). The mind of every author is the product of a particular upbringing in a particular region or regions; he or she speaks a particular language or languages, reads certain sorts of books, writes for certain sorts of reader, exists within a particular cultural milieu. All this, again, is evident to textual and literary critics but it may be ignored or rejected by readers in thrall to naïve ideas of inspiration.

Many of Aurobindo's readers are in thrall to such ideas. There are several reasons for this. One, alluded to above, is the tendency of readers of spiritual literature to apply ancient notions of rev-

elation and inspiration to modern figures: if the ancient ṛṣi Vashishta «saw» the hymns of the seventh book of the *Rg Veda*, then Aurobindo, a modern ṛṣi, saw the verses of the poem *Savitri*. Another reason is a misapplication of Aurobindo's ideas about inspiration and intuition as expressed in passages like those cited in the previous section. In one passage he said that his philosophical writings were expressions of «knowledge that flowed from above». If readers stopped there they might feel justified in thinking that Aurobindo claimed to be a pure channel of divine truth. But (as the full passage shows) he maintained that the «human instrument», that is, his own mind and life-energy, was needed to give verbal form to the inspirations and intuitions he received. The passage from *Essays on the Gita* cited in the present section shows that he believed that every text, even if it gave expression to eternal truths, belonged in part «to the ideas of the period and country in which it was produced» and was subject to «the mutations of time».

Aurobindo never claimed that his writings constituted a «scripture» in the way the *Bhagavad Gītā* is a scripture, but he would have acknowledged that his writings, like the *Gītā*, consisted of two elements: one striving to give expression to eternal truths, the other historically contingent. This historicity is evident when we study his oeuvre as a whole. The essays he wrote as a student in England clearly belong to the late Victorian period. His final essays, written more than a half-century later, incorporate a lifetime of spiritual practice and philosophical thinking in India. The historicity of Aurobindo's writings also is evident when we compare different versions of a given text, say the version of *The Life Divine* published serially between 1914 and 1919 and the book edition of 1939-1940. But it is most evident when we study his manuscripts.

### 4. AUROBINDO'S MANUSCRIPTS AND THE QUESTION OF INSPIRATION

Aurobindo's handwritten manuscripts show he made few corrections during the first writ-

ing of his drafts. This may be taken as a sign of inspiration in the ordinary sense of the term: a free flow of ideas onto the page. But the manuscripts provide no evidence of supernatural inspiration as a naïve reader might imagine it: taking down dictation from a higher source with no sign of hesitation or need of revision. In fact they provide abundant evidence of authorial labour: correction, revision, re-revision, multiple versions of texts. Unlike the unauthored, impersonal Vedas, Aurobindo's manuscripts show signs of personality right down to the cancellation marks and ink blots.

What do these documents tell us about his writing process? First they make it clear that there *was* a process. The manuscripts of many works include first drafts, which show signs of correction while writing and revision afterwards; subsequent drafts, transcribed by Aurobindo or another, most of them revised; press materials, such as galley and page proofs, corrected by press workers and later by Aurobindo; printed texts in various editions, some of them revised by hand; and later editions produced by editors with or without the help of manuscript materials. None of this will be surprising to anyone familiar with the process of producing a book. It *has* however proved surprising to those who have a Vedic, Romantic, or naïve view of inspiration.

The second thing the manuscripts reveal is that the texts they represent exist in history. Each manuscript provides direct or indirect evidence of the date or period of its production. This allows the textual scholar establish historical relationships between it and other manuscripts and texts. These include (1) the relationship between the document in question and other documents pertaining to the same text, (2) the relationship between the document in question and documents pertaining to other texts in Aurobindo's oeuvre, and (3) the relationship between Aurobindo's texts and the works of his predecessors and contemporaries. All this is the stock-in-trade of textual criticism and historical literary studies. How does it apply to texts that are considered by their readers to be revealed or inspired and therefore outside history?

## 5. A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE SRI AUROBINDO ASHRAM ARCHIVES

Sri Aurobindo's manuscripts are held by the Sri Aurobindo Ashram Archives, in Pondicherry, India. Before discussing the practices of the Archives' editors and the special problems they face in handling the texts of a writer many consider to be inspired in the Vedic, Romantic, or naïve sense, I will sketch its history.

