

Śraddhā

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The Mother and Sri Aurobindo*

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श्रद्धां भवति ज्ञानम्

Śraddhāvāṁl labhate jñanam

Who has faith.he attains knowledge

—Gita IV. 39

Cover : Krishnalal's painting 'Will or Faith'

Editorial

These are times of great moment, of unforeseen happenings and huge upheavals. Mighty unseen powers appear to be at play to take possession of this earthly life. The forces of darkness loom large over the horizon and seem to gain from strength to strength and there are signs of things growing from bad to worse and even worse than the worst if that is possible. Amid the spiralling gloom and uncertainty, amid 'the wrestle of force' and the cries of anguish and despair we seem to flounder and lose our way. The battle is now being waged on matter's turf, and it is the physical mind with the vital as its ally with its brute and stubborn obduracy, its arrogance and ignorant pride that is refusing to budge from its small, safe territory for fear of ceding its fiefdom and losing itself in a larger continent of light and power and bliss and freedom and infinitude. The churning, the murk and the slime that are being thrown up, this mindless fighting, the rise of the demoniac forces lurking in man's depths are a direct result of this resistance of the 'cold material intellect' to change and transform itself. It is at such times that we have to shed all self-deceit, insincerity and hypocrisy and make the irrevocable choice of standing firmly by the side of the Truth, the Higher Power that is pressing down to make earth its home. It is at times like these that we have to remain calm and vigilant and look straight into the spirit within and open ourselves to the light, the freedom, the bliss, the all-transforming power of love that is awaiting to descend. It is to such 'calm continents of potency', 'homelands of beauty shut to human eyes', 'sunbelts of knowledge, moonbelts of delight', 'immortal spaces of cerulean hue' that *Savitri* beckons us. As already stated in our previous issue, the remaining papers on *Savitri*, left over from the previous issue, appear in this number.

We are particularly grateful to the Clear Ray Trust, holders of copyright of all of Amal Kiran's writings, for permitting us to reproduce his article 'What Basically is Savitri?' from its recent publication 'On Sri Aurobindo's *Savitri: Writings by Amal Kiran: Part One: Essays*'. We also thank them for permission to publish extracts of his life taken from the inside jacket cover of the book to be included in our section 'Notes on Authors'. The copyright for the same rests with the Clear Ray Trust.

Customarily talks given at Savitri Bhavan get published first in its journal *Invocation*. In this case, when I put in my request to my friend, Shraddhavan of Savitri Bhavan, Auroville, for permission to include it in the **Sraddha** Apr'11 special issue on *Savitri*, she very generously agreed. I owe her special thanks for allowing us to publish Richard Hartz's talk on 'The Everlasting Yes: **Savitri** the Epic of Affirmation' which he presented at Savitri Bhavan on 19 March, 2011.

We are grateful to the Sri Aurobindo Ashram Trust for allowing us to reproduce extracts from Sri Aurobindo's *Letters on Savitri* from SABCL, vol.29, the photograph of the Mother, taken from the Ashram catalogue of photos prepared by the Digital Scanning and Photo Section, with a few lines of *Savitri* appended to it and Krishnalal's painting 'Will or Faith' taken from the Studio. Our grateful thanks to Samata in the Studio for identifying the painting, to Chaitanya in the Archives for providing its high resolution image and to Robi Ganguly for designing the layout. Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations are reproduced here with acknowledgements and thanks to the Trustees.

On Savitri

Sri Aurobindo

The tale of Satyavan and Savitri is recited in the Mahabharata as a story of conjugal love conquering death. But this legend is, as shown by many features of the human tale, one of the many symbolic myths of the Vedic cycle. Satyavan is the soul carrying the divine truth of being within itself but descended into the grip of death and ignorance; Savitri is the Divine Word, daughter of the Sun, goddess of the supreme Truth who comes down and is born to save; Aswapati, the Lord of the Horse, her human father, is the Lord of Tapasya, the concentrated energy of spiritual endeavour that helps us to rise from the mortal to the immortal planes; Dyumatsena, Lord of the Shining Hosts, father of Satyavan, is the Divine Mind here fallen blind, losing its celestial kingdom of vision, and through that loss its kingdom of glory. Still this is not a mere allegory, the characters are not personified qualities, but incarnations or emanations of living and conscious Forces with whom we can enter into concrete touch and they take human bodies in order to help man and show him the way from his mortal state to a divine consciousness and immortal life.

Savitri... is blank verse without enjambment (except rarely) — each line a thing by itself and arranged in paragraphs of one, two, three, four, five lines (rarely a longer series), in an attempt to catch something of the Upanishadic and Kalidasian movement, so far as that is a possibility in English. 1932

I used *Savitri* as a means of ascension. I began with it on a certain mental level, each time I could reach a higher level I rewrote from that level. Moreover I was particular — if part seemed to me to come from any lower levels I was not satisfied to leave it because it was good poetry. All had to be as far as possible of the same mint. In fact *Savitri* has not been regarded by me as a poem to be written and finished, but as a field of experimentation to see how far poetry could be written from one's own yogic consciousness and how that could be made creative. 1936

I receive from above my head and receive changes and corrections from above without any initiation by myself or labour of the brain. Even if I change a hundred times, the mind does not work at that, it only receives. Formerly it used not to be so, the mind was always labouring at the stuff of an unshaped formation.....*Savitri* is a work by itself unlike all the others. I made some eight or ten recasts of it originally under the old insufficient inspiration. Afterwards I am altogether rewriting it, concentrating on the first book and working on it over and over again with the hope that every line may be of a perfect perfection—. 1934

Savitri was originally written many years ago before the Mother came, as a narrative poem in two parts, Part I Earth and Part II Beyond (these two parts are still extant in the scheme) each of four books — or rather Part II consisted of three books and an epilogue. Twelve books to an epic is a classical superstition, but the new *Savitri* may extend to ten books — if much is added in the final version it may be even twelve. The first book has been lengthening and lengthening out till it must be over 2000 lines, but I shall break up the original first four into five, I think — in fact I have already started doing so. These first five will be, as I conceive them now, the Book of Birth, the Book of Quest, the Book of Love, the Book of Fate, the Book of Death. As for the second Part, I have not touched it yet. There was no climbing of planes there in the first version — rather Savitri moved through the worlds of Night, of Twilight, of Day — all of course in a spiritual sense — and ended by calling down the power of the Highest Worlds of Sachchidananda. I had no idea of what the supramental World could be like at that time, so it could not enter into the scheme. As for expressing the supramental inspiration, that is a matter of the future. 1936

Savitri is represented in the poem as an incarnation of the Divine Mother. This incarnation is supposed to have taken place in far past times when the whole thing had to be opened, so as to “hew the ways of Immortality”. 1936

The poem was originally written from a lower level, a mixture perhaps of the inner mind, psychic, poetic intelligence, sublimised vital, afterwards with the Higher Mind, often illumined and intuitivised, intervening. Most of the stuff of the first book is new or else the old so altered as to be no more what it was; the best of the old has sometimes been kept almost intact because it had already the higher inspiration. Moreover, there have been made several successive revisions each trying to lift the general level higher and higher towards a possible Overmind poetry. As it now stands there is a general Overmind influence, I believe, sometimes coming fully through, sometimes colouring the poetry of the other higher planes fused together, sometimes lifting any one of these higher planes to its highest or the psychic, poetic intelligence or vital towards them. 1936

I don't think about the technique because thinking is no longer in my line. But I see and feel for it when the lines are coming through and afterwards in revision of the work. I don't bother about details while writing, because that would only hamper the inspiration. I let it come through without interference; only pausing if there is an obvious inadequacy felt, in which case I conclude that it is a wrong inspiration or inferior level that has cut across the communication. If the inspiration is the right one, then I have not to bother about the technique then or afterwards, for there comes through the perfect line with the perfect rhythm inextricably intertwined or rather fused into an inseparable and single unity; if there is anything wrong with the expression that carries with it an imperfection in the rhythm, if there is a flaw in the rhythm, the expression also does not carry its full weight, is not absolutely inevitable. If on the other hand the inspiration is not throughout the right one, then there is an after examination and recasting of part or whole. The things I lay most stress on then are whether each line in itself is the inevitable thing not only as a whole but in each word; whether

there is the right distribution of sentence lengths (an immensely important thing in this kind of blank verse); whether the lines are in their right place, for all the lines may be perfect, but they may not combine perfectly together — bridges may be needed, alterations of position so as to create the right development and perspective etc., etc. Pauses hardly exist in this kind of blank verse; variations of rhythm as between the lines, of caesura, of the distribution of long and short, clipped and open syllables, manifold constructions of vowel and consonant sounds, alliteration, assonances, etc., distribution into one line, two line, three or four or five line, many line sentences, care to make each line tell by itself in its own mass and force and at the same time form a harmonious whole sentence — these are the important things. But all that is usually taken care of by the inspiration itself, for as I know and have the habit of the technique, the inspiration provides what I want according to standing orders. If there is a defect I appeal to headquarters, till a proper version comes along or the defect is removed by a word or phrase substitute that flashes — with the necessary sound and sense. These things are not done by thinking or seeking for the right thing — the two agents are sight and call. Also feeling — the solar plexus has to be satisfied and, until it is, revision after revision has to continue. I may add that the technique does not go by any set mental rule — for the object is not perfect technical elegance according to precept but sound-significance filling out the word-significance. If that can be done by breaking rules, well, so much the worse for the rule. 1936

I can never be certain of newly written stuff (I mean in this *Savitri*) until I have looked at it again after an interval. Apart from the quality of new lines, there is the combination with others in the whole which I have modified more than anything else in my past revisions. 1936

Allow me to point out that whatever I did in a jiffy would not be anymore than provisionally final. It is not a question of making a few changes in individual lines, that is a very minor problem; the real finality only comes when all is felt as a perfect whole, no line jarring with or falling away from the level of the whole though some may rise above it and also all the parts in their proper place making the right harmony. It is an inner feeling that has to decide that.... Unfortunately the mind can't arrange these things, one has to wait till the absolutely right thing comes in a sort of receptive self-opening and calling-down condition. 1936

...I have pulled up the third section to a higher consistency of level; the “Worlds” have fallen into a state of manuscript chaos, corrections upon corrections, additions upon additions, rearrangements on rearrangements out of which perhaps some cosmic beauty will emerge. 1938

...*Savitri* has grown to an enormous length so that it is no longer quite the same thing as the poem you saw then. There are now three books in the first part. The first, the Book of Beginnings, comprises five cantos which cover the same ground as what you typed but contains also much more that is new. The small passage about Aswapathy and the other worlds has been replaced by a new book, the Book of the Traveller of the Worlds, in fourteen cantos with many thousand lines. There is also a third sufficiently long book, the Book of the Divine Mother. In the new plan of the poem there is a second part consisting of five books: two of these, the Book of Birth and Quest

and the Book of Love, have been completed and another, the Book of Fate, is almost complete. Two others, the Book of Yoga and the Book of Death, have still to be written, though a part needs only a thorough re-casting. Finally, there is the third part consisting of four books, the Book of Eternal Night, the Book of the Dual Twilight, the Book of Everlasting Day and the Return to Earth, which have to be entirely recast and the third of them largely rewritten. So it will be a long time before *Savitri* is complete.

In the new form it will be a sort of poetic philosophy of the Spirit and of Life much profounder in its substance and vaster in its scope than was intended in the original poem. I am trying of course to keep it at a very high level of inspiration, but in so large a plan covering most subjects of philosophical thought and vision and many aspects of spiritual experience there is bound to be much variation of tone: but that is, I think, necessary for the richness and completeness of the treatment. 1946

...Rapid transitions from one image to another are a constant feature in *Savitri* as in most mystic poetry. I am not here building a long sustained single picture of the Dawn with a single continuous image or variations of the same image. I am describing a rapid series of transitions, piling one suggestion upon anotherIn such a race of rapid transitions you cannot bind me down to a logical chain of figures or a classical monotone. The mystic Muse is more of an inspired Bacchante of the Dionysian wine than an orderly housewife.

.....
Teased the Inconscient to wake Ignorance.

The Inconscient and the Ignorance may be mere empty abstractions and can be dismissed as irrelevant jargon if one has not come into collision with them or plunged into their dark and bottomless reality. But to me they are realities, concrete powers whose resistance is present everywhere and at all times in its tremendous and boundless mass. In fact, in writing this line I had no intention of teaching philosophy or forcing in an irrelevant metaphysical idea, although the idea may be there in implication. I was presenting a happening that was to me something sensible and, as one might say, psychologically and spiritually concrete.

If I had to write for the general reader I could not have written *Savitri* at all. It is in fact for myself that I have written it and for those who can lend themselves to the subject-matter, images, technique of mystic poetry.

One has to use words and images in order to convey to the mind some perception, some figure of that which is beyond thought.

To the mystic there is no such Thing as an abstraction. Everything which to the intellectual mind is abstract has a concreteness, substantiality which is more real than the sensible form of an object or of a physical event. To me, for instance, consciousness is the very stuff of existence and I can feel it everywhere enveloping and penetrating the stone as much as man or the animal. A movement, a flow of consciousness is not to me an image but a fact. If I wrote “His anger climbed against me in a stream”, it would be to the general reader a mere image, not something that was felt by me in a sensible experience; yet I would only be describing in exact terms what actually happened once, a stream of anger, a sensible and violent current of it rising up from downstairs and rushing upon me as I sat in the veranda of the Guest-House,

the truth of it being confirmed afterwards by the confession of the person who had the movement. This is only one instance, but all that is spiritual or psychological in *Savitri* is of that character. What is to be done under these circumstances? The mystical poet can only describe what he has felt, seen in himself or others or in the world just as he has felt or seen it or experienced through exact vision, close contact or identity and leave it to the general reader to understand or not understand or misunderstand according to his capacity. A new kind of poetry demands a new mentality in the recipient as well as in the writer.

Another question is the place of philosophy in poetry or whether it has any place at all. Some romanticists seem to believe that the poet has no right to think at all, only to see and feel. This accusation has been brought against me by many that I think too much and that when I try to write in verse, thought comes in and keeps out poetry. I hold, to the contrary, that philosophy has its place and can even take a leading place along with psychological experience as it does in the Gita. All depends on how it is done, whether it is a dry or a living philosophy, an arid intellectual statement or the expression not only of the living truth of thought but, of something of its beauty, its light or its power.

This is not the method of *Savitri*. Its expression aims at a certain force, directness and spiritual clarity and reality. When it is not understood, it is because the truths it expresses are unfamiliar to the ordinary mind or belong to an untrodden domain or domains or enter into a field of occult experience: it is not because there is any attempt at a dark or vague profundity or at an escape from thought. The thinking is not intellectual but intuitive or more than intuitive, always expressing a vision, a spiritual contact or a knowledge which has come by entering into the thing itself, by identity.

The philosophy of *Savitri* is different but it is persistently there; it expresses or tries to express a total and many-sided vision and experience of all the planes of being and their action upon each other. Whatever language, whatever terms are necessary to convey this truth of vision and experience it uses without scruple or admitting any mental rule of what is or is not poetic. It does not hesitate to employ terms which might be considered as technical when these can be turned to express something direct, vivid and powerful. That need not be an introduction of technical jargon, that is to say, I suppose, special and artificial language, expressing in this case only abstract ideas and generalities without any living truth or reality in them. Such jargon cannot make good literature, much less good poetry. But there is a 'poeticism' which establishes a sanitary cordon against words and ideas which it considers as prosaic but which properly used can strengthen poetry and extend its range.

In view of certain criticisms suggesting or flatly stating that there was too much thought in my poems or that I am even in my poetry a philosopher rather than a poet, I am justifying a poet's right to think as well as to see and feel, his right to 'dare to philosophise'. I agree with the modernists in their revolt against the romanticist's insistence on emotionalism and his objection to thinking and philosophical reflection in poetry. But the modernist went too far in his revolt. In trying to avoid what I may call poeticism he ceased to be poetic; wishing to escape from rhetorical writing, rhetorical pretension to greatness and beauty of style, he threw out true poetic greatness and

beauty, turned from a deliberately poetic style to a colloquial tone and even to very flat writing; especially he turned away from poetic rhythm to a prose or half-prose rhythm or to no rhythm at all. Also he has weighed too much on thought and has lost the habit of intuitive sight; by turning emotion out of its intimate chamber in the house of Poetry, he has had to bring in to relieve the dryness of much of his thought too much exaggeration of the lower vital and sensational reactions untransformed or else transformed only by exaggeration. Nevertheless he has restored to the poet the freedom to think as well as to adopt a certain straightforwardness and directness of style.

In mystic poetry also repetition is not objectionable; it is resorted to by many poets, sometimes with insistence. I may cite as an example the constant repetition of the word *rtam*, truth, sometimes eight or nine times in a short poem of nine or ten stanzas and often in the same line. This does not weaken the poem, it gives it a singular power and beauty. The repetition of the same key ideas, key images and symbols, key words or phrases, key epithets, sometimes key lines or half lines is a constant feature. They give an atmosphere, a significant structure, a sort of psychological frame, an architecture. The object here is not to amuse or entertain but the self-expression of an inner truth, a seeing of things and ideas not familiar to the common mind, a bringing out of inner experience. It is the true more than the new that the poet is after. He uses *āṛtti*, repetition, as one of the most powerful means of carrying home what has been thought or seen and fixing it in the mind in an atmosphere of light and beauty. This kind of repetition I have used largely in *Savitri*. Moreover, the object is not only to present a secret truth in its true form and true vision but to drive it home by the finding of the true word, the true phrase, the *mot juste*, the true image or symbol, if possible the inevitable word; if that is there, nothing else, repetition included, matters much. This is natural when the repetition is intended, serves a purpose; but it can hold even when the repetition is not deliberate but comes in naturally in the stream of the inspiration. I see, therefore, no objection to the recurrence of the same or similar image such as sea and ocean, sky and heaven in one long passage provided each is the right thing and rightly worded in its place. The same rule applies to words, epithets, ideas. It is only if the repetition is clumsy or awkward, too burdensomely insistent, at once unneeded and inexpressive or amounts to a disagreeable and meaningless echo that it must be rejected. 1946

Do not forget that *Savitri* is an experiment in mystic poetry, spiritual poetry cast into a symbolic figure. Done on this rule, it is really a new attempt and cannot be hampered by old ideas of technique except when they are assimilable. Least of all by a standard proper to a mere intellectual and abstract poetry which makes "reason and taste" the supreme arbiters, aims at a harmonised poetic intellectual balanced expression of the sense, elegance in language, a sober and subtle use of imaginative decoration, a restrained emotive element etc. The attempt at mystic spiritual poetry of the kind I aim at demands above all a spiritual objectivity, an intense psycho-physical concreteness.

I can perfectly understand ...that all should be lifted to or towards at least the minimum Overhead level or so near as to be touched by its influence or at the very least a good substitute for it. I do not know whether that is always possible in so long a poem as *Savitri* dealing with so many various heights and degrees and so much

varying substance of thought and feeling and descriptive matter and narrative. But that has been my general aim throughout and it is the reason why I have made so many successive drafts and continual alterations till I felt that I had got the thing intended by the higher inspiration in every line and passage. It is also why I keep myself open to every suggestion from a sympathetic and understanding quarter and weigh it well, rejecting only after due consideration and accepting when I see it to be well-founded. 1947

The whole of *Savitri* is, according to the title of the poem, a legend that is a symbol and this opening canto is, it may be said, a key beginning and announcement. So understood there is nothing here otiose or unnecessary; all is needed to bring out by suggestion some aspect of the thing symbolised and so start adequately the working out of the significance of the whole poem.

The structure of the pentameter blank verse in *Savitri* is of its own kind and different in plan from the blank verse that has come to be ordinarily used in English poetry. It dispenses with enjambment or uses it very sparingly and only when a special effect is intended; each line must be strong enough to stand by itself, while at the same time it fits harmoniously into the sentence or paragraph like stone added to stone; the sentence consists usually of one, two, three or four lines, more rarely five or six or seven: a strong close for the line and a strong close for the sentence are almost indispensable except when some kind of inconclusive cadence is desirable; here must be no laxity or diffusiveness in the rhythm or in the metrical flow anywhere, — there must be a flow but not a loose flux. This gives an added importance to what comes at the close of the line and this placing is used very often to give emphasis and prominence to a key phrase or a key idea, especially those which have to be often reiterated in the thought and vision of the poem so as to recall attention to things that are universal or fundamental or otherwise of the first consequence — whether for the immediate subject or in the total plan.

I have not anywhere in *Savitri* written anything for the sake of mere picturesqueness or merely to produce a rhetorical effect; what I am trying to do everywhere in the poem is to express exactly something seen, something felt or experienced; if, for instance, I indulge in the wealth-burdened line or passage, it is not merely for the pleasure of the indulgence, but because there is that burden, or at least what I conceive to be that, in the vision or the experience. When the expression has been found, I have to judge, not by the intellect or by any set poetical rule, but by an intuitive feeling, whether it is entirely the right expression and, if it is not, I have to change and go on changing until I have received the absolutely right inspiration and the right transcription of it and must never be satisfied with any *à peu près* or imperfect transcription even if that makes good poetry of one kind or another. This is what I have tried to do.... *Savitri* is the record of a seeing, of an experience which is not of the common kind and is often very far from what the general human mind sees and experiences. You must not expect appreciation or understanding from the general public or even from many at the first touch;... there must be a new extension of consciousness and aesthesis to appreciate a new kind of mystic poetry. Moreover if it is really new in kind, it may employ

a new technique, not perhaps absolutely new, but new in some or many of its elements: in that case old rules and canons and standards may be quite inapplicable.... We have to see whether what is essential to poetry is there and how far the new technique justifies itself by new beauty and perfection, and a certain freedom of mind from old conventions is necessary if our judgment is to be valid or rightly objective.

.....
If... *Savitri* stands as a new mystical poetry with a new vision and expression of things, we should expect, at least at first, a widespread, perhaps, a general failure even in lovers of poetry to understand it or appreciate; even those who have some mystical turn or spiritual experience are likely to pass it by if it is a different turn from theirs or outside their range of experience. It took the world something like a hundred years to discover Blake; it would not be improbable that there might be a greater time-lag here, though naturally we hope for better things.

At any rate this is the only thing one can do, especially when one is attempting a new creation, to go on with the work with such light and power as is given to one and leave the value of the work to be determined by the future. Contemporary judgments we know to be unreliable; there are only two judges whose joint verdict cannot easily be disputed, the World and Time. The Roman proverb says, *securus judicat orbis terrarum*; but the world's verdict is secure only when it is confirmed by Time. For it is not the opinion of the general mass of men that finally decides, the decision is really imposed by the judgment of a minority and *élite* which is finally accepted and settles down as the verdict of posterity; in Tagore's phrase it is the universal man, *Viśva Mānava*, or rather something universal using the general mind of man, we might say the Cosmic Self in the race that fixes the value of its own works. In regard to the great names in literature this final verdict seems to have in it something of the absolute,—so far as anything can be that in a temporal world of relativities in which the Absolute reserves itself hidden behind the veil of human ignorance.... whatever has real value in its own kind settles itself and finds its just place in the durable judgment of the world..... let us hope... that the waste paper basket is not the proper place for *Savitri*. There may still be a place for a poetry which seeks to enlarge the field of poetic creation and find for the inner spiritual life of man and his now occult or mystical knowledge and experience of the whole hidden range of his and the world's being, not a corner and a limited expression such as it had in the past, but a wide space and as manifold and integral an expression of the boundless and innumerable riches that lie hidden and unexplored as if kept apart under the direct gaze of the Infinite as has been found in the past for man's surface and finite view and experience of himself and the material world in which he has lived striving to know himself and it as best he can with a limited mind and senses. The door that has been shut to all but a few may open; the kingdom of the Spirit may be established not only in man's inner being but in his life and his works. Poetry also may have its share in that revolution and become part of the spiritual empire. 1947

What Basically Is *Savitri*?

Amal Kiran (K D Sethna)

What basically is *Savitri*? It can be regarded, in its own language, as
Sight's sound-waves breaking from the soul's great deeps.

(*Savitri*, 4th rev ed, 1993, p.383)

So to approach it I would try to concentrate in the heart-centre and plunge into it until I felt it as not only intense but also immense — and in that secrecy of warm wideness I would become all eyes and ears bent upon feeling *Savitri* as the outflow of my own true self. Here would be an attempt to enter into Sri Aurobindo through my own profundities and, catching a sense of identity with him, achieve in the form of this poem's super-art what the Rigvedic Rishis termed “the seeing and hearing of the Truth”. Whatever is spiritually visioned has an inherent vibration which renders itself into a voice, an audible rhythm of the inmost being's self-visualisation. To experience *Savitri*'s spirit-disclosures in this intimate audiovisual manner within some psychic solitude of fathomless peace conjoined with power: there you have my ideal apropos of a phrase from Sri Aurobindo's epic.

But I may add that such an account as the above does not exhaust the reality of true readership. As Sri Aurobindo explains in *The Future Poetry*, the Mantra is seen-heard in the heart's abyss at the same time that it is sensed as descended from a height of heights. This sensing, if it is to be acute, reflects the experience we meet in those sapphics of Sri Aurobindo:

*Swiftly, swiftly crossing the golden spaces
Knowledge leaps, a torrent of rapid lightnings.
Thoughts that left the Ineffable's flaming mansions
Blaze in my spirit.*

*Slow my heart-beats' rhythm like a giant hammer's;
Missioned voices drive to me from God's doorway
Words that live not save upon Nature's summits,
Ecstasy's chariots.*

I should like to set my imagination a-thrill with the rapture-roll of these lines and with the picture they conjure up of a mighty descent from the Superconscient Ether into the

human spirit and of a vast receptivity in that spirit's central organ. The central organ experiences at once an expansion and a subdual — its pulsation loses all common excitement and narrow sensation, it comes to know great prolonged gaps of silence between one throb and another. Within such a reflex and echo of the Rigveda's *sparam vyoman*, the supreme Void where all the Gods are seated together and the Mantra goes eternally vibrating — within that superhumanised heart the revelatory utterance of a poem like *Savitri* can be realised in all the authenticity of its marvellous origin at the top of Nature, the Overmind-Supermind level.

And how does that utterance precipitate itself with its sight-sound? Sri Aurobindo uses an image from the Rigveda: the chariot. It is as a mobile well-framed carrier of a luminous load that the Mantra arrives and appears in the mortal's consciousness. What psychological fact is shadowed out by this arrival and appearance in the shape of a skilfully fashioned vehicle on two wheels which resemble — to quote an Upanishadic idea — a stable centre from which and into which run the diverse lines of our nature like circling spokes?

According to the Rigveda, such arrival and appearance point to the domain of the mind in a state of in-drawnness which yet has a calm connection with all the parts of the being and which lends itself to the formative *élan* from the lofty home of Truth and from the deep answering heart. The in-drawn illuminated mentality is the workshop here below of the hidden Gods. There, like an inspired cartwright, the seer gives a particularised mould to the messages that move from everlasting to everlasting. Rather, the mould which is already existent on Nature's summits gets its true replica for man in the shaping recesses of the mind. Ecstasy's chariots are projected into the cast of human language through the services of a mental seerhood. Hence *Savitri*'s missioned voices from God's doorway call not only for a heart-consciousness of the right order but also for a mind-awareness properly tuned up.

To cut all this esoteric cackle of mine, I may sum up by saying that we should somehow so train ourselves in heart and mind that *Savitri* may be more than a superb communication to us: it should be a miraculous communion in which we shall feel as though we were its co-creators with Sri Aurobindo.

The Mother's presence is extremely intense today — as it should be to all who have pledged their future to her and to whom 21 February, along with 15 August, is the greatest occasion in history because something beyond history, a Grace of the Eternal, entered the historical stream to give it not only what it could never deserve but also what it could never dream of and desire. For, this stream belongs to the cosmic movement which has the transcendent behind it but never directly in it: its culmination would be the highest stratum of the world of the Gods, where the Many stand unified and harmonised in a Godhead synthesising in a single *summum bonum* the diverse goals of the various religions: the culmination would be the glory and passion of a World Religion such as would have been founded if the luminous creation of the Overmind plane had been precipitated in the wake of the Descent on 24 November 1926 and not been set aside by the Mother at the command of Sri Aurobindo. Sri Aurobindo wanted not this natural crowning of the cosmic

movement but the evocation of the Ineffable that was behind it, the secret Supermind transcendent of all religions, whose realisation would be rather the gift of a Super— Nature than Nature's own deserved and desired achievement in the course of history — in short, a Grace of the Eternal, which can only be received and never demanded as a right and which has been offered to terrestrial evolution by the birth of the Divine Mother amongst us, side by side with that of Sri Aurobindo the Supramental Avatar. From the viewpoint of Nature and history the dual embodiment of the Supermind is asking for the impossible. Have not all the prophets and saviours declared that, however irradiated the earth might be by the Spirit, the *grand finale* is always Yonder, never Here? Out of the mind, away from the life-force, far from the body we must ultimately go if the Supreme is to be our unchanging and everlasting home: this has been the master-message of every system of spirituality. Even Vaishnavism and Tantra, which attempted to lay reshaping hands on embodied existence, knew how short they fell of the power of true transformation: even they pointed in the end to an earth-exceeding Within or a world-forgetting Beyond. All spiritual insight in the past has said that it is chimerical to hope for a mind all-knowing, a life-force all-affecting, a physical being which is perpetually young, immune to disease, free from death. Alone the Mother and Sri Aurobindo have proclaimed:

*Earth's winged chimeras are Truth's steeds in Heaven,
The impossible God's sign of things to be.*

(Savitri, 4th rev ed, 1993, p.52)

And today — the 102nd anniversary of the Supernal Beloved's birth — the sign of the future to which our souls have been dedicated glowed bright in our consciousness, as though once again that Beloved were concretely in front of us and lavishing on us her unforgettable time-transfiguring smile.

21.2.1980 (*Mother India*, October 2003, pp. 834-36)

(The above article has been reproduced from the book entitled '**On Sri Aurobindo's Savitri : Writings by Amal Kiran (K D Sethna) : Part One Essays**', published by the Clear Ray Trust in 2010 and is printed here by the kind permission of the Clear Ray Trust and the copyright for the same rests with the Clear Ray Trust)

Savitri Book I, Canto I *The Symbol Dawn*

Debashish Banerji

It was the hour before the Gods awake.
Across the path of the divine Event
The huge foreboding mind of Night, alone
In her unlit temple of eternity,
Lay stretched immobile upon Silence' marge.
Almost one felt, opaque, impenetrable,
In the sombre symbol of her eyeless muse
The abysm of the unbodied Infinite;
A fathomless zero occupied the world.
A power of fallen boundless self awake
Between the first and the last Nothingness,
Recalling the tenebrous womb from which it came,
Turned from the insoluble mystery of birth
And the tardy process of mortality
And longed to reach its end in vacant Nought.
As in a dark beginning of all things,
A mute featureless semblance of the Unknown
Repeating for ever the unconscious act,
Prolonging for ever the unseeing will,
Cradled the cosmic drowse of ignorant Force
Whose moved creative slumber kindles the suns
And carries our lives in its somnambulist whirl.
Athwart the vain enormous trance of Space,
Its formless stupor without mind or life,
A shadow spinning through a soulless Void,
Thrown back once more into unthinking dreams,
Earth wheeled abandoned in the hollow gulfs
Forgetful of her spirit and her fate.
The impassive skies were neutral, empty, still.
Then something in the inscrutable darkness stirred;

A nameless movement, an unthought Idea
 Insistent, dissatisfied, without an aim,
 Something that wished but knew not how to be,
 Teased the Inconscient to wake Ignorance.

.....

As if a childlike finger laid on a cheek
 Reminded of the endless need in things
 The heedless Mother of the universe,
 An infant longing clutched the sombre Vast.
 Insensibly somewhere a breach began:

These are the starting lines with which Sri Aurobindo begins his epic poem *Savitri* in its first canto, which is called 'The Symbol Dawn.' These lines describe the advent of a dawn and take the form of an overture for the epic. This entire first canto may, indeed, be thought of as an overture, a fractal seed which will be expanded like a pattern throughout the poem. In the narrative scheme of the epic, it represents a specific dawn, the advent of the day when one of its principal characters, Satyavan, is destined to die. But it is much more than a specific dawn, it is a 'symbol dawn', just as *Savitri* itself is a legend and a symbol. And this dawn is described by Sri Aurobindo in terms which, from the beginning, give the impression of a cosmic event, an event which is archetypal, and which is an interruption of the order of time, something which creates a new order, a new beginning. In this sense, we have to realise that the principal protagonist Savitri, in whose name the epic is written, is herself such an Intervention. Savitri, as she will be born to her father, the yogi-king Aswapati in the epic, is an incarnation of the Divine Mother, the Shakti of the solar godhead, and she will represent the power of overcoming the night of Ignorance, Falsehood and Death. This is the very meaning of the epic *Savitri*.

Thus, *Savitri* begins with the symbolic act of dawn overcoming and destroying the night, bringing to light the contents of the full day of eternal existence. This cosmic sense may be seen as the meaning of Sri Aurobindo's teaching and of the ancient teachings of the Vedas that Sri Aurobindo draws on in this symbol. In the Vedas, we see dawn as the goddess Usha. She is the daughter of the sun, the solar godhead, *Surya Savitr*, and she appears at the end of each night to unfurl the gates of manifestation when Being becomes, reveals its contents. This opening of the gates of the manifestation, allowing the power of Being to unconceal itself, is the profound inner meaning of 'the symbol dawn' appearing repeatedly out of a succession of nights. Thus 'the symbol dawn' begins with the effect of a dawn arising out of a night.

The Vedas bestow a loaded significance to the dawn, resting on the solar godhead. The sun is the Supramental Being, the real-symbol of Supermind. It is that power of the revelation of Supreme Being as an ordered, omnipotent, luminous and beautiful Reality that will put everything in its place and cause the unfoldment of Delight in the

manifestation. This Supramental reality, the solar orb is known in the Vedas as *Surya Savitr* and Savitri is the power of *Surya Savitr*, a ray of its Reality. Thus, Savitri herself represents the dawning of the Supramental Age in the epic *Savitri* and 'the symbol dawn,' with which Sri Aurobindo begins this epic, may be seen as the dawn of Savitri. It is also, as mentioned earlier, the specific day when Satyavan will die. Therefore, it is in Savitri's own life, the dawning of her own avataric mission, her messianic power, the power with which she will overcome the night of unconsciousness and death. It is the inner event of that power which is signified by 'the symbol dawn.'

Returning to its cosmic origin and significance, we can see that the dawn also implies a sense of succession; it is an image bearing a reminder of the succession of days and nights. The Vedas, speak of this succession as the two mothers, 'aho' and 'ratri', Day and Night, who suckle the child of manifestation that evolves, revealing more and more of itself. Thus this dawn is a palimpsest of dawns and nights, an image of the manifest reality in its evolution. We are thereby brought into contact with the idea of the infinite self-exploration of Being. If Conscious Being is an Absolute Consciousness, an Infinite Consciousness, then there will also be an infinite remainder to any degree of its manifestation. It will remain infinitely unmanifest because in the order of infinity, there can never be an exhaustive manifestation of that which is infinite. To explore itself, it needs to enter into an appearance given to it by the power of consciousness, in which it manifests more of its own properties each time it appears. It is an appearance, a coming into becoming; and then this Becoming needs to be withdrawn so that a greater Being may manifest in its place. That withdrawal, that erasure is effected through a night. Therefore, this succession of days and nights is a way by which the Supreme Infinite Being manifests more and more of its properties of Being, these constant recurrences of days and nights bringing the Divine into our lives.

When we reflect on this succession, we also realise that this is the very meaning of Time. If there is a progression that is taking place, then in this there is a Being, which is perpetually being overcome by a Non-Being, which in turn it is overcoming. Infinite and absolute Existence is Being which is beginningless and endless, it is seamless. It is absolute and infinite but into this Absolute and Infinite Being, there must enter an appearance of Becoming. This appearance of becoming, to manifest Being, must also be beginningless and endless. It expresses this through its unending reappearances. It ever repeats and in each reappearance, it manifests itself as a power with a beginning, a middle and an end. In these recurrences, the dawns are the properties of Being just as the nights are the properties of Non-Being. To every Being there is a greater Non-Being because whatever may be manifest of this infinite Unmanifest, there can always be more that can be manifest, other appearances of reality that can be manifest. This can only occur through the intervention of a Non-Being. But to every Non-Being there is a greater Being, because a greater power of appearance succeeds each night of Non-Being. This is the image of time with a beginning, a middle and an end. Indeed if we

have to conceive of time against the backdrop of eternity, we realise that it is a paradox. Eternity is the absolute stillness, eternity is something in which no events occur. But Time is marked by its eventful nature, its nature as a succession of events, its quantisation of Reality, a quantification of the Beginningless and the Endless. It is this that is given an image through a succession of nights and days, a perpetuity of nights and days, which is an image of the Being in the Becoming, creating time, creating progression.

Now, 'The Symbol Dawn,' which is the canto with which *Savitri* begins, is not just another dawn in the quotidian succession of days and nights, but represents the initiation of a specific kind of succession. It is a succession that begins with a remembrance of earlier dawns. It is not merely something which is occurring as it were through a self-conception, a self-erasure and a recurrence of the self. It is the sense of a Being which has attempted to manifest itself and has been folded back into its own erasure by some power of compulsion that has left it tired and weary, wanting to emerge and yet unwilling to emerge, scarred by the trauma of the repeated failures that it has experienced.

This is indeed the sense with which our own universe is fraught. If we can think of becoming as a succession of days and nights in the order of Being, then we can think also of a specific kind of becoming that is marked by the striving to release an ultimate godhead but under the compulsion of a repeated death, a repeated non-being or erasure which it cannot overcome. This, indeed, is the kind of manifestation we find ourselves in as mortal beings on earth, in this universe ruled by death which Sri Aurobindo calls the 'evolving ignorance'.

The 'evolving ignorance' as a manifestation is marked by the compulsion of death and the compulsion of rebirth. This is what the entire cosmos experiences in its rounds of manifestation and *pralaya*, the *yugas* and the *kalpas*, the ages and the cycles with which the cosmos unfolds, expanding and contracting. It is also symbolised everywhere in the birth and death of things, in the emergence of the seed which repeats again as a new birth. And yet to every birth, there is the trace of a historical past marked by failure and incapacity. It is this *thanatos*, this remembrance and pull of death which constitutes part of the reality of manifestation in the 'evolving ignorance.'

Thus we find here, on the one hand, an urge towards the full expression of Divine Being as an Immortality, an Eternity in time, a perpetual unfoldment of the powers of Infinity and, on the other hand, a remembrance of an original death towards which things are constantly drawn, as if back to an original seed condition of Inconscience. These are the two poles of *Eros* and *Thanatos*, the power of Immortal Love attracting us towards Divine Delight and the power of death pulling through the memory of a succession of failures to a bedrock of Inconscience. This is the seed state out of which the 'symbol dawn' is presented to us by Sri Aurobindo in *Savitri*. This eternal succession between the two poles of striving days and failing nights, develops a subjective consciousness marked by two limit experiences, a sense of doom and an expectation of miracle. The sense of doom is best characterised in the Greek myth of Sisyphus,

who repeatedly rolls a huge boulder up the mountain only to see it roll down before reaching the top. This futile unending labour is an essential aspect of mortal consciousness and one of the ways in which the ancient world characterised life on earth. But human beings also intuit a development of consciousness within this repetition, an intuition of the truth of freedom and creative self-mastery at the Origin of things and thus, carry simultaneously an expectation of release from this doom. This is a messianic expectation of miracle, the Event for which all time seems to be in travail, a change in the order of Time, marking the decisive supremacy of consciousness over blind automatism and compulsion to Law.

This is the idea of a Divine Event being conceived by the Night who holds it in gestation as in a temple. In this sense, Night is a temple of eternity that will give birth to this divine event. This is the notion of an eventual miracle arising out of the succession of days and nights that will be an interruption of the order of Ignorance. This new dawn will initiate another succession of days and nights with other properties, properties of the self-concealment and self-revelation of Being, knowing itself as a Power of Knowledge.

This is the interruption or intervention that is represented by the advent of Savitri, and it is this avatic power of Savitri awaking on the day that Satyavan will die that is at the centre of the symbol of this canto. This intervention, this divine event is the very meaning of the epic *Savitri*. It is also the central meaning of Sri Aurobindo's teaching. It is an arduous call to the Grace that must descend into this ignorant world as the power of Supermind, causing a new law to interrupt and transform its law of Ignorance. The entry of this new law is the power of the new dawn in 'The Symbol Dawn'. Therefore, this canto with which Sri Aurobindo begins his epic is a symbol of the entry of a Divine Intervention into the order of the Ignorance. It is a symbol of Initiation— an initiation of the earth through the advent of Savitri, an initiation in the life of Savitri through the advent of her own avatic power missioned to overcome Ignorance and Death in her own life and a mantric initiation into a journey of self-mastery and cosmic mastery for the reader of the epic. It can be seen as an intervention, a prophecy and an initiation meant for our times, as we read *Savitri* and are thereby opened to the symbolic prophecy of a possible divine future and initiated into a new age for the cosmic manifestation.

Sri Aurobindo wrote *Savitri* not only to convey his spiritual realisation and teaching in a symbolic form, but to instrumentalise a power of language to transmit the subjective consciousness of its experience. Sri Aurobindo theorises this power of language in his text *The Future Poetry* and calls it the mantra. He sees this as the natural expression of a perception belonging to a plane of cosmic consciousness which he terms Overmind. Sri Aurobindo re-wrote the first canto of *Savitri*, "The Symbol Dawn" many times, more than any other portion of the epic, in his attempt to arrive at a perfect purity of Overmind utterance. This is what carries the magnificent intangible mantric power of these lines, almost synaesthetic in their transmission of the power of revelation of a New

Dawn. Sri Aurobindo has also given us a *mantra* in Sanskrit, adapted from the Vedas, that invokes this supramental power. This is adapted from the central and most important *mantra* of the Veda, the *Gayatri mantra*. This is Sri Aurobindo's *Gayatri mantra*, given by him as another representation of the power present in The Symbol Dawn. Sri Aurobindo's *Gayatri mantra* in Sanskrit, reads:

Om Tat Savitur varam rupam jyotih parasya dhimahi yanna satyena dipayet.
We invoke that power of the Supramental Sun which shall illumine us with Truth.

This is the supramental power which is invoked to transform us with the Truth Consciousness, with the Truth Light. We can see that the word *Savitṛ* is included in this *mantra* – *Tat savitur varam rupam jyotih paramasya dhimahi* – *Savitṛ* is the same Supramental solar godhead that is also invoked in *Savitri* and in 'The Symbol Dawn'. But whereas this *mantra* in Sanskrit is the condensed sound-body of the supramental invocation, The Symbol Dawn, beautifully elaborated in English, a contemporary world language, represents Sri Aurobindo's global legacy, his legacy to humanity and his legacy to world literature.

(DVDs of the complete series of talks are available at a price from Sri Aurobindo Bhavan, 8 Shakespeare Sarani, Kolkata 700 071. For details, please contact Arup Basu, Editor, Sraddha, at 98302 58723)

Savitri and Satyavan: The Path to Immortality

Vladimir Iatsenko

Part I

The Vedic Myths of Immortality.

There are several myths of immortality in the Vedic tradition which have come to us in the form of stories, narrated in the *Brāhmanas*, Epics and *Purāṇas*. Here we would like to mention briefly some of them, but will mainly concentrate on the symbolism of the story of *Sāvitrī* and *Satyavān*. Throughout these myths we come across events where persons are saved from death.

The myth of Trishanku.¹

In The *Rāmāyana*, *Triśaṅku*, also known as *Satyavrata*, was the king of *Ayodhyā*. After he gave his kingdom to his son *Hariścandra*, he wanted to ascend to heaven in his body. Therefore, he asked *Vasiṣṭha*, the family priest, to take him there, but *Vasiṣṭha* answered that it wasn't possible. Then *Viśvāmitra*, a sage, who was always jealous of *Vasiṣṭha*'s knowledge and power, decided to help *Triśaṅku*. When they both arrived at the gate of the heaven, access was denied and they had to go back. *Viśvāmitra* was furious. He decided to create for *Triśaṅku* his own artificial heaven between heaven and earth where he made him remain in his body.

The myth of *Naciketas*.²

In the *Katha Upaniṣad*, there is the story of *Naciketas*. *Naciketas* was the son of *Vājaśravas*, who at the time of sacrifice didn't have anything valuable to offer to the gods. His cows became weary without food, his wealth disappeared, so he became very sad. *Naciketas* seeing him thus asked: "To whom are you going to give me, O father?" His father didn't answer, so *Naciketas* asked him a second time; but his father still didn't want to speak; at the third attempt, his father said: "I will give you to Yama!"

So *Naciketas* went to *Yama*, the God of Death. When he arrived at his palace, *Yama* was not there. *Naciketas* stayed at his palace for three days and three nights,

¹ This myth belongs originally to the Vedic period, but was retold in the *Purāṇas*.

² *Katha Upaniṣad* 1.

without food or drink. When *Yama* returned, he offered *Naciketas* three boons. The first boon the boy chose was that after his return home his father should not be angry with him. The second one was to learn about the heavenly fire, *tvam agnim svargyam adhyesi*.³ And the third one was that he learns the secret of Death. The Lord of Death granted the first two, but did not want to grant him the third. To avoid giving *Naciketas* the secret of death, he offered him all kinds of gifts, such as a long and rich life and beautiful women, but *Naciketas* was only content with his request: “Leave all this for yourself!”, he said, “this will only dry my senses and make them dull and ignorant!” His steadfastness to the search after truth made *Yama* very happy and He revealed to *Naciketas* the secret of Immortality. Not only this, but he also bestowed upon him the gift of a golden chain as the sign of his heavenly initiation, and he named the triple celestial fire after *Naciketas*.