When Sri Aurobindo died in 1950 responsibility for his manuscripts passed to his secretary Nolini Kanta Gupta and one or two others who had helped him with his literary work during his lifetime. These men looked on the manuscripts as precious artefacts, as records of Aurobindo's thought, and as possible sources of unpublished writings. They treated them with special care but did little to protect them from India's hot-wet tropical climate. An attempt to safeguard some specially prized manuscripts ended in disaster when the plastic sleeves they were encased in decomposed in the summer sun. Some attempts were made to photograph manuscripts using ordinary cameras, but this was done primarily to produce facsimiles for souvenir publications and not as part of a program of photographic documentation.

Early efforts to exploit Aurobindo's manuscripts for posthumous publication were unsystematic. Some manuscripts were consulted for current projects, such as the first edition of his epic poem *Savitri* (1950-51). Others were examined in the hope of finding a poem or essay that had not been published during Aurobindo's lifetime. These new texts were transcribed from a single manuscript version and published in ashram journals without methodical verification. Editions of Aurobindo's books published after his death were, for the most part, reproductions, with minor editorial interventions, of texts as that had appeared in journals or books during his lifetime. Between 1970 and 1973 the first collected edition of Aurobindo's works was published in 29 volumes. The texts in this edition consisted, by and large, of recomposed versions of texts that

had previously appeared in print. No systematic editing was carried out apart from the imposition of a consistent house style. The last volume to be issued, the *Supplement* (1973), comprised material from manuscripts and printed material that had not been included in the main series. This volume was edited by the staff of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram Archives, which had been established the same year.

The director of the collected edition, a long-time disciple of Aurobindo's named Jayantilal Parekh, had been trying to set up an archives for some time. Between 1971 and 1973 he recruited several people to help him with the three tasks he wished to undertake: to preserve Sri Aurobindo's manuscripts and printed texts, to get them microfilmed, and to catalogue them and publish writings that remained unpublished. In January 1973 he sent a formal proposal to Mirra Alfassa (Aurobindo's French spiritual collaborator and the head of the ashram), who approved it. Parekh then organized his existing workers in three sections, one concerned with physical preservation, one with microfilming and photography, and one with cataloguing the holdings and editing texts. I was an original member of the Archives' editorial staff, and the account that follows is based on my own experience.

Around 1975, Gupta began to release Aurobindo's manuscripts to Parekh. He passed them on to me, asking me to look through and organize them with the idea of getting them microfilmed. He also asked me to keep my eyes out for writings that had not been published. I began by placing the manuscripts in six subject groups and arranging the items in each group chronologically. Then I and others carried out a full descriptive inventory, going through each notebook and set of loose sheets to identify the contents, determine the structural and chronological relationships between texts, and find out what had and had not been published. Bowing to pressure from editors of journals connected with the Ashram, we prepared texts of a few unpublished pieces for publication; but it soon became clear that a more systematic approach was needed. Before produc-

ing an acceptable text we had to collect all pertinent material, establish a rough chronological sequence, determine the latest or the most well-developed version, transcribe it carefully, check and recheck the transcriptions, and only then send it to the press. In doing all this we relied on common sense and our knowledge of Aurobindo's writing habits. Later we broadened our outlook by studying authorities on textual criticism such as Greg [1950/1951], Brack and Barnes [1969], and Gaskell [1978]. In 1977 we launched a semi-annual journal, *Sri Aurobindo: Archives and Research*, in which we published new and corrected versions of writings by Aurobindo along with biographical documents and notes on biography, bibliography, and textual editing.

## 6. SPECIAL PROBLEMS ENCOUNTERED BY THE ASHRAM ARCHIVES

Most of the problems faced by the Archives' staff are identical to those encountered daily by archivists in other parts of the world: finding ways to protect the papers while keeping them available for use, determining the most appropriate methods of reprography and carrying them out in a systematic way, and learning how to organize the manuscripts and prepare them for publication. Special problems arise owing to the veneration Aurobindo is held by his admirers (known locally as «devotees»), many of whom believe that everything he wrote—from philosophical texts and poems to brief notes and jottings—was supernaturally inspired. In the sections that follow I deal with such problems in four areas of archival and literary practice: editorial methods (6.1); access to archives (6.2); canon creation (6.3); and biographical writing (6.4).