The myth of *Mārkaṇḍeya*.⁴

This is another great legend of the Vedic period. According to the legend, *Mrkaṇḍu* didn’t have a son but through severe penance over several years he was offered a boon from Lord *Śiva*. He was given the choice between a virtuous and wise son who would live only to his sixteenth birthday, and a dull and stupid son who would live one hundred years. *Mrkaṇḍu* chose the wise son. After a little while his son was born and was called *Mārkaṇḍeya* after his father, which literally means ‘the son of *Mrkaṇḍu*’. He was a brilliant child who was loved by everyone. He learnt all the *Vedas* and *Śāstras* at an early age. When his sixteenth birthday was near his parents couldn’t hide their sorrow. *Mārkaṇḍeya* wanted to know the reason for their grief, so eventually they told him the whole story and from that day on *Mārkaṇḍeya* started to perform *tapasyā*. When the day of death arrived, he was meditating in front of a statue of *Śiva*. His *tapasya* was so luminous that none could even approach him, so the God of Death himself had to come to fetch him. But when *Yama* approached him and threw his snare, the boy suddenly embraced the statue of Lord *Śiva* so that *Yama* caught both him and the statue. Angry, Lord *Śiva* emerged from the statue and destroyed *Yama*. From that time, *Śiva* received the name *Mrtyunjaya*, destroyer of Death. He made *Mārkaṇḍeya* immortal, and to remain for ever sixteen years old. Also, at the request of the gods he gave a new life to *Yama*.

Mārkaṇḍeya led a highly austere life. He spent all his time in deep uninterrupted meditation over six *Manvantaras* (periods of time in the creation of the Universe). In the seventh *Manvantara*, in which we live now, Indra got frightened by *Mārkaṇḍeya*’s powers and tried to deviate him from his inner concentration, which would otherwise lead to the destruction of the Universe. He tried tempting him with celestial *apsaras* (nymphs) and gods time and again, but *Mārkaṇḍeya* was not interested in his tricks.

³ Katha Upaniṣad 1.13.

⁴ *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa*

Finally Lord *Viṣṇu* intervened to awaken *Mārkaṇḍeya* from his deep meditation. *Mārkaṇḍeya* worshipped Lord *Viṣṇu*.

Later, *Pārvatī* and *Parameśvara* (Lord *Śiva*) told him: “All your desires will be realised, and you will live till the end of the world, young and famous.” According to the Puranic tradition, *Mārkaṇḍeya* is one of those rare realised beings who are always present and move around in this Universe.

The Myth of *Sāvitrī* and *Satyavān*.

Some outstanding features of the tale of Sāvitrī.

Among all the outstanding characters in the history of Aryan civilisation narrated in the ancient Indian epics, *Sāvitrī* is unique. She possesses not only the quality of dedication and love for her husband, which all epic heroines possess, but also a power of absolute will and action.

Sāvitrī like *Sītā*, *Draupadī*, *Sakuntalā* and others, is a victim of circumstances, but unlike the other heroines she does not ask or require any help from outside to free herself and her beloved from doom. Moreover even her beloved does not know about it. While in the case of *Sītā*, *Rāma* is responsible for her liberation, and in the case of *Draupadī* the *Pāṇḍavas* are to fight for the crown to remove her misfortune, in the case of *Sāvitrī* she alone has to face her doom— and what a Doom! To fight the Lord of Death! This is the only story where Fate is changed “by an unchanging will”.

Usually all the stories narrated in the Indian Epics and *Purāṇas* adopted a specific method of rendering. First we find the whole story outlined in brief, and then we enjoy watching it unfold. This was the most generally-used narrative method of the ancient epics. Knowing how the story was to end, it was interesting to see the unfolding of all the details. All the boons, curses and predictions which occur in the epics play the role of letting us know what to expect as we see them practically realised. Therefore when the *Devarṣi Nārada* proclaims that “this fate of *Satyavān* cannot be undone by whatever means”, then that must be it! We ought to believe him, and we expect it to happen. What a surprise we experience when we see that the prediction is not fulfilled and unchangeable Fate gets changed! This is very rare for the Epic style.

Thus the legend of *Sāvitrī* is one of those rare tales where predictions of a fatal end are undone. In the case of *Mārkaṇḍeya* the change is brought about by *Śiva*. In the case of *Sāvitrī* it is done by *Sāvitrī* herself. It is this particular feature which makes *Sāvitrī* unique— not only her *Pativrata* (dedication to her husband) quality, which is usually emphasised by the later Indian tradition.

We all know the story of *Sāvitrī* as it is narrated in the Mahabharata. Here I would like to look at it from a slightly different perspective, as the symbol of a “divine event” in the evolution of the world. The myth of *Sāvitrī* is about the event in the evolution of consciousness which should end the time of darkness and death and suffering, and bring mankind out of Darkness into Light, from Non-being into Being, from Death into Immortality. According to Sri Aurobindo the

Night is “*not our beginning nor our end*”. It is the outcome of the Supreme’s involution through a progressive withdrawal of his aspect of Knowledge from his aspect of Power. The Night, which lies “*across the path of the divine event*”, is to be crossed, by the evolution of consciousness, building up the consciousness of the multiplicity, the manifestation. The night of unconsciousness and death and suffering is not meant to be forever. The myth of *Sāvitṛī* is about the event in the evolution of consciousness which should end the time of darkness and death and suffering, and bring mankind out of Darkness into Light, from Non-being into Being, from Death into Immortality. *Sāvitṛī* is the Saviour, the Divine Mother, who by plunging into the Darkness brings the four creator emanations, and all their creations, back to the knowledge of the Supreme in themselves; and what is even more important, she brings about the birth of a new being: the Divine Child, the Supreme Other, the Supreme Individual.

Sri Aurobindo’s Interpretation of the story.

Sri Aurobindo in his “Author’s Note” to his revelatory epic *Savitri — a Legend and a Symbol* says:

The tale of Satyavan and Savitri is recited in the Mahabharata as a story of conjugal love conquering death. But this legend is, as shown by many features of the human tale, one of the many symbolic myths of the Vedic cycle. Satyavan is the soul carrying the divine truth of being within itself but descended into the grip of death and ignorance; Savitri is the Divine Word, daughter of the Sun, goddess of the supreme Truth who comes down and is born to save; Aswapati, the Lord of the Horse, her human father, is the Lord of Tapasya, the concentrated energy of spiritual endeavour that helps us to rise from the mortal to the immortal planes; Dyumatsena, Lord of the Shining Hosts, father of Satyavan, is the Divine Mind here fallen blind, losing its celestial kingdom of vision, and through that loss its kingdom of glory. Still this is not a mere allegory, the characters are not personified qualities, but incarnations or emanations of living and conscious Forces with whom we can enter into concrete touch and they take human bodies in order to help man and show him the way from his mortal state to a divine consciousness and immortal life.”⁵

The myth of *Sāvitṛī* in the *Mahābhārata*.

The story of *Sāvitṛī*, as we first find it, is narrated in the *Vana Parva* of the *Mahābhārata* by *Mārkaṇḍeya* in answer to *Yudhiṣṭhira*’s question about *Draupadi*: “Was there ever any other woman in the history of men who being dedicated to her husband suffered so much as *Draupadi*?” And the *Rishi* says, “Yes, there was one. It was *Sāvitṛī*.”⁶

⁵ *Savitri*, 4th rev ed, 1993, Author’s note

⁶ *Mahābhārata*, *Vana Parva*, Story of *Savitri* and *Satyavan*, Ch.1.1-3

About the narrator *Mārkaṇḍeya ṛṣi*.

It is interesting to note that the legend of *Sāvitṛī*, belonging to the Vedic cycle of Myths on Immortality, is narrated by *Mārkaṇḍeya*, who himself, according to the *Purāṇas*, had gained the boon of Immortality from *Mahādeva* (Lord *Śiva*) in the first *Manvantara* of this *Kalpa*. He is also known as the author of the *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa*, which consists of the most magnificent and profound mantras dedicated to the Divine Mother, called *Devī-Māhātmya*. *Mārkaṇḍeya*, the immortal worshiper of *Śiva-Śakti*, here in the *Mahābhārata* narrates the story of *Sāvitṛī*, the incarnation of the Divine Mother who conquers Death.

The story told by *Mārkaṇḍeya* ⁷

The story is about a princess of *Madra*, *Sāvitṛī*, so named because she was an incarnation of the Goddess *Sāvitṛī*, as a result of her father, king *Aśvapati*, who performed severe penance over 18 years in order to gain progeny, specifically one hundred sons. The Goddess was pleased with his tapasya. However, she bestowed him not with sons but with a single daughter.

Savitri was so beautiful in her youth that none could approach her for marriage, being afraid of her splendour as of a supernatural power, *devakanyeti*.⁸ Thus the girl had to find a husband for herself. The *Svayamvaram* marriage⁹ was announced and she went around the world in a golden chariot in search of her mate. She travelled through all the kingdoms, lands and forests, but there was none to match her divine qualities, until finally in the forest she met *Satyavān*, the son of the blind and exiled King *Dyumatsena*.

When she returned to her father’s palace, *Devarṣi Nārada* was there on a visit to *Aśvapati*. When *Sāvitṛī* announces that she has chosen *Satyavān*, *Nārada* exclaims that she has made a wrong choice, a big mistake, *mahat pāpam*. “Although he is the best among men,” says *Nārada*, “he will die in one year from now, and nothing can be done about it.”¹⁰ After hearing such shocking news, King *Aśvapati* asks *Sāvitṛī* to find another person to marry. But *Sāvitṛī* refuses, saying that she cannot choose twice, when her heart and mind have once decided.¹¹

Thus she marries *Satyavān* and moves to his home in the forest. She serves *Satyavān* and his parents in every way without complaint, remembering the words of *Narad* and counting the days of *Satyavān*’s life. Neither *Satyavān* nor his parents know anything about it. The time goes by very quickly, and three days before the destined day, *Sāvitṛī* performs a *mahāvṛata tapasya*, standing for three days and nights without sleep or food, like a pillar in deep meditation. On the morning of the fourth day, after completing the vow, she notices that *Satyavān* is

⁷ *Mahābhārata*, *Vana Parva*, 7 Chapters 293-299.

⁸ *Sāvitṛī* in *MhBh*, 1.26.

⁹ *Sāvitṛī* of *MhBh*, 1.32: *svayam anviccha bhartāram guṇaih sadṛśam ātmanah*, “Choose the husband for yourself, equal to your own qualities.” – says *Aśvapati* to *Sāvitṛī*.

¹⁰ *Sāvitṛī* of *MhBh*, 2.11-23

¹¹ *ibid*, 2.26-28

going to the forest to cut wood. She goes along with him, after some debate with him and his parents who want her to take rest after performing such a difficult *vrata*, but she requests them to let her go with *Satyavān* and they cannot refuse her.

In the woods *Satyavān* suddenly feels dizzy and lies down with his head on her lap. He feels as if thousands of knives are piercing his body and falls unconscious. Then she feels the presence of someone else. She sees a dark figure with red eyes approaching them. It is *Yama*, the God of Death, who has come to fetch *Satyavān*. He takes *Satyavān*'s soul and returns to his kingdom. But *Sāvitṛī* follows him without delay. She speaks to him in perfect poetic Sanskrit, surprising him with her high knowledge and deep understanding of Dharma. So the Lord of Death, who is at the same time the Lord of Dharma, is immensely impressed with *Sāvitṛī* and bestows upon her a series of boons:

- 1) Return of sight for *Satyavān*'s father, *Dyumatsena*;
- 2) Return of the kingdom which he once lost;
- 3) One hundred sons for her own father *Aśvapati*, the boon he was aspiring for in his tapasya;
- 4) One hundred sons for *Sāvitṛī* and *Satyavān*;
- 5) And finally the life of *Satyavān*.

In the morning *Sāvitṛī* and *Satyavan* return home and see that the king *Dyumatsena* has got both his sight and his kingdom back. Neither *Satyavān* nor his parents know what has actually happened. Only the Rishis were aware, and praise *Sāvitṛī* for her Divine Power of Love and Truth.

This, in brief, is the story, where a destiny predicted as inevitable was changed by the determination of a woman's will.

Vedic Symbolism in the Story.

Here I would like to briefly elaborate on a few major features of the main characters in the story, in the light of the Vedic symbolism given by Sri Aurobindo.

There are two kings, representing the two kingdoms of Knowledge and Power. *Dyumatsena*— the Lord of the Shining Hosts, (lit. "With the Army of Rays or Luminous Beings"), the King of Knowledge¹² falls blind, here in the lower hemisphere, and thus loses his Kingdom.

- 1) He has a son, *Satyavān*, the growing Soul of Man, a prince, a king to be, who cannot live in the darkness of this creation without the support of light and truth and therefore is destined to die within a year. Nor has he any future as a prince, for his father has already lost his kingdom.
- 2) *Aśvapati* is the Lord of Horse.¹³ Here in the lower hemisphere *Aśvapati* is involved in *Tapasyā*, concentrated spiritual effort, dedicated to the Divine

¹² The rays, *gāvaḥ*, *usrāḥ*, in the Vedas are the symbols of Consciousness in its aspect of Knowledge.

¹³ *aśva*-, horse, in the Vedas is a symbol of power, energy, force in opposition/complementary to *gauḥ*, cow or ray of light. As a symbol of knowledge the cow is to be in front of the horse (as indicated in the hymns of the *Rig-Veda*), Knowledge is to rule Power.

Mother, *Sāvitṛī*, 'goddess of the supreme Truth', calling for Her to support his spiritual work on earth with heirs or progeny. For his work has no future, unless he has a son to continue it.

3) The Goddess *Sāvitṛī*, having promised *Aśvapati* any boon he would ask for, did not give him the progeny he wanted, because she knew that without *Dyumatsena* first regaining his sight and his kingdom there would be no future for it, and all the endeavours of *Aśvapati* would be fruitless. This is the reason why her human embodiment, *Sāvitṛī*, asks *Yama* first for the return of *Dyumatsena*'s sight and his Kingdom, and only afterwards for the heirs for *Aśvapati*. Thus the goddess actually fulfils his wish by giving him a daughter, *Sāvitṛī*, who saves King *Dyumatsena* from his blindness and re-establishes his Kingdom of Knowledge, and thus opens up the opportunity for *Aśvapati*, the King of Power, to have a hundred sons.

Once this has been granted, she asks for children for herself and *Satyavan*: the Divine Race on earth. This is granted by *Yama* as inevitable after she has gained the three previous boons. This might give us the impression that *Yama* did not notice this, or was, so to say, cheated by *Sāvitṛī*. For each time he says: "Choose any boon except the life of *Satyavān* It is really not that he does not understand what he is doing, but he agrees because the first three boons have prepared the conditions for the Divine Race on earth. And only then does *Sāvitṛī* ask for the life of *Satyavān*, the future King of Creation. This life (of *Satyavān*, of "the soul carrying the divine truth of being within itself") means the conversion of death into its origin.

The boons in the story can be understood symbolically, and as a reflection of the action of the Divine Mother upon the four fallen Divine Beings (according to the Mother's story of Creation) that was mentioned earlier in the first chapter:

- a) The return of his sight and his kingdom to *Dyumatsena*, the Lord of Knowledge, could be seen as a symbol of the return of "Consciousness in Light" from the state of Darkness.
- b) One hundred sons for *Aśvapati*, the Lord of Power, probably symbolises the return of Bliss to its Origin. In the story of *Mārkaṇḍeya* it is mentioned that *Aśvapati*, being a perfect King, is loved by all his subjects, suffered a lot, *samtāpam upajagmivān*,¹⁴ from having no progeny, *anapatyam*.¹⁵ In order to recover from that suffering he performed his tapasya for 18 years. (It is interesting to mention here that the world of bliss, *ānanda-loka*, being emanated from *SAT* and *CIT*, is the world of the multitude of souls, the world of eternal and infinite becoming, we may say. In the *Purāṇas* it is called *Mahar-loka* or *Janar-loka*, the world of Vast or the world of Genesis.)
- c) One hundred sons of *Sāvitṛī* and *Sātyavān* might be symbolic of the conversion of Falsehood into Truth. It is a symbol of the Supramental Manifestation upon Earth, with all its multitude of souls. Here *Sāvitṛī* is the Divine Mother and all men are her children: psychic beings.

¹⁴ *ibid*, 1.7

¹⁵ *ibid*, 1.8

d) The Life of *Satyavān*, meaning the Soul of Man will not die, is symbolic of the conversion of Death into its counterpart — the Divine Life.

Sri Aurobindo and the Mother spoke about the pre-Vedic and pre-Chaldean traditions. For example the story of creation told by the Mother is based on her knowledge of that prehistoric tradition. The myth of *Sāvitṛī* has also some of those features, which cannot be fully understood within the Vedic tradition. It is only within the most archaic images and symbols of the oldest parts of the Veda that we can find a clue to these symbols in *Savitri*. Sri Aurobindo writes in *The Secret of the Veda*: “In images of an energetic incongruity reminding us of the sublime grotesques and strange figures that have survived from the old mystic and symbolic art of the prehistoric world, Vamadeva describes the Purusha in the figure of a man-bull, whose four horns are the four divine principles, ...” (SV 308) “For all this creation has been, as it were, ejected into the subconscious by the four-horned Bull, the divine Purusha whose horns are **infinite Existence, Consciousness, Bliss and Truth**.”¹⁶ We can clearly see the correspondence of these four with *SAT-CIT-ĀNANDA-VIJÑĀNA* of the later Vedic and Vedāntic tradition. These four horns of the divine Purusha are perhaps the prehistoric symbols of those four original divine beings, mentioned by the Mother in her story of Creation. Infinite Existence corresponds to Life in the Mother’s story, and all others follow the same order.

There are some interesting implications following this kind of identification. The order of these beings falling into their opposites and the order of their recovery is the same, it is: Consciousness, Bliss, Truth and Life. The Life or infinite Existence (*SAT*) is falling last, and it is being recovered last. The Consciousness is falling first and is recovered first, which is fully understood within the Vedic tradition.

The conundrum of the story regarding the fourth boon of a hundred sons for her and *Satyavān* is impossible to understand unless we see the bigger picture. How could she ask for sons from *Satyavān*, if his life was not granted? And how could He, the Lord of Death, give her such a boon, if he was refusing to give back *Satyavān*’s life?

It is only when we know that Existence, *SAT*, is to be recovered last that we understand what has actually happened. For infinite Existence consists of all other aspects of Consciousness, Bliss and Truth (Supermind), and cannot come into existence without them being manifested first in the world.

The Truth or Supermind, as the Divine Manifestation in Matter (100 sons of *Sāvitṛī* and *Satyavān*), should be granted before the Infinite Existence can be effectuated. This was the secret knowledge, which made the narration of Mārkaṇdeya seem irrational from the point of view of earthly wisdom. But from the point of view of the Infinite it is a perfect account. It also suggests that the Transformation will be fulfilled before it becomes finally effective and visible. It is probably this which makes Sri Aurobindo write about it in such a mysterious way:

¹⁶ *The Secret of the Veda*, p. 307

*A Voice ill-heard shall speak, the soul obey,
A Power into mind’s inner chamber steal,
A charm and sweetness open life’s closed doors
And beauty conquer the resisting world,
The Truth-Light capture Nature by surprise,
A stealth of God compel the heart to bliss
And earth grow unexpectedly divine.
In Matter shall be lit the spirit’s glow,
In body and body kindled the sacred birth;
Night shall awake to the anthem of the stars,
The days become a happy pilgrim march,
Our will a force of the Eternal’s power,
And thought the rays of a spiritual sun.
A few shall see what none yet understands;
God shall grow up while the wise men talk and sleep;
For man shall not know the coming till its hour
And belief shall be not till the work is done.*¹⁷

Part II

What the Lord of Death did not know.

According to the story of Creation told by the Mother to the children of the Ashram,¹⁸ the Supreme *Śakti* (Knowledge-Force) for the sake of manifesting the Divine created Four Great Supreme Emanations of Consciousness, Bliss, Truth and Life. When these great beings started their Work they considered themselves as self-sufficient and thus got separated from the Supreme. So they fell gradually into their opposites: Light into Darkness, Bliss into Suffering, Truth into Falsehood and Life into Death.

In order to repair what was done, so to say, the secondary Emanations were created, which plunged, as it were, into the Abyss of the Inconscient. These Emanations were even greater in power and knowledge than the first ones, for they had to bring the fallen ones back to their origin.

These two Involutions created a double process of terrestrial evolution.

The first has become an environment for the second to grow from within, enduring the resistance of its darkened instrumentation and illumining it by its growth.

There was a hierarchical unfolding of the Supreme *Śakti*. Though these four beings are one and the same Supreme, there is a certain order of their relations and their fall.¹⁹ Basically *SAT* contains all: *Sat-Cit-Ānanda-Vijñāna*. It is all only *SAT*, the Eternal Life, the Divine Being, which IS Conscious and Blissful and Truthful in Its infinite qualities.

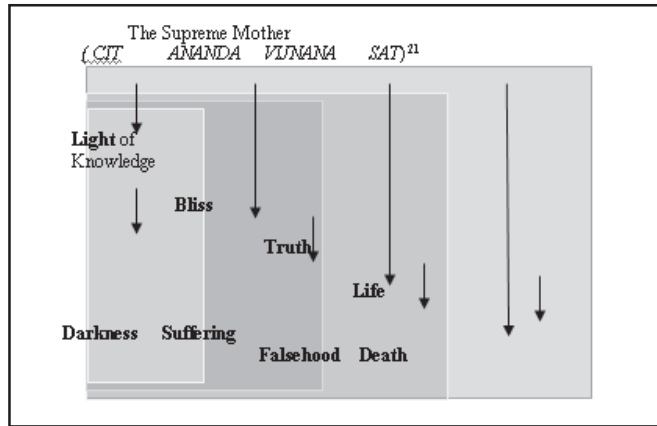
¹⁷ *Savitri*, 4th rev. ed, 1993, p. 55

¹⁸ MCW; *Questions and Answers* 16 October 1957, Vol. 9 p. 205-6; see also: *About Savitri*, published by Huta, Vol. 1.

¹⁹ *About Savitri*, published by Huta, Vol. 1.

To turn the Eternal Life to its opposite Death, a certain process must take place: the darkening of the Supreme Consciousness must take place first, for without it there could be no other fall—for how could the Supreme who alone IS can stop being the Supreme?²⁰ So, He gradually forgets Himself as Supreme, and thus creates a duality within His wholeness: on one side He knows Himself as such (Transcendental), and there is a part of Him which doesn't know that it is Him (Manifestation), but it is Him.

The Supreme Mother



Once the Supreme is unaware of himself, the Suffering within his Blissful being is the next result. The fall of these two great beings created a new ground for the aspect of Truth in his Infinite qualities to turn into Falsehood, differentiating the qualities as such and defining them in their separate existence, in negative terms, which triggers finally the Supreme Denial of Life: Death. Thus the Supreme could start from zero, as it were.²² The Falsehood in this scheme plays a key role for this perception of otherness. Without it the fall of Life would not be complete.²³

Let us try to define these four:

- 1) Darkness is a light of Knowledge unaware of the Supreme. It can be described as the absence of Knowledge within the Consciousness itself. It is the first distortion of the Supreme Consciousness.
- 2) Suffering is an expression of the Power of the Supreme, which due to this first distortion of Knowledge, is wrongly applied/used, causing so called

²⁰ Cp. also with the biblical story of the Fall of Adam and Eve, where Eve, representing *Cit-Śakti* is first to try the apple and only then Adam, representing the aspect of *Sat-Puruṣa*. Similar to *Sāvitṛī* regaining first the sight and kingdom of *Dyūmatsena* and only then the hundred sons of *Aśvapati*, for Knowledge (*Cit*) is to be restored first and only then the Power (*Tapas*).

²¹ *The Secret of the Veda*, p. 307. By this picture we wanted to show also that all the three Consciousness, Bliss and Truth are only the aspects of SAT, the Supreme Existence, the Eternal Life, that is why it falls last. Actually it is the only thing which falls.

²² The purpose of this self-Denial is in His Original Intent to become Another, to start life of Another and for that He had to deny himself first.

²³ *Savitri*, p.141

suffering within its being. It is the first distortion of the Supreme Power (=Being) in its self-movement as unconscious being.

- 3) Falsehood is movement of Knowledge, rooted in the Darkness, starting its unfolding from the fallen Light of Consciousness. It leads to a much greater distortion of Power— Death. It is based already on Darkness itself, whereas the Darkness is still based on Light.
- 4) Death is a Power of the Supreme's being based on the Inconscient as its true Self. It is the denial of everything that is not Supreme in its Being. It is the second distortion of the Supreme Power based on the Inconscient itself.²⁴

When in Sri Aurobindo's epic the Lord of Death realises that *Sāvitṛī* is the Supreme Mother and not a human being, he decides to give her a final battle and calls for these four *Asuras* as his great powers:

He called to Night (=Darkness) but she fell shuddering back,

He called to Hell (=Suffering) but sullenly it retired:

He turned to the Inconscient (=Absence of Truth, Falsehood) for support,
From which he was born, his vast sustaining self;

It drew him back towards boundless vacancy

As if by himself to swallow up himself:

He called to his strength (=Death himself as blind Energy of the Supreme),
but it refused his call.

His body was eaten by light, his spirit devoured.

At last he knew defeat inevitable

And left crumbling the shape that he had worn,

Abandoning hope to make man's soul his prey

And force to be mortal the immortal spirit.²⁵

There are very interesting insights here on the nature of Death, who “was born” from the Inconscient, where Truth is not, which is at the same time his “vast sustaining self”. The first two Lords of Night and Hell are also connected with him and are his support and power, but not as closely as the Inconscient.

He calls on them one by one in the order of their fall: Darkness, Suffering, Falsehood, and finally he can rely only on his own strength, his blind Energy – Death himself.

We can see a clear gradation of the Fall of Knowledge-Power of the Supreme. The fall starts with Consciousness and ends with Power (=Being). The Lord of Death says to *Sāvitṛī* confirming this view:

Who then art thou hiding in human guise?

Thy voice carries the sound of infinity,

Knowledge is with thee, Truth speaks through thy words;

The light of things beyond shines in thy eyes.

But where is thy strength to conquer Time and Death?

²⁴ *Savitri*, p.667. The major function of Death was to force the Immortal spirit to undergo changes: to become mortal.

²⁵ *ibid*, p. 667

*Hast thou God's force to build heaven's values here?
For truth and knowledge are an idle gleam
If Knowledge brings not power to change the world,
If Might comes not to give to Truth her right.
A blind Force, not Truth has made this ignorant world,
A blind Force, not Truth orders the lives of men:
By Power, not Light, the great Gods rule the world;
Power is the arm of God, the seal of Fate.²⁶*

Death is to ensure the existence of the Absolute, which alone is, and none else can be:

*I have created all, all I devour;
I am Death and the dark terrible Mother of life,
I am Kali black and naked in the world,
I am Maya and the universe is my cheat.
I lay waste human happiness with my breath
And slay the will to live, the joy to be
That all may pass back into nothingness
And only abide the eternal and absolute.
For only the blank Eternal can be true.²⁷*

It has many implications in the later dealing with creation, for instance: nothing can claim its “*separate birth*” unless and until it is the Supreme itself. This provides a dynamic basis for a perfect future manifestation in time and space. The manifestation is to be also supreme, and nothing less than that. Otherwise the lord of Death will destroy it, in order to find better solutions. In this way he becomes the very engine of Evolution. Every form which is not perfect is destined to perish, giving way to a more perfect manifestation of the Supreme. The function of Death ends there where the Supreme manifestation starts: Immortality in matter, the Eternal Life.

We can compare Death also to the function of Zero in the system of numbers. Zero is necessary to underline the existence of One in its self-awareness, as it were. It implies that only One Is and there is None else. It is within this Zero that all the selves, as the projection of One, take their place as multitude, and can stay as a sum, and as separate numbers: 1, 2, 3, etc., but Zero is only one for all of them, and therefore it always points to the Absolute in all their combinations. Without this zero the multitude would not be possible, for it is the only place within the One, where it takes other shapes for itself and becomes another, as it were.

*I am the shapeless formidable Vast,
I am the emptiness that men call Space,
I am a timeless Nothingness carrying all,
I am the Illimitable, the mute Alone.
I, Death, am He; there is no other God.*

²⁶ Savitri, pp.663-4

²⁷ ibid, p.535

*All from my depths are born, they live by death;
All to my depths return and are no more.
I have made a world by my inconscient Force.²⁸*

Death is a fall of Life of the Supreme Existence, SAT. That is why he says: *I, Death, am He; there is no other God. I have made a world by my inconscient Force.* Interestingly he mentions that the Force was inconscient which shows that the Fall has already taken place.

So on one side the Lord of Death has made the world by his inconscient Force, Force without Knowledge, and on the other hand he knows that only the blank Eternity is true, which wasn't ever made. He doesn't believe in this world as true, for he knows that the Supreme alone is true, and because he himself has made it by the inconscient force of the Supreme. And since he created this world he has full right over it, as he claims it.

The only thing which he seems not to know is that the world he created has a higher purpose than to remain always unconscious or half-conscious. There was an original Intent of the Supreme of which the Lord of Death was not informed so to say, for the sake of the Game to be played truly. The purpose of the whole second Creation—the plunge by the Supreme into the darkness, and lying at the bottom of the Inconscient—seems unknown to him, for all that happened after He was made to create the world, and seems contradictory of the original purpose of Creation of which he *was* aware—that none else can Be but the Supreme, of which he, Death, is the Existence, *Sat*, but fallen and become *Asat*, Non-existence. Therefore no separate birth can be allowed to endure, but that of the Absolute.

For the Lord of Death the only reality is a blank Eternity without creation. Creation is something like ripples on the waters of Eternity. It came after Him, it is his work so to say. So the Lord of Death knows two states: the blank Eternity and the Creation, of which the latter He effectuates, moves, creates, and destroys.

What He seems not to know is that these very ripples he seems to create and destroy are the evolving and growing Supreme from within the Darkness towards Its own newly rediscovered Identity, and that he, the Lord of Death, is not actually an ultimate creator but a helper to accomplish something which is beyond his knowledge and purpose. He seems not to know about the original Intent of the Supreme to create Another Himself, to become many Individual Supremes. He takes it only as a play, Lila of the Supreme, to amuse Himself with Himself in time and space. The whole creation for him is like a playground full of toys to play with for the Child-God. He cannot take them seriously as something closely related to the Supreme. He knows that their nature is of Darkness and is of no match to the Supreme.

*Who art thou who claimst thy crown of separate birth,
The illusion of thy soul's reality
And personal godhead on an ignorant globe
In the animal body of imperfect man?
Hope not to be happy in a world of pain*

²⁸ ibid, pp.592-3

*And dream not, listening to the unspoken Word
And dazzled by the inexpressible Ray,
Transcending the mute Superconscient's realm,
To give a body to the Unknowable,
Or for a sanction to thy heart's delight
To burden with bliss the silent still Supreme
Profaning its bare and formless sanctity,
Or call into thy chamber the Divine
And sit with God tasting a human joy.*²⁹

Here he is clearly neglecting the growing Divine within the heart of man, the Psychic Being, mentioning that the Transcendent Self should not be burdened with the bliss of the heart's delight.³⁰ The Supreme should not be loved, and therefore bothered by the growing Psychic Being within the heart of man, calling Him into its chamber to be together here in the body "*tasting the human joy*". It seems that this kind of adventure is not attracting the Lord of Death. He seems not to understand it in positive terms but only in a negative way, or at the most as a temporary event with no reason to be or purpose to become:

*All from my depths are born, they live by death;
All to my depths return and are no more.*³¹

Let us again view the conversion of these four great Emanations into their origin through studying the symbolic boons *Sāvitri* received from *Yama*:

- 1) The return of sight and kingdom to blind King *Dyumatsena*, the Lord of Knowledge, who has lost his sight and thus the celestial kingdom here in the lower hemisphere, is a symbol of the conversion of the Lord of Darkness into the original Light.
- 2) The removal of suffering of the Lord *Aśvapati*, the Lord of Power, by granting him royal progeny is a symbol of the restoration of the original Bliss (see the usage of *janar-loka* as *ānanda-loka* in the *Purāṇas*).
- 3) The conversion of Falsehood into Truth is symbolised by the boon of 100 sons for *Sāvitri* and *Satyavān*, even though the life of *Satyavān* was not granted yet. It is a symbol of the Supramental Manifestation upon earth, which is to be achieved before the real Immortality can be effectuated. That is why the boon is granted before the life of *Satyavān* is given back. Immortality should be dared to be called upon by mortal men, and that is an apparent contradiction.
- 4) And the final boon is the transformation of Death itself into the Eternal Life symbolised by the return of the life of *Satyavān*.³² Technically it

²⁹ *ibid*, pp. 534-5

³⁰ Cp. the Myth of Shiva and Parvati, where Parvati tried to disturb Shiva with her love and how he reacted to it.

³¹ *Savitri*, p.593

³² So on this ground Fear can be defined as a state of consciousness anticipating non-being (as in the myth of Creation of *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, 1.4.1-3) or non-existence (Death), absence of the Self, experienced by the Self as It felt it from the very beginning of Creation before plunging into the darkness.

means that there will be no more contradiction and disharmony between the Soul involved in Manifestation and the Manifestation as such. Manifestation itself becomes of the Supreme Nature.

Why Sri Aurobindo is not using the name of Yama in his *Sāvitri*.

It is important to note here is that although Sri Aurobindo uses all the original names from the story of the *Mahābhārata* to convey the deepest symbolism of the *Veda*, unlike in the *Mahābhārata* he never uses the name *Yama* to refer to the Lord of Death. Why?

In the *Vedas*, *Yama* is not yet the Lord of Death, a role which he becomes identified with in the post-Vedic tradition. Initially, he is one of the *Āṅgīrasa ṛṣis* and the first soul who, after death, discovered the way back to the original abode of all souls, the highest heaven where the forefathers abide. Thus it became his responsibility to accompany the souls after death through the abyss of darkness to this highest resting place. In the *Vedas*, then, *Yama* is rather a saviour of the soul than a killer of the body. He symbolises the Sun, the supramental oneness of all souls. In other words, he belongs to the second creation — the plunge into the inconscient — and does not represent the inconscient itself, which the Lord of Death represents. For Sri Aurobindo the Lord of Death is the most powerful of the four fallen supreme emanations of the first creation and not the Supreme Soul which descended into the Inconscient to save it.

Part III

The four Boons in Sri Aurobindo's *Sāvitri*

In Book XI of Sri Aurobindo's epic *Savitri*, the Supreme grants *Sāvitri* the four boons, after she revealed herself as the Divine Mother and conquered Death:³³

- 1 "*Choose, spirit, thy supreme choice not given again;
For now from my highest being looks at thee
The nameless formless peace where all things rest. ...*"
And silently the woman's heart replied:
**"Thy peace, O Lord, a boon within to keep
Amid the roar and ruin of wild Time
For the magnificent soul of man on earth.
Thy calm, O Lord, that bears thy hands of joy."**
- 2 *A second time the eternal cry arose:
"Wide open are the ineffable gates in front.
My spirit leans down to break the knot of earth,
Amorous of oneness without thought or sign
To cast down wall and fence, to strip heaven bare,
See with the large eye of infinity,
Unweave the stars and into silence pass."*

³³ *Savitri*, 4th rev ed, 1993, pp.696-697

*In an immense and world-destroying pause
She heard a million creatures cry to her.
Through the tremendous stillness of her thoughts
Immeasurably the woman's nature spoke:*

**“Thy oneness, Lord, in many approaching hearts,
My sweet infinity of thy numberless souls.”**

- 3 *Mightily retreating like a sea in ebb
A third time swelled the great admonishing call:
“I spread abroad the refuge of my wings.
Out of its incommunicable deeps
My power looks forth of mightiest splendour, stilled
Into its majesty of sleep, withdrawn
Above the dreadful whirlings of the world.”
A sob of things was answer to the voice,
And passionately the woman's heart replied:
“Thy energy, Lord, to seize on woman and man,
To take all things and creatures in their grief
And gather them into a mother's arms.”*

- 4 *Solemn and distant like a seraph's lyre
A last great time the warning sound was heard:
“I open the wide eye of solitude
To uncover the voiceless rapture of my bliss,
Where in a pure and exquisite hush it lies
Motionless in its slumber of ecstasy,
Resting from the sweet madness of the dance
Out of whose beat the throb of hearts was born.”
Breaking the Silence with appeal and cry
A hymn of adoration tireless climbed,
A music beat of winged uniting souls,
Then all the woman yearningly replied:
“Thy embrace which rends the living knot of pain,
Thy joy, O Lord, in which all creatures breathe,
Thy magic flowing waters of deep love,
Thy sweetness giveto me for earth and men.” (Ibid,p.697)*

In this profound passage we can clearly see that *Sāvitṛī* followed the Supreme in his choice of boons he wanted to bestow upon earth and Man. Before choosing a boon, she heard clearly stated the intention of what is to be done and at the same time the response of the earth, the souls of Mankind and earthly things, as for instance: “*A sob of things was answer to the voice*”, “*She heard a million creatures cry to her*”, etc. It is as if the Supreme and the world were one, and the world reacted in complete unison to the intention of the Supreme.

The four intentions of the Supreme were:

- (1) *The nameless formless peace where all things rest;...*
- (2) *My spirit leans down to break the knot of earth,*

*Amorous of oneness without thought or sign;...
(3) My power looks forth of mightiest splendour, ...
(4) To uncover the voiceless rapture of my bliss...*

And *Sāvitṛī* chose them all:

- 1) **Thy peace, O Lord, a boon within to keep...**
- 2) **Thy oneness, Lord, in many approaching hearts,...**
- 3) **Thy energy, Lord, to seize on woman and man,...**
- 4) **Thy joy, O Lord, in which all creatures breathe...**

We can see that the first two boons are of the inner nature (peace within to keep, oneness in many approaching hearts), whereas the two last are oriented to a global consciousness-power including the outer nature (energy to seize on woman and man, joy in which all creatures breathe, etc.), where the distinction between inner and outer realisation is not made.

II Sri Aurobindo's Yoga and his Yogic realisations.

It is as if the four boons symbolically cover the four main realisations in Sri Aurobindo's Integral Yoga, which are also oriented from the inner realisation towards the outer (the work of Redemption):

1) Peace is a sign or a result of Liberation, *Mukti*, as a separation of *Puruṣa* from *Prakṛti*, the experience Sri Aurobindo had with Vishnu Bhaskar Lele, when peace descended upon him from above, and he could experience the absolute detachment of *Puruṣa* from the workings of *Prakṛti* and see himself completely free from the body-vital-mind as if in a movie, the liberation inside or realisation of the static Self.

1) The experience of the “*oneness in many approaching hearts*” to the Lord, *Nārāyaṇa*, *Śrī Kṛṣṇa* as their own “*sweet infinity*”. The experience of the Cosmic Self “*in the numberless souls*” is very similar to the experience Sri Aurobindo underwent in the Alipore jail, where he saw *Vāsudeva* in every human and non-human being, the experience of blissful oneness of the Supreme living in every creature and every thing, the liberation outside or realisation of the dynamic Self.

2) The experience of the Supreme Knowledge-Power, which is “*to seize on woman and man, to take all things and creatures in their grief and gather them into a mother's arms*” is a description of the action of the Supramental *Śakti*, where the *Puruṣa* and *Prakṛti* finally become one and change their nature to *Īśvara-Śakti*, revealing the true nature of the Supreme within manifestation, that everything is done by *Śakti* alone, for She is none but He, His dynamic being, liberating us from the perception of a separate doer, making a complete surrender possible, leading All to the Supramental transformation. In a letter to a *sādhaka* Sri Aurobindo mentions that he has caught the tail of the Supermind and is trying to bring It down into earthly life.

3) The last and the greatest realisation of them all is the descent of the Supreme *ānanda*, through the Supramental transformation, manifesting in all the actions here on earth His embrace, His joy, His ‘*magic flowing waters of deep love*’, and ‘*sweetness*’. This is the final aim of Sri Aurobindo's Yoga, the *Pūrṇa Yoga*.

III Conversations with Pavitra in 1925:

Sri Aurobindo defines clearly the three stages in his yoga in “*Conversations with Pavitra*”³⁴: (1) *Puruṣa* as a witness, free and not involved in the activities of *Prakṛti*; (2) *Puruṣa* free but giving his sanction to her workings; (3) *Puruṣa* free and at the same time completely involved in all her activities; to which we may only add the fourth one as a result of these three: (4) the opening to the transcendental realms, where *Ānanda* itself enters into the workings of *Prakṛti*, about which he speaks elsewhere in *The Life Divine*.

1) First the *Puruṣa* is realised as a silent witness, not participating in the action of *Prakṛti*, only observing her, detached from her actions, bringing the experience of calm and peace. This stage is called *Mukti* or liberation. This stage is considered to be the final achievement for many paths of yoga, including Buddhism, Jainism and Hinduism (*Advaita Vedānta*, *Sāṅkhya*, *Yoga* etc.)

2) Later he becomes *Anumantā*, Sanctioner of the actions of *Prakṛti*. He agrees or disagrees with her movements, and she completely obeys his consent.

3) Then the *Puruṣa* gradually reveals himself as the Lord, *Īśvara*, who fully takes this world into his hands, whereas *Prakṛti* becomes His *Śakti*. The difference between *Puruṣa* and *Prakṛti* disappears, and *Īśvara-śakti* become one movement of consciousness-power in the world.

4) This oneness of *Īśvara-śakti* then opens up to the Transcendental realms of the Supreme *Ānanda*, which now can descend into the lower hemisphere, transforming every physical action on earth into an action of the Divine *Ānanda*.

It is important to see that these four stages are the four fundamental stages of a complete path leading to the full liberation and transformation of the earthly nature, thus culminating in the divine life. In his early days, before Mother settled permanently in Pondicherry, Sri Aurobindo followed his plan of yoga which he formulated as *śuddhi-mukti-siddhi-bhukti*, which again resembles the whole approach to his Yoga as the conscious advent in the evolution of man. According to this approach, after *Mukti* is realised and the *Puruṣa* is freed from the workings of *Prakṛti* into self-awareness, the stage of *Siddhi* or the perfection of the instruments becomes possible. In the conversations with Pavitra, who came to Sri Aurobindo seeking the realisation of *Mukti*, Sri Aurobindo says that there are people in India who could give Pavitra this realisation (of *Mukti*), but before he has to learn their language; as for himself this stage of *Yoga* was already over, *Mukti* was realised, but this was only the first step in his *Yoga*. The second step was to bring the light from above into the instrumentations of mind, life and body, being fully conscious of all the processes and changes which take place. This part was far more difficult than the first one, but without it there would not be much use for liberation (*Mukti*), because Nature would be left unchanged.

The fourth part of this *Yoga*, *Bhukti*, is the result of the first three as the realisation of the Delight of the Supreme in the physical body.

34. “Conversations with Pavitra”, Ashram, Pondicherry, 1995.

We can clearly see the resemblance of these four parts of Sri Aurobindo’s yoga with the four boons *Sāvitrī* received from the Supreme.

The four boons and the conversion of the four Asuras by the Mother.

In Sri Aurobindo’s epic, Savitri, after conquering Death, gets four boons from the Supreme. They are positive boons, as it were, given in a positive context by the Supreme when the Death is already conquered. In the *Mahābhārata* she gets her boons from *Yama* himself in a negative context, so to say, without conquering him.

The conversion of the four *Asuras*, which the Mother mentioned in the *Agenda* as her main work of the transformation of our earthly life, must be directly connected with these four boons *Sāvitrī* receives from the Supreme, as it is obviously there in the story of the *Mahābhārata*.

These four Supreme emanations and the order of their fall the Mother defines in conversation with Huta:

The first was Consciousness in Light and He turned into Unconsciousness.

The second was Bliss and He turned into Suffering.

The third was Truth and He turned into Falsehood.

The fourth one was Life and He turned into Death.

So, in order to repair the fall of these four beings, so to say, “*The creative Force which had emanated these four Beings, essentially for the creation of the world, witnessed what was happening, and turning to the Supreme she prayed for the remedy and the cure of the evil that had been done. Then she was given the command to precipitate her Consciousness into this inconscience, her Love into this suffering, and her Truth into this falsehood. And a greater consciousness, a more total love, a more perfect truth than what had been emanated at first, plunged, so to say, into the horror of Matter in order to awaken in it consciousness, love and truth, and to begin the movement of Redemption which was to bring the material universe back to its supreme origin.*”

Let us try to understand the order of their fall:

- 1) The darkening of the Supreme Consciousness is to be the first. Without it there can be no other fall, so to say. Here the Supreme gradually forgets himself (= the blindness of *Dyumatsena*).
- 2) Once the Supreme is unaware of himself, the Suffering within his Blissful being is the next result (= the suffering of *Aśvapati*).
- 3) These two Darkness and Suffering give a new ground for an emergence of Falsehood. It is a newly started Awareness of Separateness, as it were, based already on the Darkness and Suffering (or darkened Consciousness and darkened Being).
- 4) This Falsehood becomes a new self-awareness for the Supreme Denial of the very existence in itself: Death.

So, these four, though they are one in their origin, were necessary for the Supreme to gradually come to a complete Non-existence, starting with forgetful-

ness of itself and ending with a complete denial of its supreme Existence. In this scheme, the creation of Falsehood is the key, I think, for there had to be another perception of itself, some other knowledge of a separate being, before the Being could be turned into Non-being. Without falsehood death would not be possible.

Therefore these last two, Falsehood and Death, were the most difficult to convert. Mother says that the first two were converted, but the last two were impossible to convert, they had to be conquered.³⁵

These four beings we also meet in Sri Aurobindo's *Savitri* as Death's immanent powers. As we have already mentioned above, he calls to them for help in the battle with the Divine Mother in the same order of their fall as it is described by the Mother. Here we will quote these lines once more:

*He called to Night but she fell shuddering back,
He called to Hell (=Suffering) but sullenly it retired;
He turned to the Inconscient (=Falsehood) for support,
From which he was born, his vast sustaining self;
It drew him back towards boundless vacancy
As if by himself to swallow up himself;
He called to his strength (=Death), but it refused his call.
His body was eaten by light, his spirit devoured.* (Ibid, p.667)

The conquest of these four immanent aspects of Death, the four *Asuras*, is the Supreme Victory of the Divine Mother. So if we compare them with the four boons she received from the Supreme later after conquering them: the Divine Peace, Oneness, Strength and Love we will have an interesting picture.

1) Night is in opposition to the Consciousness in Light or, better to say, a counterpart of Self-Awareness. It is a fallen Light of Consciousness, which covered up or hid the divine self-perception; the *Puruṣa* is hidden within the workings of *Prakṛti*.³⁶ It made the conscious element in us blind (the symbol of blind *Dyumatsena*), as it were.