### 6.1 Editorial methods

The primary responsibility of people who edit the texts of established authors is to produce editions that represent their final intentions and are free from errors that may have crept in during

the process of textual transmission. To be able to do this, the editors must know how the author worked. Aurobindo's papers reveal he wrote drafts by hand and, occasionally, by typewriter, sent copies typed by himself or others to the press where they were typeset and proof-read, and corrected author's proofs and gave his approval for final printing. All this is standard procedure for books published during the pre-computer era. Accordingly the methods developed by bibliographers and textual editors such as Greg, Brach and Barnes, and Gaskell for books of this era are generally suitable for Aurobindo's books as well.

The first thing the editors of a book that exists in various forms must do is choose a «copy-text», that is, the version on which the new edition will be based. The second step is to collate other significant versions—from early drafts to late editions—with the copy-text and note variant readings. In producing editions of works published during Aurobindo's lifetime, we generally chose as copy-text the last edition in which he played an active role. In this way we were sure to include his final revisions and to avoid errors and unauthorized changes introduced by editors who brought out posthumous editions. (Each posthumous edition was recomposed by hand from the immediately preceding edition and in each typesetters, proofreaders, and editors made unintentional and intentional changes.) We also consulted earlier versions, including handwritten manuscripts if available, to make sure that those who typed copies of Aurobindo's drafts, and typeset and proof-read his final versions, did not introduce errors he failed to notice while reading proofs. We found that each successive version contained transmission errors. In our editions we removed all such errors as well as unnecessary editorial changes.

For works that exist only in manuscript, we compared all drafts and fair copies, determining the version that best represented his final intentions and transcribing it. If the version we chose was the same as the one earlier editors had chosen, we sometimes discovered they had made transcription errors. (They were experts in reading Aurobindo's handwriting but did not think it

necessary to check and recheck their transcriptions.) If the version we chose was *not* the same as theirs—a common occurrence, since they often were unaware that there were variant versions of many items—the text we published was of course fundamentally different from theirs.

When we published our editions, we included tables of variant readings in which we pointed out the differences between our versions and earlier ones. This is where our problems began.

Most of Aurobindo's readers may be described as conservative. This means in practical terms that they are attached to the editions they first read. If a reading in a new edition differed from a reading in their favoured edition, they often assumed that someone had corrupted the master's inspired text. If we pointed out that the «new» readings were what Aurobindo had originally written as attested by his manuscripts or earlier editions and that the readings they were familiar with were transcription errors committed by others, they often raised objections. How could there be errors in an inspired text? Had not Aurobindo approved it for publication? Had not his own disciples done the transcribing and proof-reading? When such readers went through our lists of textual differences, they did not examine them in the light of textual history but insisted that the readings they were familiar with were correct or else chose one reading over another on the basis of personal preference.

These disagreements in editorial methodology soon grew into a public controversy. Some devotee-readers complained about the new editions to the Ashram's trustees and agitated against the Archives' editors, circulating leaflets filled with catchy slogans and crude drawings but no rational argumentation. Some went so far as to file court cases against the Archives' editors and Ashram's trustees. One of these cases went all the way to the Supreme Court of India, which dismissed it.

## 6.2 Access to archives

Almost every textual scholar and historian has had the experience of wanting to consult a document but not being able to get access to it. There

may be many reasons for this failure: the document may have been lost or misplaced, it may be regarded as too fragile for consultation, it may be considered sensitive or liable to be misuse, or it may be withheld by a family or institution for unstated reasons. Having had such experiences while doing research, an archivist is likely to want to provide fairly open access to documents under his or her care. But this may not always be possible or desirable.

Between 1950 (when Sri Aurobindo died) and 1973 (when the Archives took shape) Aurobindo's manuscripts were accessible to almost no one but his secretaries. If anyone else was given access it was for a specific purpose and for a limited period of time. After the majority of documents had been transferred to the Archives, the people involved in preservation, reprography and editing had almost unrestricted access to documents they were interested in. At this time the Archives did not have a purpose-built cold storage room, and the documents were kept either in locked cabinets in the Archives office (if they were considered especially important), or in cabinets in another site (if considered less important). The only record of consultation was an informal handwritten notebook. After the documents were shifted to the cold storage room the notebook was replaced by a formal log.