Peace is experienced when the concrete presence of the Self, free from Nature, is realised. The Divine Is and there is nothing to be afraid of and that brings the experience of deep Peace; Peace and Purity are the attributes of the transcendent *Puruṣa*.

2) Hell (= Suffering) is in opposition to Bliss, or the blissful existence within the Being or even co-existence among beings.

If Night separates us from our self-perception of the Divine Consciousness within us, the Suffering pushes us away from the Divine Oneness in the aspect of power within ourselves and without: from each other, being from being. For the Power of Bliss is experienced now as pain, confirming the division made by the Night. It is because of this suffering that the oneness of the one being cannot be achieved, for pain stays in the way where bliss and love should be (the symbol of suffering *Aśvapati*).

35 She tried to convert them through contact with their *Vibhūti*s: Max Theon as the *Vibhūti* of the *Asura* of Death and Richard Morisset as the *Vibhūti* of the Lord of Falsehood.

36 In the language of the Veda, Agni, the son, the young prince, is kept inside the young Mother, she carries him secretly and does not give him to his Father. RV 5.2.1

3) Inconscient (= Falsehood) is an opposition to the Supramental Knowledge-Power, to the Truth of our manifested existence.

Inconscience is the vast sustaining self of Death. To overcome Death we must overpower it with the strength of the Supramental Power. This Falsehood and Death cannot be illumined, but are overpowered by the Strength of the Divine Mother with the participation of All.³⁷

We can get a hint of this fact from the words of Death to *Sāvitṛī* :

*But where is thy strength to conquer Time and Death?
Hast thou God's force to build heaven's values here?
For truth and knowledge are an idle gleam
If Knowledge brings not power to change the world,
If Might comes not to give to Truth her right.
A blind Force, not Truth has made this ignorant world,
A blind Force, not Truth orders the lives of men:
By Power, not Light, the great Gods rule the world;
Power is the arm of God, the seal of Fate.* (Ibid, p.664)

The Supramental manifestation upon Earth (one hundred sons of *Sāvitṛī* and *Satyavān* is another symbol of it), which is spoken of as the Divine Energy "to seize on woman and man, and... gather them into a mother's arms."

4) Death is in opposition to the Divine Existence, which contains all the four aspects of Night, Suffering, Falsehood and Death's own Power.³⁸

Death is the power which created these worlds, the divine being *SAT*, the Supreme Life, which turned to be Death. Now his Consciousness of Night has refused to cooperate with him, His Power of Separation, Hell, which is dividing the Oneness, is also sullenly retired; his very Self, the Inconscient, is not supporting him anymore, he is left alone to face the Mother. Death is the foundation of the separation of the Higher *Prakṛti* of *Sat-Cit-Ānanda* from the lower one of Mind-Life-Body. When this foundation is removed, then every movement and touch in all creation becomes the movement and touch of the Supreme *Ānanda*.

The Triple transformation in Integral Yoga.

So, we can compare the four boons of the Supreme with the three stages of transformation in Integral Yoga which result in the fourth and the final realisation of Immortality and the Divine Life on Earth (see also the first Chapter pp.18-19).

- I. *First is the psychic transformation, in which all is in contact with the Divine through the individual psychic consciousness.*
- II. *Next is the spiritual transformation in which all is merged in the Divine in the cosmic consciousness.*
- III. *Third is the supramental transformation in which all becomes supramentalised in the divine gnostic consciousness.*³⁹

37 We are using here 'All' as a philosophical term used in the Vedas, *sarvam idam*, meaning all powers, forces, beings participating in the manifestation of the Divine.

38 He called to **his strength**, (= **Death itself**) but it refused his call. His body was eaten by light, his spirit devoured.

39 *Letters on Yoga*, p. 95

To summarise our overview of the four boons and different sets of symbols in the story of the Mahābhārata and from Sri Aurobindo's epic poem, as well as the major stages of Sri Aurobindo's Yoga we draw here a simple table which will help us to dwell on this profound symbolism and to understand deeper the story of *Sāvitri* and the reason why Sri Aurobindo has chosen it to convey his realisations. In the words of the Mother: "**Savitri is the supreme revelation of Sri Aurobindo's vision.**"

There are four main characters in the story, which are highly significant. The two Kings of Knowledge and Power, perfect in every respect, but one, *Dyumatsena*, is blind and has lost his kingdom and the other, *Aśvapati*, has his kingdom but is suffering. The first King has a son, *Satyavān*, but has no kingdom; the latter has the kingdom but no son; so through rigorous spiritual practice or *tapasyā*, *Aśvapati* acquires from the goddess a daughter, *Sāvitri*. These two children are perfect in every respect; but nobody wants to be with *Sāvitri*, for she is too good, *devakanyeti*, and nobody approaches her for marriage; and *Satyavān*, though he is a perfect young man, is destined to die in a year.

		Parents		Children	
		1 Knowledge	2 Power	3 Knowledge	4 Power
1	Four major characters, before <i>Sāvitri</i> 's marriage	Blind <i>Dyumatsena</i>	Suffering <i>Aśvapati</i>	Unasked, Unmarried <i>Sāvitri</i> . ⁴⁰	Dying <i>Satyavān</i>
2	Four major characters, after one year of life with <i>Satyavān</i>	<i>Seeing</i> <i>Dyumatsena</i>	Happy <i>Aśvapati</i> (100 sons)	<i>Married</i> <i>Sāvitri</i> (100 sons)	<i>Living</i> <i>Satyavān</i>
3	Four Great Asuras, False Emanations of the Supreme	Light turned into Darkness	Bliss turned into Suffering	Truth turned into Falsehood	Life turned into Death
4	Four Immanent aspects of Death in Sri Aurobindo's <i>Savitri</i>	Night	Hell	The Inconscient	Death's own strength
5	Major realisations	Mukti , The separation of Purusa from Prakṛti, the discovery of individual Self <i>The Divine is in me</i>	Cosmic Self The realisation of the godhead in all beings <i>The Divine is in All</i>	Supramental The realisation of beings as one knowledge-force <i>All are in the Divine</i>	Transcendental The realisation of Supreme Ānanda <i>All is the Divine</i>
6	The four boons of <i>Sāvitri</i> in Sri Aurobindo's epic	Peace (<i>a boon within to keep</i>) as a result of Self-realisation of Purusa	Oneness (<i>in many approaching hearts</i>) as a result of Bliss among the beings	Strength (<i>to bring all into the Mother's arms</i>) as a result of the Truth of that Oneness	Joy (<i>in which all creatures breathe</i>) as a result of the realisation of the transcendental Ānanda

40 Savitri was most beautiful and yet nobody asked her hand in marriage. It is unheard of in the history of Aryan civilisation that someone so beautiful was not asked for in marriage (especially compare the stories of Sītā, Damayantī, Kuntī, etc.) Sāvitri, I believe, wasn't approached not because she had divine beauty but because she contained divine Truth also. No one could stand her true nature, only Satyavān. She is an incarnation of the Divine Word, the Power of Truth.

Veda Vyasa's Mahabharata in Sri Aurobindo's *Savitri*

(Continued from the previous issue)

Prema Nandakumar

8. The Questioning Queen

Anyone who is retelling an existing tale in a new format introduces changes in keeping with contemporary associations. To make the story self-explanatory, even new characters are added. This goes on through several retellings down the centuries. The Pativratopahyana in the **Mahabharata** is one of the very few legends that has remained almost untouched through several recapitulations. The original legend has the following characters:

Aswapati the King of Madra, Savitri, Satyavan, Rishi Narad, Dyumathsena and Yama. The rishis Markandeya, Gautama, Suvarcha, Bharadhwaja, Dhalbhya, Apastambha and Daumya also appear. While the Rishi Markandeya narrates the story as an answer to Yudhistira's question, the other rishis have each a verse or two and appear only towards the end of the legend. Thus the main characters from Vyasa who have been taken up by Sri Aurobindo for his version are Aswapati, Savitri, Satyavan, Rishi Narad, Dyumathsena and Yama. There is only a passing reference to a dharma-following (*dharmachaarinyaam*) princess from Malava kingdom (Malavyaa) as the chief queen (*jyeshthaayaam mahishyaam*) who became with child by Aswapati when he had been blessed by Goddess Savitri, and how the foetus grew in the womb like the waxing moon in the sky (*sukle taarapatirivambare*).

This reference to the Malava princess led Sri Aurobindo to bring in an important addition to the crucial Book of Fate in **Savitri**. One can only imagine the amount of meditation it must have involved to create the passionate character. For, if Aswapati is a representative of humanity's aspirations, his queen represents the frustrations of the common man who is unable to comprehend the life around him. For instance, we are not able to get reconciled easily to the finality of death. The only way for us has been to turn away from death and go on with life again as though death is a lie, thereby creating the greatest possible marvel in this world of human affairs. Towards the end of Vana Parva in the **Mahabharata**, prior to the Pandavas and Draupadi entering the one-year period of living incognito in the Virata kingdom, we have a meaningful question and answer session between a Yaksha and Yudhistira.

When the Pandavas were living in privation in the forest, a Brahmin came to them that an antler had run away with his arani sticks with which he produced fire for his agnihotra ritual. He requested them to get the sticks back. The brothers went in search of the deer. A deceptive animal, it led them all over the forest and became invisible. Unable to trace it and getting tired, Yudhistira requested Nakula to get him some water. Nakula found a lake but before he could get in to gather water, he was stopped by an aerial voice. The Pandava was asked to answer the questions posed by the voice before he could get at the water. Nakula disregarded the threat, proceeded to drink the water. He fell down dead. Sahadeva, Arjuna and Bhima were sent one after another and the same fate befell them. Worried deeply, Yudhistira himself now went in search of his brothers and came to the beautiful, cool lake which was covered with lovely flowers. Cranes abounded in the place. Shocked at seeing his brothers lying down motionless, Yudhishtira was shocked and lamented the grievous loss. Presently he proceeded to the lake's waters so he could begin the ablutions for the departed. At that time, a voice stopped him saying the lake belonged to himself, a Yaksha and unless his questions received satisfactory replies, no one may touch the water. Yudhistira could now see the huge and terrifying figure but with his characteristic humility even in that distressing moment said: "O bull among male beings, virtuous persons never approve that one should applaud his own self (without boasting, I shall, therefore, answer thy questions, according to my intelligence). Do thou ask me!"¹

Now follows one of the finest, most educative and unparalleled question and answer sessions that world literature has seen. Even as Yudhistira's answers came crisp and meaningful, the Yaksha was pleased. At the conclusion he asked:

"Who is truly happy? What is most wonderful? What is *the* path? And what is *the* news?"

Answer these four questions of mine and let thy dead brothers revive" Yudhishtira answered,—"O amphibious creature, a man who cooketh in his own house, on the fifth or the sixth part of the day, with scanty vegetables, but who is not in debt and who stirreth not from home, is truly happy. Day after day countless creatures are going to the abode of Yama, yet those that remain behind believe themselves to be immortal. What can be more wonderful than this? Argument leads to no certain conclusion, the *Śrutis* are different from one another; there is not even one *Rishi* whose opinion can be accepted by all; the truth about religion and duty is hid in caves: therefore, that alone is the path along which the great have trod. This world full of ignorance is like a pan. The sun is fire, the days and nights are fuel. The months and the seasons constitute the wooden ladle. Time is the cook that is cooking all creatures in that pan (with such aids); this is *the news*". The Yaksha is satisfied and the dead Pandavas return to life. This passage is well known as the "Yaksha-prasna" segment in Vyasa's epic.

The vital answer from Yudhistira, "Day after day countless creatures are going to the abode of Yama, yet those that remain behind believe themselves to be immortal. What can be more wonderful than this?" concerns us most. Of course, we

accept death and proceed with our lives. But there are also persons who are concerned by this seemingly insurmountable phenomenon of death. Sri Aurobindo has adroitly transformed Aswapati's Queen as an incensed mother tiger faced with the danger that has come upon its cub. If the Divine has created this world, why did he have to design sorrow and death? If Aswapati is needed as the leader of an aspiring humanity, the Queen's role as envisaged by Sri Aurobindo also is required to explain and project the philosophy of evolution. Vedanta needs Poorvapaksha and Uttarakpaksha; Poorvapaksha and Siddhanta. One has to question and be countered by another question in proving a point. One has to state a problem so that the siddhantin can give an answer. The Queen in Sri Aurobindo's epic thus plays a very important role to make the epic spread clear for the reader.

A princess of Malava, the Queen is called Malavi, as we refer to the princess of Kekaya kingdom as Kaikeyi. Sri Aurobindo could not have got a questioner for his purpose as apposite as the Queen. Our first introduction to her makes it clear that she is no blotting-paper.

*"There welcomed him the sage and thoughtful king,
At his side a creature beautiful, passionate, wise,
Aspiring like a sacrificial flame
Skyward from its earth-seat through luminous air,
Queen-browed, the human mother of Savitri."* (Savitri, 4th ed., 1993, p.417)

This introduction is absolutely necessary for soon it is the queen who would be giving eloquent form to humanity's unanswered cry: "WHY must this happen to ME?" Rishi Narad descends to the palace of Aswapati and some time is spent with him discoursing on the problems of humanity and the way man is burdened with struggle, sorrow and death all the time. But then the struggle and sorrow are being overcome by love all the time; in due course, love will overcome death also and a new creation will be in place. Love, The Radha-shakti will transform earthly life into a life divine.

As if it were an echoing rhythm to the Rishi's concluding words, sounds of a chariot's arrival, "a call of hooves" is heard. As Savitri comes in, ananda spreads all over, and herself seems "changed by the halo of her love". Sri Aurobindo has noted Vyasa referring to Savitri as "shubha" here. Savitri's very presence assures auspicious happenings. What follows is a familiar enough sight in households where the daughter's marriage has been decided. With a sage's divine sight, the Rishi knows that Savitri has found her bridegroom. He hints at what he knows and probably wishes to test Savitri's steadfastness when he speaks at length about her high attainments and the possibilities of her becoming the cause of the world's redemption. As if he is unable to stop himself, Rishi Narad exclaims:

*"On heights of happiness leaving doom asleep
Who hunts unseen the unconscious lives of men,*

*If thy heart could live locked in the ideal's gold,
As high, as happy might thy waking be!
If for all time doom could be left to sleep!"* (Ibid, p.420)

This long speech and what follows is an expansion of a single sloka in Vyasa: "On what mission, O King, did your daughter go and wherefrom is she returning? And why, now that she is a good young woman, do you not give her in marriage to a suitable husband?" It is obvious that Sri Aurobindo's creative look has watched the silent presence of the Queen and it is she who is going to face a very difficult test of faith. She had been anxiously waiting for the return of her darling daughter and for the good news. The daughter has come. She is entering the royal room of audience, her face lit up with newfound love. But what is this inauspicious talk of 'doom' from the sage? The queen must have been irritated as ordinarily we do: these elderly men in their second nonage, using such words when a wedding is being planned!

As for Aswapati who is now a fully evolved yogi, there is a deeper understanding.

His immediate thought is to protect his Queen for he may have noted in her face the unease. He tries to stop Rishi Narad from saying anything more in that line. He uses words associated with happiness when he introduces Savitri to the Rishi:

*"Behold her, singer with the prescient gaze,
And let thy blessing chant that this fair child
Shall pour the nectar of a sorrowless life
Around her from her lucid heart of love,
Heal with her bliss the tired breast of earth
And cast like a happy snare felicity."* (Ibid, p.422)

Aswapati seeks the Rishi's blessings for Savitri: "*Armoured with love and faith and sacred joy / Once let unwounded pass a mortal life.*" Taking the hint, the Rishi turns his track and wants to know where Savitri had been. Aswapati speaks of her mission and asks her simply: "*Whom hast thou chosen, kingliest among men?*" The Queen's uneasiness at the way the two men have been conversing must have vanished once she saw Savitri aglow with her new found happiness. The mother's heart must have rejoiced to hear Savitri's reply.

*"Father and king, I have carried out thy will.
One whom I sought I found in distant lands;
I have obeyed my heart, I have heard its call.
On the borders of a dreaming wilderness
Mid Shalwa's giant hills and brooding woods
In his thatched hermitage Dyumatsena dwells,
Blind, exiled, outcast, once a mighty king.*

*The son of Dyumatsena, Satyavan,
I have met on the wild forest's lonely verge.
My father, I have chosen. This is done."* (Ibid, p. 424)

All the needed bio-data given in perfect simplicity and Sri Aurobindo writes: "*Astonished, all sat silent for a space.*" Surely the Queen's astonishment can be readily understood. Her daughter, the Princess to choose the son of an exiled king! Yet, it gives us the measure of the Queen's wise approach to life. Savitri is happy. The rest is immaterial. The Queen's understandable pride in her daughter assures her that Savitri could never make a wrong choice. Aswapati accepts the choice as one who had reached the very heights of yoga, for he too had gained *trikaaldrishti*. He had seen a shadow pursue the name of Satyavan and the shadow itself was chased by "*a sudden and stupendous light.*" Ah, there is going to be some great struggle in the life of Savitri and Satyavan! Remembering the presence of his wife, he hints to Rishi Narad that he should not reveal anything dire about the future: "*Lend not a dangerous vision to the blind!*" But the mother's heart has sensed that something is seriously wrong with the choice Savitri has made. Aswapati's words and the eloquent silence of Rishi Narad have pressed the danger signal in her consciousness. Alarmed, and with complete faith in the Rishi's ability to avert anything inauspicious, she asks him to bless Savitri. Was it not a fortunate happening that his coming timed with Savitri's return? In any case why were they so anxious about Savitri's future? Is it because she has chosen a bridegroom who is so poorly in material riches? They need not worry on that score at all. It is true Savitri is a princess and has been brought up in the lap of luxury. But the bringing up has been charged with wisdom too. Women like her can adjust to any circumstance for they believed in the ideals posited by Sanatana Dharma and marriage was a sacrament, a dharma. The very image of self-confidence, she says:

*"A single spirit in a multitude,
Happy is Satyavan mid earthly men
Whom Savitri has chosen for her mate,
And fortunate the forest hermitage
Where leaving her palace and riches and a throne
My Savitri will dwell and bring in heaven."* (Ibid, p.426)

This reaction of the Queen about the women of her times is fully borne out by the legends of great classical heroines. Sita readily comes to our mind. One moment the Princess, the very next moment the wife of an exiled prince! When Rama says that she will not be able to face the hardships of an uncertain future in the forests, she argues with him and wins his consent. When he agrees, Valmiki says her face broke out into a smile immediately, *kshipram pramudita devi*. She had got her strength of purpose by meditating upon great women of yore.

Later on, when a prisoner in Lanka, Sita rejects the advances of Ravana and is not cowed down by the demonesses guarding her. I am close to Rama as Sachi to Indra she says and gives a list of many great pativratas who had been close to their husbands: Arundhati to Vasishta, Rohini to Sasi (Moon), Lopamudra to Agasthya, Sukanya to Chyavana, Srimati to Kapila, Savitri to Satyavan, Madayanti to Saudasa, Kesini to Sagara and Damayanti to Nala. The words of the Queen of Aswapati are indeed life-energising to women caught in the consumerist Valhalla of today.

Savitri's mother is wise, but she is also a mother. She instinctively feels something amiss in the choice. Well, after all it has been only a preliminary choosing, not the final wedding. If something is really wrong, one can always turn back from a threatening future in the choice. Rishi Narad should bless the child or come out with the truth about Satyavan as a bridegroom. For she is old enough to know that life is not a bed of roses always and the wisest can yet commit a mistake. But the Rishi is evasive. *"A future knowledge is an added pain."* Fate is inexorable and the Queen should rest content that her daughter is the gift of the Divine and is blessed with an untrembling will:

*"None can refuse what the stark Force demands:
Her eyes are fixed upon her mighty aim;
No cry or prayer can turn her from her path.
She has leaped an arrow from the bow of God."* (Ibid, p.427)

There was no need to say any more. The mother's instinct had proved her right. So Savitri is to be struck by "the ancient human sentence", widowhood! For what can be a worse calamity for a bride than to lose her groom? As a human being, she knows she is helpless against Fate. But can she remain silent? There must be some way out!

Passionate and wise, yes; but also a mother!

*"Aspiring to the nature of the gods,
A mind proof-armoured mailed in mighty thoughts,
A will entire couchant behind wisdom's shield,
Though to still heavens of knowledge she had risen,
Though calm and wise and Aswapati's queen,
Human was she still and opened her doors to grief".* (Ibid, p. 427)

Words tumble out of her, hot with helplessness as she pleads with the Rishi: *"Even a stranger's anguish rends my heart,/ And this, O Narad, is my well-loved child."* She persists in questioning the nature of the fate that has been reserved for Savitri and the Rishi has to speak. He describes Satyavan in glowing terms only to close: *"This day returning Satayvan must die."* The Queen's reaction is immediate. She asks Savitri to get back into her chariot and go forth again to choose another young man, for Death has already pronounced against this choice. But then Savitri is this Queen's daughter. When Aswapati in Vyasa's upakhyana had asked Savitri

to choose another, she had said she will not choose again: *sakrud vruto maya bhartaa na dhviteeyam vrunomyaham*. In Sri Aurobindo the Queen had made the suggestion and the answer had been the same. Sri Aurobindo's Savitri also speaks in similar accents: *"Once my heart chose and chooses not again."* She says she is not afraid of death and she will not accept defeat either: *"Fate's law may change, but not my spirit's will."*

In the epic of Sri Aurobindo, there was a reason in making the Queen and not Aswapati as the parent who makes the suggestion. Aswapati's yoga had been a great journey into light and he was no more a fear-ridden mortal being. He was now a Realised Soul. As we note in Sri Aurobindo's poem. *'Jivan Mukta'*:

*"A Power descends no Fate can perturb or vanquish,
Calmer than mountains, wider than marching waters
A single might of luminous quiet
Tirelessly bearing the worlds and ages."*

How could then Aswapati ask his daughter to change her mind as if the decree of Fate had disturbed him? Such realised souls are rare whereas the Queen is a perfect representative to give voice to our worries, frustrations and fears. It is a change we hardly notice, though. But then the Queen is like us, will not give up so easily. For a mother a child is always a child. Savitri has no experience to tackle the problem on hand. Idealism is of no use in everyday life! This kind of talk belongs to the Titan, not man:

*"Here on this mutable and ignorant earth
Who is the lover and who is the friend?
All passes here, nothing remains the same.
None is for any on this transient globe ...
The middle path is made for thinking man.
To choose his steps by reason's vigilant light,
To choose his path among the many paths
Is given him, for each his difficult goal
Hewn out of infinite possibility?"* (Ibid, pp. 432-434)

Savitri withstands the argument based on 'reason' advanced by her mother and the Queen knows Savitri will not change her mind. Her heart overwhelmed with sorrow and helplessness, she does not know what to say or do for a while. She has nothing to guide her now except that purest creation of nature, a mother's heart. Years and years of training in self-control give way in the plane of maternal love. Why should there be suffering? Why should it happen to me? Is there a god around at all? Is life only a chaotic accident? A grand illusion and no more?

*"Awhile she fell to the level of human mind,
A field of mortal grief and Nature's law;*

*She shared, she bore the common lot of men
And felt what common hearts endure in Time.
Voicing earth's question to the inscrutable power
The queen now turned to the still immobile seer ...
Perhaps the soul we feel is only a dream,
Eternal self a fiction sensed in trance."* (Ibid, pp. 437-42)

There is complete silence for a while. Then Rishi Narad begins: "*Was then the sun a dream because there is night?*" Speaking in the voice of a guru, Narad calms her down first, gives her the assurance that Savitri is going to be a happy housewife (an important point for the mother). Thanks to the question of the Queen, we receive answers for our doubts when he insinuates that Savitri is an incarnation. When the Supreme limits himself to a form, he goes through the troubles that are faced by earth-born men. The incarnation has to suffer, even die. "*He dies that the world may be new-born and live.*"

Nor must the queen expect her daughter to be thanked for the suffering she is taking upon herself. Leaders, Workers and Incarnations are even reviled and killed by the very people whom they have tried to save. The mass mentality can make a guru of a piece of straw or destroy the real guru when he comes. Rishi Narad's close-knit argument explains the presence of pain to help man go up the evolutionary ladder to achieve a divine life.

*"Pain is the hammer of the Gods to break
A dead resistance in the mortal's heart,
His slow inertia as of living stone.
If the heart were not forced to want and weep,
His soul would have lain down content, at ease,
And never thought to exceed the human start
And never learned to climb towards the Sun."* (Ibid, p.443)

There is nothing in this creation that can be rejected as meaningless or purposeless.

The most negligible weed may yet contain within it a very potent medicine. We recognise the importance of the Queen's question when the Rishi's answer keeps us enthralled by his discourse on the presence of pain and death in human life. The queen (and we too) is made to understand that the limitation of Satyavan's life must be accepted. Berating Fate and censuring the Creator is of no avail. We have to move forward slowly, patiently till the day of transformation. Meanwhile the Queen (and we too) must nurture an unshakable faith, a *Mahavishwasa* in the Divine.

*"Make of thy daily way a pilgrimage,
For through small joys and griefs thou mov'st towards God."* (Ibid, p. 451)

Rishi Narad asks the Queen not to interpret Satyavan's death as a 'condition' imposed by the Supreme. The Divine is not interested in the joy produced by

suffering as it is with the Titan who positively revels in torture and suffering. The Divine however forces itself to give such pain to man to help his mobility upwards, like a doctor who injects a medicine to make the patient well. Sri Aurobindo has translated the decad on surrender by the Tamil hymnologist Kulasekhara (7th century). One of the verses says:

*"The sufferer loves the wise physician even when his flesh is cut and burnt. O Lord of the City of the wise, let thy Illusion inflict on me an endless pain, I will yet remain thy servant, I will yet look up to thy feet."*²

The poet in Sri Aurobindo was fascinated by the superb similes of Kulasekhara to teach man the need for faith in God. Do we not have love and devotion for the surgeon who performs a surgical operation on our body? Do we not praise him and thank him? This we do because we know the surgeon is engaged in bringing comfort to us.

We have not heard the Queen in the earlier cantos. Nor seen her. We will not be seeing her again in the epic. But her presence midway through the epic is vital and unforgettable. She does not have the vision of the Rishi, nor the supernal calm of Aswapati. Hence her questions. These questions are important because that is how we recoup our energies and the blessings of elders prove to be an armour. Narad tells the Queen that her daughter is no ordinary person and she will surely be a formidable challenge to Fate.

*"Thou hast no place in that tremendous strife;
Thy love and longing are not arbiters there;
Leave the world's fate and her to God's sole guard.
Even if he seems to leave her to her lone strength,
Even though all falters and falls and sees an end
And the heart fails and only are death and night,
God-given her strength can battle against doom
Even on a brink where Death alone seems close
And no human strength can hinder or can help.
Think not to intercede with the hidden Will,
Intrude not twixt her spirit and its force
But leave her to her mighty self and Fate."* (Ibid, pp. 461-62)

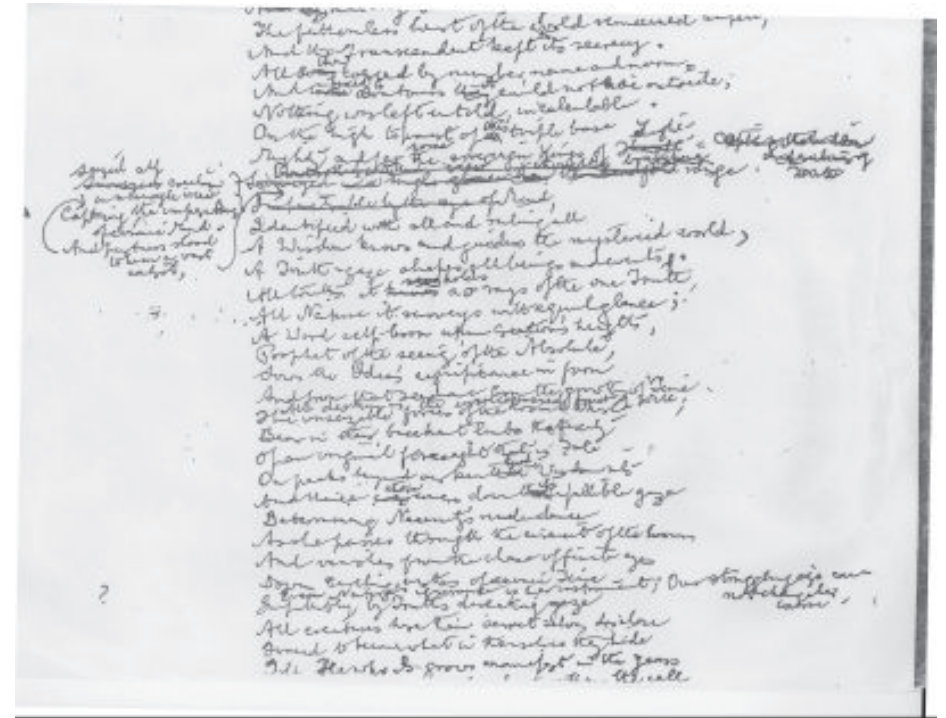
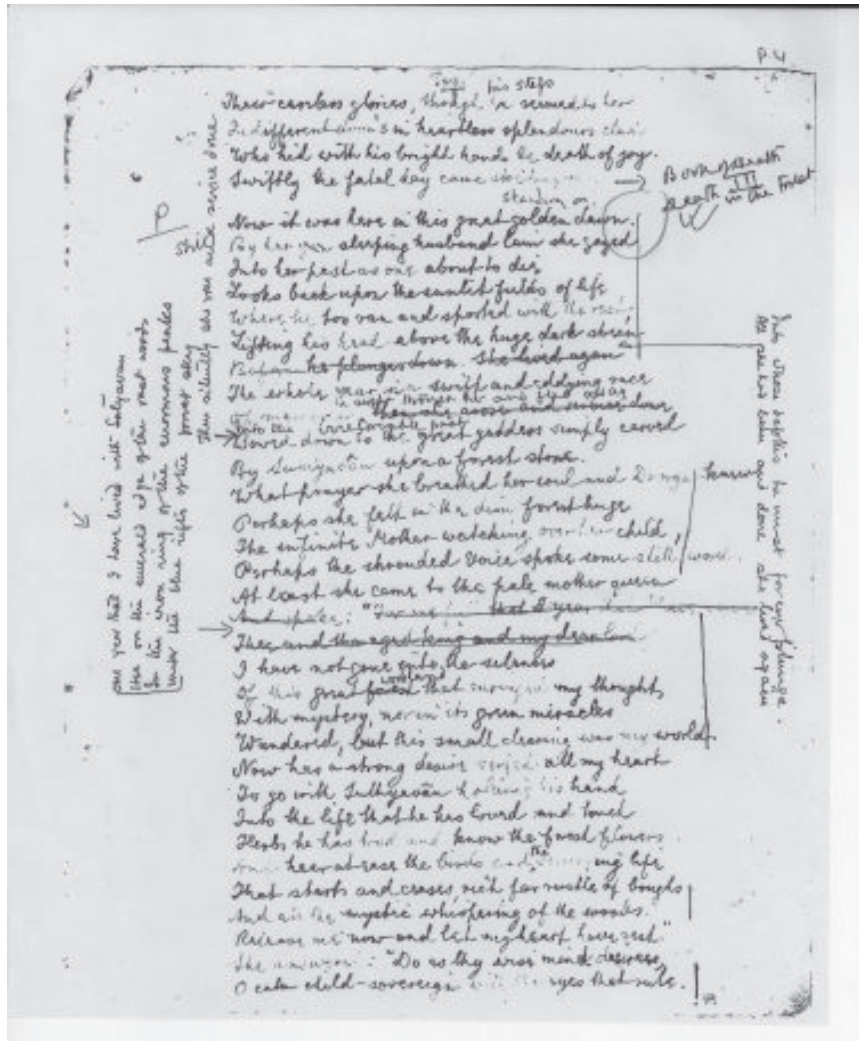
This stern command uttered with love is a comfort for the Queen. Her love for her child will yet guard Savitri and all will be well.

References

- i Translations from "*Yaksha Prasna*" are by Kisari Mohan Ganguli
- ii Perumal Tirumozhi, CWSA, Vol. 5, p.593

Lexicon Of An Infinite Mind

Narad (Richard Eggenberger)



I have been asked to contribute an article on *Savitri* for the special issue, February 2011, of **Sraddha**,—the quarterly publication of the Sri Aurobindo Bhavan, Kolkata, but I do not have the capacity of inner development in the Integral Yoga to attempt such a monumental task. Many others of great wisdom have written on *Savitri* or delivered brilliant and enthralling lectures on its many books and cantos. What then can I give, as one who has barely taken a step on the path Mother and Sri Aurobindo have blazed for us?

I remember the great Kapali Shastri once saying that he did not write anything until he was in his sixties because he did not want to be a purveyor of others' goods. So this article contains primarily examples from the light and wisdom of Sri Aurobindo and His elder disciples along with dictionary definitions of words that are unfamiliar even to those knowledgeable in English, and others that at first look may be thought to be familiar and yet may contain six or more distinct definitions when employed by Sri Aurobindo.

The inspiration for the *Lexicon of An Infinite Mind, a Dictionary of Words and Terms in Sri Aurobindo's 'Savitri'* came to me in the early 1970's during the initial stages of the construction of the Matrimandir and Matrimandir Gardens in Auroville. I was greatly encouraged by Madhav Pandit who asked me to begin the work immediately as I could

be sure that Mother's force and help would be with me at every moment to enable me to complete the *Lexicon*. Although preliminary study began, the intensity of the work to build the gardens precluded further research at the time.

During the mid 1970's, Nolini agreed to meet with Mary Helen and me and explain various terms in *Savitri*. His enlightened replies are noted in the text as are numerous detailed and often revelatory answers to our questions from Amal Kiran (K.D. Sethna), clear and thoughtful responses from Madhav Pandit, especially through his books on *Savitri*, enlightened definitions from Tehmi Massalawalla, with whom I spent many months during the last years of her life reading *Savitri* together, A.B. Purani, friend and elder brother to a young seeker, whose *Savitri, An Approach and a Study*, was of significant help in understanding Vedic terms and the 'overhead touch' in poetry, and to Jhumur-di who so generously shared the light of her knowledge.

Now, nearly forty years have passed since the first inspiration came. The title is taken from Book Eleven, *The Book of Everlasting Day, Canto One, The Eternal Day: The Soul's Choice and the Supreme Consummation*, p. 675, line 167.

... . . the first lexicon of an infinite mind
Translating the language of eternal bliss.

The task we set before us was a daunting one, to read through *Savitri* slowly and carefully as many times as possible so we might include all important words and phrases. The criteria used in determining those we would choose to define were as follows:

First, to select from the voluminous writings of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother terms which they have clearly explained;

Second, to seek the assistance of Sri Aurobindo's disciples, especially those who were correspondents, typists, etc., during the many years of *Savitri*'s creation, and ask them to define phrases and terms that are beyond the scope of dictionaries.

Third, to use as a reference for defining standard and unique words, numerous free-source internet dictionaries such as Dictionary.com, Merriam Webster Free Dictionary, One Look, The Free Dictionary, Wiktionary, YourDictionary.com, and others.

As this is a first edition, the *Lexicon* is by no means complete and scholars and sages of the future will undoubtedly find further references and profound illumination in Vedic, Upanishadic, Greek, Latin and other languages, and in the great poetic creations and philosophies of humanity. Suggestions and emendations are welcome for possible inclusion in subsequent editions. This is a beginning only by two disciples of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother for whom *Savitri* has been for nearly 50 years, our Light upon the Way.

The first list of words and terms was compiled in 1998. In 1999 our research intensified and continued through the winter of 2001 when we had completed more than 90% of the *Lexicon*. In February 2002, Mary Helen, my beloved friend, companion, wife, disciple and child of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo, passed away after a long battle with cancer. Her understanding of English grammar, punctuation and style, as well as her meticulous attention to detail, enabled a far wider compilation than had earlier been envisioned.

When Shraddhavan of Savitri Bhavan in Auroville, sent us a list of words for which a disciple from India needed clarification, our scope was again enlarged, understanding

that for many whose first language is not English there are numerous words with multiple definitions, some abstruse or complex and not readily accessible to the mind. For this reason we revisited the entire text and began to include words that may be felt by some familiar with English to be 'common', yet are employed by Sri Aurobindo in unique ways in *Savitri*. Even then, there remain hundreds of well-known words that have been omitted so that the *Lexicon* might prove not too unwieldy.

Let me then begin with the method we followed. In our early trials we read the poem from cover to cover again and again, carefully reading each line, and selecting those words we felt should be defined. We then had to decide how to list them and arrived at one solution that we eventually discarded, i.e. to list the Book, Canto, Page, and Line number. This would have added many more pages to an already large volume and would not be the most elegant method. After having read through the poem at least five or six times, the inspiration came to me that there should be a numbered edition of *Savitri* as is done in the great epic poems. I went to see my friend, Madanlal Himatsingka, and told him of my idea. As was his nature, if he felt something was right and should be done, he wanted to realise it immediately. We went to the Ashram library together and looked at epics from many of the great poets, Shakespeare, Dante, Virgil, Homer, and others and saw how the numbers were placed on the page and very soon after our visit to the Library, Madanlal published the first numbered edition that is in print today.

During another visit with Madanlal we were speaking of the *Lexicon* and he tossed us the *Savitri* 'Concordance', a listing of every word in *Savitri* with the exact location of the word, again according to page number, etc., just as I had felt to do in the initial listing. Reading through the 'Concordance' inspired us to go through the poem again slowly and thoroughly and look for words we may have missed. In the process hundreds of new words were added.

Prior to this, Mary Helen and I had completed a revision of the botanical data for the book, *The Spiritual Significance of Flowers* as given by the Mother. When Mary Helen was diagnosed with late-stage ovarian cancer and given only a few weeks to live and after extensive surgery perhaps a few months, we worked on the *Lexicon* often at least six and frequently eight hours a day and would read *Savitri* to each other before sleep. Our work continued until she was no longer able to walk downstairs to the computer. Only a few weeks later she left her body.

I promised myself that I would complete a book on the 'Service Tree' that leans in beauty protecting the Samadhi of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother so that generations to come would look with reverence at the supreme example of 'Service' given by this stately tree whose branches have shaded millions of visitors and whose golden flowers carpet the ground with their colour and fragrance for months. The book is now at the Ashram Press and hopefully will be released in the coming year. The time has now come to complete the first edition of the *Lexicon* and shed some light on the many complex words and phrases in *Savitri*.

We are aware that much of *Savitri* is incomprehensible to the mind without an inner illumination, experience or understanding from planes above the mind, and challenges transcription in a lexicographic sense. Sri Aurobindo has expanded the English lan-

guage as no one since Shakespeare, coined new words, employed words in unique and far wider senses, utilised and often anglicised foreign terms and widened the language by conveying visions and experiences that are beyond words and, of supreme importance, bringing mantra into English.

In the writings of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother we are fortunate to have a vast body of words and terms occurring in *Savitri* already defined by Them.

In his *Letters on Savitri* Sri Aurobindo writes the following:

"Its expression[Savitri] aims at a certain force, directness and spiritual clarity and reality. When it is not understood, it is because the truths it expresses are unfamiliar to the ordinary mind or belong to an untrodden domain or domains or enter into a field of occult experience: it is not because there is any attempt at a dark or vague profundity or at an escape from thought. The thinking is not intellectual but intuitive or more than intuitive, always expressing a vision, a spiritual contact or a knowledge which has come by entering into the thing itself, by identity."

"The philosophy of Savitri is different but it is persistently there; it expresses or tries to express a total and many-sided vision and experience of all the planes of being and their action upon each other. Whatever language, whatever terms are necessary to convey this truth of vision and experience it uses without scruple or admitting any mental rule of what is or is not poetic. It does not hesitate to employ terms which might be considered as technical when these can be turned to express something direct, vivid and powerful."

"Moreover, the object [of Savitri] is not only to present a secret truth in its true form and true vision but to drive it home by the finding of the true word, the true phrase, the 'mot juste', the true image or symbol, if possible the inevitable word; if that is there, nothing else, repetition included, matters much."

"Every word must be the right word, with the right atmosphere, the right relation to all the other words, just as every sound in its place and the whole sound together must bring out the imponderable significance which is beyond verbal expression."

And lastly, *"One has to use words and images in order to convey to the mind some perception, some figure of that which is beyond thought."*

To paraphrase a famous compiler, we have offered very little if anything, of our own, except the string that ties this gift of divine wisdom and promise together in a dictionary format to help us go deeper into the vision of *Savitri* and the new world that dawns before us.

A few further notes:

On Sri Aurobindo's use of capitalisation:

Amal: *"I believe that capitalisation indicates that these are not only states but also powers which can display even personality."*

Nolini: (The authors gave as an example the word "Vision".) *"When it is the supreme vision it is capitalised"*. Nolini also said: *"When it is the personality of the thing, not*

only the quality of it. There is no set rule on capitalisation."

(The authors also gave the example of Centaur.) *"When such words are capitalised it refers to a divinity representing the species"*. Also with the word Circean, Nolini said: *"Not merely a mythological story but a being representing universal forces"*.

On hyphenated words:

Nolini: *"Hyphenated words are meant as one word, not merely adjectives. When both words in a hyphenated word are capitalised it is to stress both elements."*

In the **Author's Note** before the poem begins, Sri Aurobindo writes:

The tale of Satyavan and Savitri is recited in the Mahabharata as a story of conjugal love conquering death. But this legend is, as shown by many features of the human tale, one of the many symbolic myths of the Vedic cycle. Satyavan is the soul carrying the divine truth of being within itself but descended into the grip of death and ignorance; Savitri is the Divine Word, daughter of the Sun, goddess of the supreme Truth who comes down and is born to save; Aswapati, the Lord of the Horse, her human father, is the Lord of Tapasya, the concentrated energy of spiritual endeavour that helps us to rise from the mortal to the immortal planes; Dyumatsena, Lord of the Shining Hosts, father of Satyavan, is the Divine Mind here fallen blind, losing its celestial kingdom of vision, and through that loss its kingdom of glory. Still this is not a mere allegory, the characters are not personified qualities, but incarnations or emanations of living and conscious Forces with whom we can enter into concrete touch and they take human bodies in order to help man and show him the way from his mortal state to a divine consciousness and immortal life.

"Let us meditate on the most auspicious (best) form of Savitri, on the Light of the Supreme which shall illumine us with the Truth"

Sri Aurobindo's *Gayatri*

As we read the reminiscences of disciples that continue to be printed we find more and more words of the Mother on *Savitri*. I list below a number of them.

"Savitri is a mantra for the transformation of the world." Mother to Udar
Sweet Mother,

This morning in my meditation I saw so many things which were logically unrelated but which definitely produced the impression that something extraordinary is about to happen. This is the first time, perhaps, that I have had such a presentiment, lasting almost an hour. I want to know whether there is any truth in it and how we should prepare for it.

Last night, we (you and I and a few others) were together for quite a long time in Sri Aurobindo's permanent dwelling-place in the subtle physical (what Sri Aurobindo called the true physical). Everything that took place there (far too long and complicated to relate) was organised, so to say, to express concretely the rapidity of the

present movement of transformation. And with a smile, Sri Aurobindo told you something like this: “Do you believe now?” It was as if he were evoking the three lines from Savitri:

God shall grow up while the wise men talk and sleep;

For man shall not know the coming till its hour

And belief shall be not till the work is done. (4th rev.ed,1993, p.55)

I think that this is a sufficient explanation of the meditation you refer to.

My blessings.

1 February 1963

Savitri, this prophetic vision of the world’s history, including the announcement of the earth’s future. (Meditations on Savitri, vol.1, 1964)

The daily record of the spiritual experiences of the individual who has written.

A complete system of yoga which can serve as a guide for those who want to follow the integral sadhana.

The yoga of the Earth in its ascension towards the Divine.

The experiences of the Divine Mother in her effort to adapt herself to the body she has taken and the ignorance and falsity of the earth upon which She has incarnated.

(Mother’s Collected Works, 13:24)

Some extracts from Savitri, that marvellous prophetic poem which will be humanity’s guide towards its future realisation. (Mother’s Collected Works, 13:24 - 27.11.1963)

For the opening of the psychic, for the growth of consciousness and even for the improvement of English it is good to read one or two pages of Savitri each day.

Mother to Norman Dowsett

I believe that it is his message; all the rest are the preparations, but Savitri is the message. Mother to Satprem

The importance of Savitri is immense. Its subject is universal. Its revelation is prophetic. The time spent in its atmosphere is not wasted. Mother (from the message for the Meditations on Savitri exhibition, 1967)

You see, Mahalakshmi is the Divine Mother’s aspect of love, the perfection of manifested love, which must come before this supreme Love (which is beyond the Manifestation and the Non-manifestation) can be expressed — the supreme Love referred to in Savitri when the Supreme sends Savitri to the earth:

For ever love, O beautiful slave of God! (Savitri, 4th rev ed, 1993, p.702)

It’s to prepare the earth to receive the Supreme’s manifestation, the manifestation of His Victory.

Seen in that way, it becomes clear - comprehensible, and comprehensive, too: it has a content.

(11 May 1963, vol. 4,

L’Agenda de Mère)

Seeing that, there is obviously a similar experience in connexion with what is called life and death. It’s a sort of “overhanging” (it comes to me in English, that’s why I have difficulty) of that constant presence of Death or possibility of death. As he says in Savitri, we have a constant companion all the way from the cradle to the grave, we are constantly shadowed by the threat or presence of Death. Well, this gives the cells an

intensity in their call for a Power of Eternity which would not be there without that constant threat. Then we understand — we begin to understand very concretely— that all those things are only goads to make the Manifestation progress and grow more intense, more perfect. If the goads are crude, it is because the Manifestation is very crude. As it grows more and more perfect and apt to manifest something ETERNALLY PROGRESSIVE, those very crude methods will give way to more refined ones, and the world will progress without the need for such brutal oppositions. It is only because the world is in infancy and the human consciousness in its very early infancy.