When the documents were being kept in the Archives office, members of the ashram and outside visitors often asked to see them out of simple curiosity or to satisfy their devotional impulses. This practice, which endangered the manuscripts and created a great deal of disturbance, was stopped as soon as possible. Access was restricted to those who had an apparently legitimate interest in the texts. Sometimes this policy opened the way to disturbances of a different sort. Admirers of older editions of Sri Aurobindo's books came to our door and asked why such and such a word had been changed. We typically replied that the earlier reading was not in accord with Aurobindo's manuscripts or revised editions. Sometimes such visitors demanded to see the original documents. Occasionally we complied but generally were sor-

ry if we did. In one case that I will not soon forget a visitor who was shown a text that Aurobindo had altered between the lines in pencil, declared: «How do I know that that is Sri Aurobindo's handwriting.» «Well,» we answered, «because it *is* his handwriting and this *is* his copy of the book...». This did not satisfy our amateur textual critic, who went away in an agitated state. Fortunately he didn't have an eraser in his hands when he was given access to the document.

### 6.3 Canon creation

During the lifetime of an author, the canon of his or her writings consists of the works he or she chose to publish. After the author's death, his or her executors are likely to discover unpublished writings that may seem worthy of publication. The author's readers will be eager to see the new material, and will press the executors to issue them as soon as possible. The executors then will have to decide which of these writings should be published immediately and which held for later consideration. Their decisions may have a considerable effect on the nature of an author's canon. One has only to think of the published corpus of Wittgenstein, which, at the time of his death consisted only of the *Tractatus* and some notes and essays circulated among his admirers, but soon included the *Philosophical Investigations* and other works that altered his place in Western philosophy.

Aurobindo's canon at the time of his death consisted of one major work of philosophy, *The Life Divine*; a number of other prose works of various lengths; a body of poems, including the epic *Savitri*; a large number of letters; and some miscellaneous writings. Between 1950 and 1970 his secretaries transcribed and issued dozens of unpublished essays, poems, plays, letters and other works, first in journals and later in books. There was little problem finding a place for these writings in Aurobindo's corpus. Longer ones were published as separate texts, shorter ones added to existing collections. But the new books were put together by people who did not have access to Aurobindo's manuscripts. As a result the versions



chosen for publication were not always the last ones Aurobindo wrote.

After 1970 the staff of the Archives found among Sri Aurobindo's manuscripts many unpublished essays and poems, some existing in multiple versions; drafts and notes related to published and unpublished works; a large number of letters; and a spiritual diary the existence of which had hitherto been known only to one or two persons. After we had completed an inventory of published and unpublished works, we had to decide which works should be published and in what form they should be issued. We conceived our semi-annual journal as a supplement of the 1970-73 collected edition, publishing new works in it with the idea of adding them later to existing volumes. But soon it became evident that we had to carry out a complete revamping of Aurobindo's collected works. All of them needed to be reedited. The collections of shorter materials had to be enlarged and rearranged.

The Archives' rearrangement of Aurobindo's works was governed by two considerations: genre and publication history. The genres or types of writing we selected included philosophical prose, literary prose, political writings, poems, plays, translations, letters, and autobiographical material. The categories created with reference to publication history were pieces published during Aurobindo's lifetime and pieces published posthumously. If a collection contained writings of both types, we placed them in separate sections and ordered the writings within each section by date. This new arrangement became the basis of *The Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo*, the first volume of which was issued in 1997.

The complete works constitute a new Aurobindo canon. The main addition was his diary, *Record of Yoga*, which extends in printed form to more than 1400 pages. This is a completely different sort of writing than the works he wrote for the general public and the letters he wrote to his disciples. Before publishing it, the director of the Archives sought the advice of senior members of the Ashram, who approved its publication. This did not prevent conservative readers from complaining that

the diary should never have been published, since it showed a side of Aurobindo they were not familiar with. They argued that if Aurobindo had wanted it to be published he would have published it himself. (The same argument apparently did not apply to the dozens of poems, letters, and essays published after Aurobindo's death.) Fortunately the Ashram authorities did not believe it was their duty to shape Aurobindo's canon according to their preconceptions. With one or two exceptions, all his significant writings found a place in the *Complete Works*.

#### 6.4 Biographical writing

From the beginning, one of the archive's tasks was to gather biographical documents connected with Aurobindo's life and times. In pursuit of this goal I collected biographical material from archives and libraries in New Delhi, Kolkata, Mumbai, Vadodara, London, Paris, and other places. Our first concern was to compile an accurate chronology of his life. Later we published some biographical documents with explanatory notes in the Archives' journal. Still later I published a number of articles on his life and career in various research journals. Eventually I wrote and published a brief biography and laid the groundwork for a more comprehensive one.