It’s a very concrete experience. (L’Agenda de Mère, vol.4, 15 May 1963)

(Offered in gratitude for a life guided and blessed by the Avatars of the New World)

A Biographical Aspect of *Savitri*

RY Deshpande

There is a double aspect of biography in *Savitri*, of the legendary Aswapati and Savitri, of the spiritual-occult, of Purusha and Shakti, Presence and Power, Omniscience and Omnipotence, supreme Being and Consciousness-Force, divine Will and divine Action, of human incarnates as Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. Why two, this double aspect of the divine Will and the divine Action, *samkalpa* and *kārya*? It is in intimate as well as functional relationship that it is present, present to work out a possibility in this mortal world, *mṛtyuloka*. In it is the aspect of the Divine's will-to-be and the Divine's will-to-become. It is a manifesto for the Divine's manifestation.

There is, therefore, a good justification to divide *Savitri* in two equal parts, one dealing with Aswapati, will, *samkalpa*, and the other with Savitri, action, *kārya*. Thus

Part I: Aswapati, 24 Cantos, 11 683 lines, 330 pages

Parts II and Part III: Savitri, 25 Cantos, 12 154 lines, 370 pages

The total number of lines in *Savitri* by the latest count is 23,837.

The first half of *Savitri* is essentially presenting the yoga-tapasya of Aswapati, and the second the shakti-yoga of Savitri. For an epic entitled *Savitri*, this may look somewhat disproportionate in division, as if the poet got driven away by that which is not directly in the story-line. But is it so? *Savitri* is at once a legend and a symbol, both together, the legend capitalising on the myth, and the symbol unfolding the manifesto in the language that holds in it the future. The legend essentially comes from the narrative as is given in the Mahabharata, it having the splendid Vedic roots in it. The Vedic roots themselves are symbolic; it is a revelatory myth belonging to the Vedic cycle. *Savitri*'s biographical is carrying in it this double aspect, the legendary and the symbolic.

In the Mahabharata legend we have the yoga-tapasya of Aswapati described in just 20 ślokas—in a total of 300. But here in Sri Aurobindo we have almost 12,000 lines. The focus in the legend is on receiving a boon for conduct of the *dhārmic* life, based on the law of truth, *satya-dharma*. But in *Savitri* the yoga-tapasya of Aswapati is to compel the mortal birth of the divine Goddess Savitri, she taking birth in the context of the New Creation willed by him in the Transcendent. But before he approaches her and prays for this birth of hers, he has to prepare the ground to support her birth. He travels through all the fourteen worlds, all the *lokas*, through the vast creation, and leaves his presence there behind him. This Presence of his in the fourteen worlds, the Avatar's Presence, becomes her supporting ground, *ādhāra-bhūmī*, for her work.

The yogic-occult foundation for the action of the divine Shakti is provided by Aswapati. Without it she cannot work, without it her work is impossible. This also means that only when this ground, this *ādhāra-bhūmī* is ready can she be invoked to take the mortal birth. Seeing it so, she condescends to pass through the portals of the birth that is a death. Hers is a sacrifice for the divine Cause, in the divine Will. She takes mortal birth and meets Death, the present Lord of this mortal creation, this *mṛtyuloka*.

Projected by the inconscient Void stands Death in opposition to the divine Will now in action here. That is how Savitri meets Death. But in the process, after conquering him, she cuts a door through the Void to enter into the Transcendent. Not the traditional passage through the door of the sun, *sūryasya dwārāḥ*, but through the door of the nothing, *sūnyasya dwārāḥ* has Savitri opened the new path. When one passes through this door, no darkness is left behind—because that itself has now passed into the luminous Void, the Void ready to give rise to a new manifestation. That is the greatness of Savitri's victory, a manifestation where no darkness is present.

After cutting a door through the Void and passing through it, Savitri meets the Four-fold Being—Virat-Hiranyagarbha-Prajnanaghana-Anandamaya who is also the Being of Love, Premamaya. He is one who upholds seven earths, *sapta-bhūmī*. But what is *bhūmī*? It is ground for growth, it is that which grows, expands, becomes rich, all in the spiritual sense, in terms of growth of consciousness and its possibilities. The Master, the Lord of this *bhūmī* is *bhūmī* celebrated by the Chhandogya Upanishad. Savitri meets him, appropriately enough, after entering into the Transcendent via the Void. He stands there behind all, endowing the riches of immortality. From him she receives the Boon of Immortality for the Earth. In it is the fulfilment of the mortal creation. It is a fulfilment which marks the beginning of a new creation, *nava samsāra*.

Savitri's birth was in response to Aswapati's prayer. What about Aswapati's own birth? But that is the birth of the Avatar. He comes here from age to age, *yuge-yuge*.

Long ago the Rishis and the Gods and the Sadhyas performed Purusha-Yajna, the Sacrifice of the Purusha, and in it established the Fourfold Order of the cosmic working. In response to this Sacrifice, in this Purusha-Yajna, things got established, the enduring Order in which the great beings participate. In it is prepared by the Manu of the Age the body of the Avatar. Here is the beginning of a Manvantara, a New Age which will unfold itself in the growing dynamism of timeless Eternity.

In *Savitri* we have the following description:

As rare the vessel that can hold God's birth;

A soul made ready through a thousand years

Is the living mould of a supreme Descent.

Rare is the cup fit for love's nectar wine, (Savitri, 4th rev ed., 1993, p.398)

Savitri is born. She does Shakti Yoga, establishes in her soul the Divine Power to conquer Death. The conquest of Death is the central issue of *Savitri*. In it is locked the mystery of this mortal creation, a creation begun in possibilities of the Inconscience.

There is darkness all around, and the Gods are not awake yet. They are the ones who carry forward the evolutionary march. The Mind of Night, the physical's mind receiving the darkness of the Night, is standing across the path of that divine Event. This Mind

of Night at one stage was necessary. It came to give form and stability to things that would otherwise get dissolved in the all-swallowing original Void. But now that Mind of Night itself is becoming an obstacle. Savitri's task is to remove it and clear the way, at the same time assuring that things will not get swallowed by the Void.

Savitri is aware of her divine origin right from the beginning. She is a greatness that came from our other countries, a spirit of its celestial source aware. (p.353) The Mother recounts in her talks what her own mother had told her, that she had come here to do great work. In another place she details one of her childhood experiences:

February 22, 1914: When I was a child of about thirteen, for nearly a year every night as soon as I had gone to bed it seemed to me that I went out of my body and rose straight up above the house, then above the city, very high above. Then I used to see myself clad in a magnificent golden robe, much longer than myself; and as I rose higher, the robe would stretch, spreading out in a circle around me to form a kind of immense roof over the city. Then I would see men, women, children, old men, the sick, the unfortunate coming out from every side; they would gather under the outspread robe, begging for help, telling of their miseries, their suffering, their hardships. In reply, the robe, supple and alive, would extend towards each one of them individually, and as soon as they had touched it, they were comforted or healed, and went back into their bodies happier and stronger than they had come out of them. Nothing seemed more beautiful to me, nothing could make me happier; and all the activities of the day seemed dull and colourless and without any real life, beside this activity of the night which was the true life for me. Often while I was rising up in this way, I used to see at my left an old man, silent and still, who looked at me with kindly affection and encouraged me by his presence. This old man, dressed in a long dark purple robe, was the personification—as I came to know later—of him who is called the Man of Sorrows. (CWM, vol.1, p.81)

Indeed, a power seated deep within her shaped every aspect of her personality, moulded her senses, her faculties, even as she was one with her greater Nature. “*An invisible sunlight ran within her veins.*”

A mind of light, a life of rhythmic force,

A body instinct with hidden divinity

Prepared an image of the coming god;

(Ibid, p.357)

Many high gods lived here in one beautiful home. She could already engage herself in doing great heavenly experiments. As a student she acquired knowledge and skill in all the secular arts and sciences, in thought, philosophies, logic, grammar, ethics, music, painting, sculpture, crafts, architecture, number's laws, the movement of the stars, the theories that explain the physical world, all the sixty-four branches as did Narad before he approached Rishi Sanatkumar for the higher knowledge, *parā vidyā*, the knowledge of the Eternal, Brahma-jñāna. Later Savitri will be initiated by the divine Shakti herself; she will get instructions directly from her, she as her willing human portion here to do the divine work, of removing the obstacle that stands in the way of a divine manifesta-

tion upon earth. That work of hers will mark in this creation the arrival of Krishna and Kali, of the truth-dynamism in the wideness of the truth-joy. Such is indeed her demand, too great, such is the purity of her force that nothing would resist it, that the promised thing shall be fulfilled.

Young Savitri is the traveller of eternity who came here from the immortal spaces to set her conquering feet on Chance and Time. But in order that that happens she must meet Satyavan and, to be sure, “*Love in the wilderness met Savitri.*” But who met whom? Love—met Savitri? or Love met—Savitri? If her birth is to conquer the enemy, the enemy of Love, it is she who must meet Love, although in his own fulfilment it is he who should go about and meet her. Love who is none other than Satyavan is the involuntary incarnation of the Divine, and it is he who awaits the arrival of the divine Power to redeem his lot, the lot of ignominy, of the mortal existence.

If we have to count the three poises of the Supreme, then these are: Satyavan-Death-Aswapati. Savitri has connection with all the three. As human Savitri she comes as the daughter of Aswapati who has laid the psycho-spiritual foundation for her occult work; she grows into rich and ripe maidenhood and meets in the lonely forest her life's timeless partner, Satyavan. That sets the high stage for the arrival of the Antagonist, stiff and dark, born of the fathomless inconscient Void but now embodying itself in the person of Death, embodying to wrestle with Savitri.

The meeting of Satyavan and Savitri itself is a unique meeting in which the God of Love as the God of Destiny touched things in time; in it, without a moment's delay, all got settled. Savitri was going from place to place in her long and unknown quest for a life's partner; similarly Satyavan chanced to take an unaccustomed road to do his daily work in the remote forest away from civilisation, the work of collecting fruits, flowers and firewood for the elderly dwellers in the hermitages. In that fine summer morning Satyavan and Savitri glanced at each other and at once recognised their timeless identity. In it at once was ushered in a new epoch, an epoch in the fulfilment of the avataric work of theirs. The moment Savitri cast her look on Satyavan her inner vision promptly remembered a forehead that “*wore the crown of all her past*”. Even as the God touched in time in bringing about this meeting of the ageless lovers, later at every stage Savitri's Yoga also received guidance from the supreme Power, from the Mahashakti herself presiding over her work as the human instrument. The very first instruction she received was to remember why she had come here:

Find out thy soul, recover thy hid self,

In silence seek God's meaning in thy depths,

Then mortal nature change to the divine.

Open God's door, enter into his trance.

Cast Thought from thee, that nimble ape of Light:

In his tremendous hush stilling thy brain

His vast Truth wake within and know and see.

Cast from thee sense that veils thy spirit's sight:

In the enormous emptiness of thy mind

Thou shalt see the Eternal's body in the world,

*Know him in every voice heard by thy soul,
In the world's contacts meet his single touch;
All things shall fold thee into his embrace.
Conquer thy heart's throbs, let thy heart beat in God:
Thy nature shall be the engine of his works,
Thy voice shall house the mightiness of his Word:
Then shalt thou harbour my force and conquer Death.* (Ibid, p.476)

Savitri prepares herself occult-yogically to meet Death, to meet him and win victory over him, to win victory over him and accomplish the mission of her incarnation.

Human Savitri's Yoga is entirely guided by the divine Shakti, her celestial source and foundation, she overseeing her occult-yogic progress, that she should be able to meet the challenge of the fierce and formidable Enemy. She enters into the inner countries, she meets her soul-forces working in the dynamics of the inner nature, she discovers her soul, she grows one with her divine Soul when there is the rush of the Shakti's powers in different centres of her subtle body, she attains formless liberation in which all that is inconscient is dissolved; her will has now become one with the will of the Supreme, an identity even in her very physical.

Savitri is now ready to encounter Death, meet him face to face in the battle of life and death. In the planned or willed death of Satyavan is fought the occult battle by the two terrible mighty powers, one in the strength of Falsehood and the other in assertive dynamism of the Truth-Divine. In the deep forest, in the summer month, at the noon hour Satyavan breathes his last, collapses in the lap of Savitri. Soon Death appears to pick up his soul. Savitri follows him, claiming it back from him. He refuses. An occult battle is fought, and Death is vanquished. Savitri looks on Death even as in his symbol shape the world's darkness had consented to Heaven-light. A mighty transformation comes on Savitri just as the Immortal's lustre lights up her face. She the Incarnate thrusts aside the veil and stands a radiant figure of Infinity to establish the Divine's will in the darkness of the world. The life-force of the Mahashakti enters into her; it fills with her presence and her power all the centres of her subtle body. Savitri hails victorious Death, the grandiose Darkness of the Infinite. It is he who made the room in the Void for all to be. But as a Shade he refuses to admit defeat. But

*A pressure of intolerable force
Weighed on his unbowed head and stubborn breast;
Light like a burning tongue licked up his thoughts,
Light was a luminous torture in his heart,
Light coursed, a splendid agony, through his nerves;
His darkness muttered perishing in her blaze.
Her mastering Word commanded every limb...
He called to Night but she fell shuddering back,
He called to Hell but sullenly it retired:
He turned to the Inconscient for support,
From which he was born, his vast sustaining self;
He called to his strength, but it refused his call.*

*His body was eaten by light, his spirit devoured.
At last he knew defeat inevitable
And left crumbling the shape that he had worn, ...
Afar he fled shunning her dreaded touch
And refuge took in the retreating Night.* (Ibid, pp.667-68)

Savitri has cut a door into the Void, a door of entry through the creative Void into the all-sanctioning Transcendental. Not through the door of the sun, *sūryasya dwārāh*, but through the door of the Void, *sūnyasya dwārāh*, she enters into the Everlasting Day. Here she meets transformed Death—the Supreme himself, the boon-giver, poised for a new evolutionary manifestation. Savitri receives the boon of the life divine upon earth. The positive confirmation of it is as Satyavan and Savitri return to the earth, behind them follow Krishna and Kali. The divine dynamism in the manifesting delight of the Ever-Joyous, of the Anandamaya Purusha, is the promised beginning and that has now been established in the occult-spiritual of the earth to unfold in steps in Time.

This is the glorious work the Mother was engaged in after Sri Aurobindo's purposeful yogic withdrawal on 5 December 1950, the "*Death's tremendous hour*" when the seed for it was triumphantly sown. The Mother even said that that was what Sri Aurobindo had told her to do. That was the work he had given to her and it was completed on 29 February 1956 when the supramental light and force descended in the earth's subtle-physical. But that also opened out the divine possibilities which she would attempt in the wake of this aeonic event. In it began her yoga-tapasya of cellular transformation first making the body's cells conscious of the divine Presence in them, it now doing whatever is to be done in their luminous receptivity. Because of it they arrived at the wonderful realisation: Lord, whatever you shall will in us, and for us, let that be, only that, and nothing else. Such was the victory that had been won.

With this brief reflection on the aspect of Savitri in *Savitri* let us get back to *Savitri*'s first part describing the yoga-tapasya of Aswapati. Sri Aurobindo himself wrote to Amal Kiran the following, in 1946: "*Aswapati's Yoga falls into three parts. First, he is achieving his own spiritual self-fulfilment as the individual and this is described as the Yoga of the King. Next, he makes the ascent as a typical representative of the race to win the possibility of discovery and possession of all the planes of consciousness and this is described in the Second Book: but this too is as yet only an individual victory. Finally, he aspires no longer for himself but for all, for a universal realisation and new creation. That is described in the Book of the Divine Mother.*"

This threefold yoga-tapasya of Aswapati can be summarised as follows: Aswapati is achieving his own spiritual fulfilment as an individual, Book I Cantos 3-5; 2,416 lines; Aswapati makes the ascent as a representative of the race in winning all the worlds, Book II Cantos 1-15; 7,101 lines; Aswapati aspires for a universal realisation and the establishment of the New Creation, Book III Cantos 1-4; 1,457 lines. This makes in all 22 cantos and 10,974 lines. The opening two cantos pose the issue, giving focus to his yoga-tapasya: Canto-1; 341 lines, Canto-2; 367 lines, with a total of 709. In all thus we have 24 cantos and 11,683 lines in Part I of *Savitri*.

The three cantos of the first Book deal with the Yoga of the King:
 Canto Three: Psycho-spiritual transformation;
 Canto Four: Getting the Secret Knowledge of the universal Nature;
 Canto Five: Greater spiritual transformation.

The soul is released; Aswapati has knowledge of the working of Purusha and Prakriti, and his spirit is free. Now he is ready to launch himself on the cosmic exploration, the discovery of the cause of the world-failure. The way he finds to remove the dark cause is to first establish a New Creation in the House of the Spirit and then invoke that Power, Shakti, who will make it manifest in the sequel of the evolutionary process.

The very opening canto describing the Yoga of the King makes it clear that it is the incarnate Divine who is engaged in the yoga-tapasya. Nothing can be achieved without it, without yoga-tapasya, be he man or God or the Avatar, because things have got to be done in the earth-field, in the field of Ignorance and Death cut off from the Divine in the mode of working. The opening passage of the canto in a swiftness of the divine knowledge straightaway declares that Aswapati's was a spirit that had come down upon earth, as the Incarnate, as an Avatar, come down from larger spheres, of truth-beauty-delight-life-power. He came to do yoga-tapasya in the earth-consciousness.

His birth held up a symbol and a sign;

.....

.....paying here God's debt to earth and man

.....

His knowledge shared the Light ineffable.

.....

He bore the stamp of mighty memories

.....

His soul lived as eternity's delegate,

His mind was like a fire assailing heaven,

His will a hunter in the trails of light.

(Ibid, pp.22-23)

Such was the Divine's arrival in human form. He came to do yoga-tapasya in order to bring down the radiant Power, that she may deal with the problem of stiff mortality at present governing the soul of the earth; she alone can remove its affliction, bring the smile of the Divine to it. Savitri's mortal birth was compelled by Aswapati, he carrying the world's desire to the supreme Goddess. Aswapati's birth was an aspect of the divine Incarnation, he coming age after age, *yuge-yuge*, to take the evolution to the next higher stage, at present making it open to the supramental prospects.

In the Puranas, Prithvi goes to Mt Sumeru and offers respects to Brahma and other Gods; then she speaks of her plight, overpowered as she was by the Daityas, the Enemies of the Gods. The Gods approach Vishnu, requesting him to incarnate himself and redeem the suffering of the world, of the earth, Prithvi. In response to it Vishnu comes as an Avatar. Sri Aurobindo explains the process of Avatarhood, that the body of the Avatar is prepared by one of the four Manus, *catvāro mānavah*, the spiritual Fathers of every human mind and body.

The Mother reveals about Sri Aurobindo's coming as follows:

What Sri Aurobindo represents in the history of the earth's spiritual progress is not a teaching, not even a revelation; it is a mighty action straight from the Supreme. (15 August 1964)

Sri Aurobindo came upon earth to announce the manifestation of the supramental world and not merely did he announce this manifestation but embodied also in part the supramental force and showed by example what one must do to prepare oneself for manifesting it. The best thing we can do is to study all that he has told us and endeavour to follow his example and prepare ourselves for the new manifestation. (30 January 1972)

Right at the beginning of Book I Canto 3 presenting the Yoga of the King and the Soul's Release, we are told about who Aswapati is, the Incarnate himself who took the mortal birth for the divine work to be carried out in the mortal world, *mṛtyuloka*, "a thinker and toiler" working here as the Avatar. He is like the divine Agni soaring towards heaven, "a spirit that is a flame of God", he is like him the Son of Force, *sahas sputro agniḥ*. The Veda speaks of the Son of Force as one who has attained massive strength on earth, free from Ignorance one who is supramental in his completeness. When Aswapati meets the divine Shakti on the threshold Mind, she addresses him as the Son of Strength standing at the Eternal's doors. He comes here, and soon he has the double realisation:

A static Oneness and dynamic Power

Descend in him, the integral Godhead's seals;

His soul and body take that splendid stamp...

His soul breaks out to join the Oversoul,

(Ibid, p.24)

All this happened in the case of Sri Aurobindo much before his coming to Pondicherry in 1910. Around 1 January in 1908, he sat with Lele in Baroda for three days and had the realisation of the Active Brahman, of the divine Presence everywhere, *vāsudeva iti sarvam*, this when he was in Alipore Jail as an undertrial prisoner. If these are realisations of the profound Adhyatma Yoga, then we should also remember that Sri Aurobindo had already received its foundational principles in the jail, the Saptachatusthaya which later became a part of the Yoga of Self-Perfection, this Self-perfection including the awaking of the supramental senses, and the knowledge of the three divisions of times, the past, the present, and the future, *trikāladṛṣṭi*.

A pure perception has brought to Aswapati the gifts of the inner senses, behind which is the primary sense, *manas*. The five elemental states of ether-air-fire-water-earth, Akash-Vayu-Agni-Apas-Prithvi, have also brought the corresponding subtle organs of perception, ear-touch-eye-tongue-nose or shabda-sparsha-rupa-rasa-gandha. From the causal into the subtle physical have now these instruments of cognition entered becoming the part of his physical. And all this happened before the pre-Pondicherry period. The realisation had already reached a high Upanishadic peak.

In the wake of the inspired knowledge came also inspiration with her lightning feet, and the inexpressible Truth revealed to him its silent soul. The primordial Nescience is rent even as the closed Beyond bared. Inspiration arrives as a sudden visitor and

plunders for man the Unknowable's vast estate. There in her speed rush immortal words to mortal man. In that arrival Aswapati's voyaging soul meets luminous beings. It was during this period that Sri Aurobindo received knowledge of the Vedic Goddesses, Ila, Mahi, and Saraswati, they "*associated together in a constant formula in those hymns of invocation in which the gods are called by Agni to the sacrifice.*" To him came the powers of Discernment, Intuition, Inspiration, and Revelation.

In this context let us recall what the Mother has said about those who come fully conscious about their Origin.

For those who have come upon earth fully conscious of their entire being and conscious of their Origin, there is at first a period when this consciousness gets veiled by the physical life and the body-consciousness. It withdraws deep within and waits for the hour when the outer circumstances will make it necessary for that inner self to manifest and to become fully active in the body. And generally, as life is organised, it is some more or less dramatic event that makes this change not only possible but needed.

In the case of an Avatar, because he is compelled to take birth in a body, there is a veil drawn over his consciousness, a veil which soon has to disappear. We relate the reclaiming of this consciousness, of this awareness with the outer circumstances of the Avatar's life and get interested in them as his biography. Obviously such cannot be the true picture of an avatic being. The true picture can be revealed only by him. This is what Sri Aurobindo has done through *Savitri* and it is that which we must study, in which we must live and grow, in it breathe the spirit of truth and beauty and joy and life's power. Here in this small article it will not be possible for us to go into all those details, the details as we have in *Savitri*; but the opening passage we have taken is quite illustrative of this fact. Perhaps we could add two more specific examples to it.

First let us see the following. In response to his ardent and strong solicitation, Aswapati is receiving an exceptional boon from the divine Shakti, that she shall take mortal birth to tackle the issue of mortality in this mortal creation, in this *mṛtyuloka*. She shall come here in all her preparedness, she shall bear Wisdom in her voiceless bosom, and possess the strength as that of a conqueror's sword, its well-forged lustrous steel destroying all opposition, giving herself entirely to the divinely inspired will and action. While she shall be such an embodiment or incarnation of Wisdom and Strength, Jnana and Shakti, with Brahmateja and Kshatrateja as her celebrated divine attributes, she as Maheshwari and Mahakali, the Eternal's bliss shall gaze from her eyes, she lustrous as one who is full of divine Ananda and Love.