Here, as with new editions of texts and additions to the canon, the reception of the work depended mainly on the way it accorded with established notions. If the documents added detail to the received account of Aurobindo's life, all was well. If they seemed to cast doubt on something Aurobindo was supposed to have said or done, the reaction was likely to be stormy.

It is a tenet of biographical research that primary documents contemporaneous with the event are considered more authoritative than secondary reports, even those produced by the subject himself. But what if the subject is considered by many to be an inspired sage? There are no contemporary documents concerning Aurobindo's birth, but it is generally agreed he was born in the house of a friend of his father's in Calcutta. In 1949, when he was seventy-seven, he told a press representative

that the house in question was located on Theatre Road in Calcutta. Contemporary documents show that Aurobindo's father's friend actually lived in a house on South Circular Road at the time of Aurobindo's birth. Since Aurobindo left the house as a babe in arms and spent his entire youth in northern Bengal and England, he could hardly be considered an expert in the matter. When I noted this in an article, conservative readers accused me of saying that I knew more about Aurobindo's life than he did. He explicitly said he was born in a house on Theatre Road, and that was the end of the matter!

Turning to a more significant example, thirty years after leaving the political arena, Aurobindo wrote that, when he was threatened with deportation in 1909, he published «a signed article in which he spoke of the project of deportation and left the country what he called his last will and testament; he felt sure that this would kill the idea of deportation and in fact it so turned out» (Aurobindo [2006]: 63). While researching this period in the archives of the state of West Bengal, I found that the governor of the British province of Bengal dropped the idea of deporting Aurobindo several days before Aurobindo's article was published. Aurobindo had no way of knowing this and, when no deportation order was passed, he had grounds to conclude that his article had had something to do with it. When I pointed out that archival documents showed his conclusion was unfounded, some people declared that I was saying that Aurobindo had made a false statement—something an inspired sage could never do.

Despite the obvious perils involved in writing about Aurobindo's life, I continued my biographical research. Then, after thirty years of study and writing, I published a critical biography, in the course of which I made several statements that were not in accord with the accepted version of Aurobindo's life. The biography was fairly well received in academic circles in India and abroad. Among Aurobindo's devotees it created an enormous uproar. Before long, two civil and three criminal cases had been filed against me. One of

them resulted in a «temporary injunction» against publication of the book in India that is still in force twelve years later.

## 7. CONCLUSIONS: THE POLITICS OF ARCHIVAL PRACTICE

I have touched on a number of problems the editors of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram Archives have faced over the last 47 years. In themselves the problems are scholarly, involving matters of archival and historiographical practice, but all have «political» overtones, involving beliefs and assumptions of groups who are on opposite sides of a question. I have called a section of Aurobindo's readers conservative. The positions taken by the members of the Archives are for the most part liberal: they favour freedom of research and objective standards of editing, research and writing. But there is an irony here. The attachment of «conservative» devotees to the editions they are familiar with stands in the way of their accepting editions that restore the original readings of Aurobindo's manuscripts and printed texts. Viewed in this way the «liberal» editors of the Archives are in fact more conservative than the «conservative» devotees. It might be better to call such devotees reactionary or — when they resort to organized pressure to impose their ideas — fundamentalist.

Given the ostensible conservatism of many Ashram members, it is somewhat surprising that the Ashram authorities set up an archives with well-maintained collections that has sponsored long-term research and publication projects. This came about because the founder of the Archives had a strong, if vague, idea that an institution of this sort was needed. He convinced those in authority to sanction his proposal, managed to find young people who were willing to do the work required, and defended them when the going got rough. Opposition came from devotees who were unwilling to believe that there was any need to follow standard editorial procedures to produce printed editions of Aurobindo's works.

This belief was linked to another one: that the writings of Sri Aurobindo were inspired expressions of superhuman knowledge.

I have shown that Aurobindo himself believed that some writings are inspired but that even the greatest examples of spiritual inspiration, such as the *Bhagavad Gītā*, have two sides: one that gives expression to eternal truths, the other one subject to the mutations of time. He felt that some of his writings came from a source above the mind but he also made it clear that the influx from this source had to pass through his intellect and vital force before it could take verbal form. His manuscripts show that he worked on his writing the way every serious writer does—writing, rewriting, revision, and further revision. It has been the responsibility and the privilege of the archivists of the Ashram to ensure that the fruits of this authorial labour are preserved in the best editions possible

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