*A seed shall be sown in Death's tremendous hour,
A branch of heaven transplant to human soil;
Nature shall overleap her mortal step;
Fate shall be changed by an unchanging will.*

(Ibid, p.346)

The fructification of the boon is fixed in the tremendous hour already marked for Death. In the Mahabharata legend it is the hour of Satyavan's death, the summer noon, in the ancient Shalwa Woods. But in Sri Aurobindo's *Savitri* there is a distinct autobiographical element, death logically predetermined as a decisive strategic act and event.

In it that tremendous hour is 1.25 am, 5 December 1950, much long before the hour when the cosmic Gods awake. In that tremendous hour what Sri Aurobindo called the Mind of Light got established in the Mother, the Mind of Light in its operative dynamism, the physical's mind receiving directly the supramental Light and Force. In less than six years following this, on 29 February 1956, the supramental manifestation took place in the earth's subtle physical.

In this context let us see another occultly significant passage in *Savitri*, which belongs to the absolutely last three additions Sri Aurobindo had introduced in the second canto of the Book of Fate, these made around 15 November 1950, just three weeks before his withdrawal. The relevant text with three added lines is as follows:

*He who would save the race must share its pain : ...
The Son of God born as the Son of man
Has drunk the bitter cup, owned Godhead's debt, ...
Now is the debt paid, wiped off the original score...
His love has paved the mortal's road to Heaven:
He has given his life and light to balance here
The dark account of mortal ignorance.
It is finished, the dread mysterious sacrifice,
Offered by God's martyred body for the world;
Gethsemane and Calvary are his lot,
He carries the cross on which man's soul is nailed;
His escort is the curses of the crowd;
Insult and jeer are his right's acknowledgment;
Two thieves slain with him mock his mighty death.
He has trod with bleeding brow the Saviour's way.
He who has found his identity with God
Pays with the body's death his soul's vast light.
His knowledge immortal triumphs by his death.*

(Ibid, p.445)

The last three lines in this passage were added in one of the last three dictations. That it was a later addition to the "*It is finished*"—description of Christ's crucifixion can never be made out if we read the passage without this background, that it is so seamlessly introduced in it. But when we also see it in the context of the 5 December 1950 event, it at once assumes a tremendously different connotation. The decision to withdraw was already taken and that is what we have here: "*body's death*" and "*triumphs by his death*". That it refers to Sri Aurobindo and not to Christ is pretty obvious—in the case of Christ it would have been "*His love immortal triumphs by his death*" as against what we have here, "*His knowledge immortal triumphs by his death*". So, it is knowledge that is going to win victory over death. The victory was won by making the Mind of Light a part of the physical, the beginning of supramental transformation. In its greatness Sri Aurobindo "*attempted all, achieved all*".

What we have attempted here, but not achieved much, is possibly just an examination to see in what way we could approach *Savitri* from a biographical point of view.

The Bird-Image in *Savitri*

Ranajit Sarkar

Metaphor and the Poetic Discourse

Poetic discourse, as opposed to prose, is that poetry does not *say*: it shows and suggests. The two acts, showing and suggesting, are linked to our two principal senses, seeing and hearing. The ancient Vedic poets knew this truth, and thus vision (*dr̥ṣṭi*) and audition (*śruti*) were considered as the essential faculties that guide the poetic creation.

Poetic discourse is not just a metrical or ornamental linguistic expression of our sense-perceptions or abstract mental concepts. It implies an immediate grasping by the aesthetically sensitive reader of the truth that is also the expression of the delight (*ānanda*) in things – the delight that to us is revealed as beauty and aesthetic apprehension (*rasa*). The poetic discourse expresses beyond the perception of physical things and of the logic of the mind, the glorious magic of the infinite truth. Art (and poetry is an art expression), Sri Aurobindo says, “*is not an imitation or reproduction of outward Nature, but rather missioned to give by the aid of a transmuting faculty something more inwardly true than the external life and appearance.*”¹

Outward nature is not rejected, for it is the support; it is through nature that the poet enters into the heart of things; he sees behind the phenomenal appearances the delightful truth of existence and hears the suggestive vibration (*dhvani*) that things emanate. The faculty that transmutes the outward nature and expresses the inner vision and vibration is the creative imagination (*pratibhā*).

The transmuting faculty has to use the language which ordinarily does not possess the power to express directly the poetic seeing or hearing. The language needs itself to be transmuted. The instrumental means that is used to transmute language is the poetic technique. “*It involves,*” says Seamus Heaney, “*the discovery of ways to go out of his (poet’s) normal cognitive bounds and raid the inarticulate: dynamic alertness that mediates between the origins of feeling in memory and experience and the formal ploys that express these in a work of art.*”²

Technique helps to grasp within a poetic form the truth of feeling and experience. But technique is not art, it only provides the “*formal ploys*” for the effectiveness of the poetic discourse. Two powers are here involved: “*aesthetic vision*” and “*perfect execution*”.³ Among the formal ploys that a poet has recourse to, are the image and the rhythm: the first relates to vision and the second to audition. My purpose here is to deal

with the image as an expressive strategy in the poetic discourse as used by Sri Aurobindo in his great epic *Savitri*. The poem is a vast repository of images; it is neither my intention, nor within my limited capacity, to study the whole range of its poetic imagery. I propose to take up the bird-image and explore its creative and expressive potency in the poem.

“*The essential power,*” Sri Aurobindo writes, “*of the poetic word is to make us see, not to make us think or feel; ... sight is the primary consequence and power of poetic speech.*”⁴ The poet “*throws into significant form a truth he has seen.*”⁵ Image, we may say, is the general denomination of the form that the truth seen assumes in poetic discourse. There are three expressive levels of the image. Firstly, there is a simple representation of the external form seen by the viewer. However, in poetry the image cannot be reproduced as the eye sees it or the visible impression the camera records. It has to be expressed in words. This verbal expression describes the object seen, and the reader, if he has the same image stored in his memory, can recognise and visualise it. At this level the representation is more or less limited to the outward form. Secondly, there is the metaphor.⁶ The image in this case does not stand by itself; it is meaningfully related to something else – to another image or an idea or an experience of physical or spiritual realities. The metaphor is more than representation, it is a symbolisation, it suggests something more than the denotative meaning, and helps the reader to enter into the poetic world. It is a transmutation of the sense, a going beyond the denotation to an aesthetically effective and revelatory meaning. In the metaphor two terms, which may seem incongruent, are brought together. A metaphor brings out forcefully the meaning of an idea or thing by juxtaposing some of its characteristic qualities and related attributes with the similar qualities and attributes of another thing. When Burns writes: “*My love is like a red, red rose*”, there is a metaphor. His subject is his Love – the woman he loves. The poet has a very concrete image of his Love and he wants to express it so that the reader too can grasp the poet’s vision. The image of the woman he loves is the great unknown for the reader. But the poet assumes that he knows the rose. And by comparing the woman with the rose he wants to communicate to the reader the wonderful image of the woman he loves.

What is the process of communication? There are here two terms of comparison: the term compared (the beloved woman) and the comparing term (the rose). A word is composed of various smaller units of meaning which make up its total significance. Analysing the word “*rose*” we may find a number of associative and constituent sense-units: flower, delicacy, grace, beauty, fragrance, ephemerality, mystery, mystique, etc. The poet does not mean to say that the woman is exactly like the rose, but that she shares with the rose some of the units of meaning.⁷ She is fair, graceful, and delicate. It is this sharing of meaningful units that makes a metaphor an effective means for conveying the vision of a thing, a subtle idea or a feeling. In practice, one does not have to analyse the terms lest we “*dissect to murder*”. The sense-units form an aura of meaning which is often enriched by personal education, literary knowledge and cultural associations. When the auras of two terms have a common area in which they meet, the meaning of the comparing term illuminates the compared term. A sympathetic reader

can intuitively grasp the intersecting area. Metaphor becomes in this way a poetical device for conveying forcefully and concretely a desired meaning.

The term compared may be abstract, an idea or vision of things occult and spiritual. In such cases the comparing term which is concrete evokes a concrete image of the first term, thus making the idea or the vision graspable. Reification is one of the functions of the metaphor.

The third level of the image is a symbol. As in the first level the image here stands alone but with a difference: the compared term of the metaphor apparently disappears into the body and substance of the comparing term which bears the whole burden of meaning. It represents (i.e. presents to our senses intensely) an idea or a vision without however exhausting its meaning. In the words of Goethe it “*converts the phenomenon into an idea and the idea into an image in such a way that in the image the idea always remains infinitely effective (wirksam) and, though it is expressed in all languages, yet remains inexpressible.*”⁷⁸ In the symbolic image the idea and the vision are inexpressible in the sense that no amount of analysis and mental understanding can circumscribe the meaning as a whole. It remains forever an object of intuitive apprehension.

The image in all three manifestations is especially needed in the poetry that sees truths which are above the mind or which are hidden in the depth of the heart: “... metaphors, symbols, images,” Sri Aurobindo writes, “*are constant auxiliaries summoned by the mystic for the expression of his experiences: that is inevitable because he has to express, in a language made or at least developed and manipulated by the mind, the phenomenon of a consciousness other than the mental and at once more complex and more subtly concrete. It is this subtle concrete, supersensuously sensible reality of the phenomena of that consciousness to which the mystic arrives, that justifies the use of metaphor and image as a more living and accurate transcription than the abstract terms which intellectual reflection employs for its own characteristic process.*”⁷⁹ Sri Aurobindo says that *Savitri* is “*a sort of poetic philosophy of the Spirit and of Life.*”⁸⁰ It can perhaps be said that this philosophy of the Spirit and Life is of the same order as that of the Upanishads, about which Sri Aurobindo writes: “... *the unique revelatory utterance of the Upanishads stands by itself as a form of inspired thought which penetrates either direct or through strong unveiling images to the highest truths of self and soul and the largest seeing of the Eternal.*”⁸¹

In *Savitri* both the methods — direct expression of the highest truths and the strong unveiling images — are used. Our intention is to take the bird-image and see how the image reveals some of the hidden truths of the Spirit.

The Bird-Image: Antecedents

In poetry the bird has often served as a powerful symbol. This winged creature has a rich aura of sense-units: it flies above the earth, defying gravitation, free in the vast blue sky; it often sings and gladdens our heart with its varied melodies; it is beautiful and not seldom its feathers are bright-hued; and its nest where it takes shelter is the home that gives the sense of security and protection. We may here mention a few well-known instances of the bird-image from literature, instances with which most readers of

poetry are undoubtedly familiar. The image is profusely present in poetry; I shall only take three poems on the lark from English literature which, I think, provide the most important meaningful traits of the bird-image.

Wordsworth’s invocation of the skylark: “*Ethereal minstrel! pilgrim of the sky!*” gives the essence of the image. The bird is a singer, it pours “*upon the world a flood/ Of harmony*”; and it is an aspirant of the vast and the high, a pilgrim, but a pilgrim who leaves the earth to soar and explore the unknown. Nevertheless the bird does not deny the earth, “*the nest upon the dewy ground*”. Wings aspire but they do not break the bond of the earth. That is the highest wisdom:

*Type of the wise who soar, but never roam;
True to the kindred points of Heaven and home.*

In Sri Aurobindo’s spiritual philosophy this bond between the earth and heaven is fully recognised. The realisation of the divine life on earth — the idea Sri Aurobindo proposes — is possible when “*an ascension of the mind to heights above*” is followed by the descent, “*an increasing inflow from above, an experience of reception and retention of the descending spirit.*”⁸² If the human spirit reached “*alone the source*”, then

*Our earth would ever spin unhelped in Space,
And this immense creation’s purpose fail!*⁸³

Shelley invokes the skylark as the “*blithe Spirit*”. Soaring and singing are also the essence of its symbolism:

*Higher still and higher
From the earth thou springest
Like a cloud of fire;
The blue deep thou wingest,
And singing still dost soar, and soaring ever singest.*

And the song fills the world:

*All the earth and air
With thy voice is loud,*

Here too we have not only the ascension but also the higher beauty and delight filling the whole world. Shelley was, Sri Aurobindo writes in a long letter that reveals the essential meaning and beauty of the poem, “*passionately interested in bringing the light, beauty and truth of the ideal super-world... The mental, the vital, the physical cannot be left out of the whole he saw in order to yield place only to the ethereal and impalpable.*”⁸⁴

The third lark-poem is Meredith’s. Speaking of his poetry Sri Aurobindo writes that Meredith’s metrical beats sometimes serve “*some dominant soul-tone of the thought and seeing and to dance attendance on that as in the four lines... from ‘The Lark Ascending’.*”⁸⁵ The four lines are:

*So pure that it salutes the suns,
The voice of one for millions,
In whom the millions rejoice
For giving their one spirit voice.*

The lark's voice is its "song seraphically free/ From taint of personality;"

In this poem too the song of the bird "As up he wings the spiral stair/ ... To reach the shining tops of day" fills the earth. The ascension does not make him forget the earth: it makes earth more desirable and uplifts the human soul to higher heights.

*For singing till his heaven fills,
'Tis love of earth that he instills,
And ever winging up and up,
Our valley is his golden cup,
And the wind which overflows
To lift us with him as he goes.*

In these three poems the essential implications of the bird-image are clear: soaring, singing and joining the heaven and earth.

Sri Aurobindo himself has used the bird-image in several of his poems. We will consider some of them. The bird in "The Blue Bird" is a mystical symbol but it is concrete and has the features of any other bird. It soars high and sings "the notes of the sweet and the true" and its joyous song falls on the earthly soil as seeds of bliss that can one day produce the harvest of divine joy:

*I rise like a fire from the mortal's earth
Into a griefless sky
And drop in the suffering soil of his birth
Fire-seeds of ecstasy.* (SABCL, vol.5, p.104)

Don't we find here the same themes as in the three lark-poems?

In his early narrative poems the bird-images are often present. They are romantically metaphorical but the metaphors do not rise to the level of symbolisation :

*As a bright bird comes flying,
From airy extravagance to his own home,
And breasts his mate and feels her all his goal,
So from boon sunlight and the fresh chill wave...
Came Ruru back to the white-bosomed girl,
Strong-winged to pleasure.....*

(*Love and Death*, Ibid, pp.231-2)

There is no scope here for an elaborate study of all the bird-images. But before undertaking the exploration of the image in *Savitri*, I would like to mention "The Bird of Fire". In the poem the bird is a pure symbol – not the metaphorical symbolisation of an image. The second term of comparison is absent. The reader does not get any mental hint as to the meaning of the symbol:

*O marvel bird with the burning wings of light and the unbarred
lids that look beyond all space,
One strange leap of thy mystic stress breaking the barriers of mind
and life, arrives at its luminous term thy flight;
Invading the secret clasp of the Silence and crimson Fire
thou frontest eyes in a timeless Face.* (Ibid, p.571)

This bird-image is of the nature of the Vedic symbolism.¹⁶ In respect to such symbols Sri Aurobindo warns us that we should not mentalise too much, "... mentalising always takes most of the life out of spiritual things."¹⁷ But in some sonnets, "Nirvana" and "Transformation", which are of the same spiritual philosophical style as that of *Savitri*, Sri Aurobindo gives "a clear mental indication". This, we may venture to say, is of the nature of the Upanishadic poetry. In "The Bird of Fire" the poet suppresses the mental indication and gives "the image only with the content suggested in the language".¹⁸ The reader may have a superficial impression, but the profound symbolism can only be grasped by those who have a luminous intuition and the living experience that the symbol conceals.

As regards the images in *Savitri*, we are given, fortunately, the mental indication so that we may grasp, passing through the metaphoric implication, something of the meaning of things that lie beyond our mental perception.

Modern poets prefer unexpected imagery – they bring together two distant terms, which at first do not seem to have any common meaningful element. Such metaphors are unexpected and stun the mind with a violent blow. But gradually the mind wakes up stimulated and may find the metaphorical appropriateness and the primary shock turns into an aesthetic surprise. For an example we may quote Eliot:

*... the evening is spread out against the sky
Like a patient etherised upon a table* *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*

There are also metaphors which are not "new", but are made new by the inspired craftsmanship of the poet. In the classical Sanskrit poetry the image of the moon and the lotus are used almost *ad nauseam* but poets like Kalidasa have yet been able to instil in them unexpected expressiveness. The bird-image is not new, but a great poet rejuvenates it and makes it bear a rich suggestiveness. Such images are also enriched by inter-textual relations – their association with the works of other great poets. The strength of the bird-image is not diminished by its association with the lark-poems and other bird-poems (we shall have occasion to refer to others), rather its suggestiveness is thereby increased: it is haloed with them.

The bird-image does not only involve the word "bird", or specific names of birds – dove, swan, eagle, lark, cuckoo, peacock, etc – but also it may be suggested by wings, claws, beak, feather, nest, flight, soaring, preening, etc. The context and the poetic intention make clear if "wings", for example, suggest a "bird", or an "insect".

We shall now consider some of the important metaphorical implications of the bird-image.

Savitri's Nature as Revealed by the Bird-Image

On the fatal day when Satyavan must die, *Savitri* too wakes up when the dawn dissipates night's shadows. One long year she has borne a tremendous secret, and she has prepared herself for the grim rendezvous with death and fear. She wakes up.

*At the summons of her body's voiceless call
Her strong far-winging spirit travelled back,...* (*Savitri*, SABCL, vol.28, p.9)

The bird-image is implied in these lines in “*far-winged*”. The spirit is free, neither body’s material inertia nor earth’s gravitation can hinder its flight. It goes far and high.

After the body’s awakening from sleep there is a greater awakening. This is the day when her divinity would manifest; the great World-Mother would arise in her. (Ibid, p.21) But before that she must cast her “*surface soul*”, and become the “*ungarbed entity within*”. This transformation comes on Savitri. She wakes up from the mortal ignorance; her ungarbed spirit becomes mighty and free to fly towards unborn things:

*Near to Earth’s wideness, intimate with heaven,
Exalted and swift her young large-visioned spirit
Voyaging through worlds of splendour and of calm
Overflew the ways of Thought to unborn things.* (Ibid, p. 14)

Does not the first line remind the reader of Wordsworth’s skylark which is “*true to the kindred points of heaven and home*”?

Already in her early childhood one could feel “*the nearness of a light still kept from earth*”. Her nature was near to earth – she is a human child – yet her nature bore the separate stamp of divinity. Her earthly nature bore the impress of heaven. This again, which sustains the idea just expressed is vividly revealed by an elaborate bird-image.

*As needing nothing but its own rapt flight
Her nature dwelt in a strong separate air
Like a strange bird with large rich-coloured breast
That sojourns on a secret fruited bough,
Lost in the emerald glory of the woods
Or flies above divine unreachable tops.
Harmoniously she impressed the earth with heaven.* (Ibid, p. 355)

The sensitive reader is made to visualise the delightful lightness and freedom of her nature, its glorious beauty, and its strength to fly to divine heights. He also foresees Savitri’s future achievements: the bird-nature sojourns on a secret fruited bough, suggesting that it is waiting for the time when it will pluck the fruits of its action: the earth, the habitation of her nature, will become like the emerald glory of the woods by the descent of heaven. How symbolically forceful is the bird-image to bring out the idea of the union of earth and heaven, our eternal parents as the Vedic seers had clearly recognised!

Savitri, the World-Mother, is the refuge; her breast is the nest in which the tormented soul can find rest, solace and warmth:

*As might a soul fly like a hunted bird,
Escaping with tired wings from a world of storms,
And a quiet reach like a remembered breast,
In a haven of safety and splendid soft repose
One could drink life back in streams of honey-fire,...
And preen joy in her warmth and colour’s rule.* (Ibid, p.15)

This image in which the soul-bird takes refuge in the motherly bosom as in a nest and preens joyously its feathers in complete trust reveals that although Savitri is the transcendental divinity yet is she near to the humans. Sri Aurobindo’s own remarks

about this will bring forward the whole implication of the image. It shows, Sri Aurobindo writes, “*how this transcendental greatness contacts the psychic demand of human nature in its weakness and responds to it and acts upon it. That was the purpose of the new passage and it is difficult to accomplish it without bringing in a normal psychic instead of a transcendental tone. The image of the bird and the bosom is obviously not new and original, it images a common demand of the human heart and does it by employing a physical and emotional figure as to give it a vivid directness in its own kind. This passage was introduced because it brought in something in Savitri’s relation with the human world which seemed to me a necessary part of a complete psychological description of her.*”¹⁹

Savitri has come down to earth and become human; and her portrait, to be complete, has to depict both her human and spiritual aspects. She is a princess in a kingdom which has both the wonderful physical landscape and also a cultural and spiritual atmosphere. It is in these surroundings that she grows up, acquires a rich and varied culture which refines the sense of the spirit’s acuteness “*to hear the unheard and glimpse the invisible / And taught the soul to soar beyond things known.*” Her mind, strong like the heavenly eagle, takes her to spiritual heights:

*Leaving earth’s safety daring wings of Mind
Bore her above the trodden fields of thought
Crossing the mystic seas of the Beyond
To live on eagle heights near to the Sun.* (Ibid, p.360)

After the psychological this other bird-image gives her full spiritual description.

But the poet has not made Savitri an allegorical figure; she is a woman of flesh and blood, her joys and sorrows are human; her love has all the intensity of that of a woman in love.

She is beautiful and like a princess she has a royal bearing, and her physical beauty matches with her beautiful dress. Listen to how Sri Aurobindo describes her coming down from the chariot – again a lively bird-image:

*Descending with a soft and faltering haste;
Her many-hued raiment glistening in the light
Hovered a moment over the wind-stirred grass,
Mixed with a glimmer of her body’s ray
Like lovely plumage of a settling bird.* (Ibid, p.409)

This is indeed a Kalidasian image, rich in colour, light, controlled movement and stillness, and everything is subdued. Her many-hued dress is like the bright plumage of a bird which hovers a moment in the air before it settles down. We see Savitri as she remains still for a short moment before her foot touches the ground.

Love like beauty is the expression of delight. She is beautiful, but she meets her love, that for which she had left on an unknown journey. Her first meeting with Satyavan is also superbly expressed with a significant bird-image. When she saw Satyavan in the woods,

*...Trembling with the mystic shock her heart
Moved in her breast and cried out like a bird
Who hears his mate upon a neighbouring bough.* (Ibid, p.396)

The meeting is not just the so-called love at first sight; it is the recognition, as if the finding of the long lost love: she knows, as the bird does, hearing the other bird on a nearby branch, that she is his mate.

She has found her lover and companion, and she returns home to reveal her discovery to the parents.

When the king, her father, sees her, all aglow with love, he says:

*Reveal, O winged with light, whence thou hast flown
Hastening bright-hued, through the green tangled earth,
Thy body rhythmical with the spring-bird's call.* (Ibid, p.419)

And a little farther:

*Or roamst, O ruby-eyed and snow-winged dove,
Flitting through thickets of thy pure desires
In the unwounded beauty of thy soul.* (Ibid, p.420)

We shall later see Savitri's other nature, that of power and high determination, her spiritual eagle-nature. Here it is her dove-nature, innocent soul of love and joy, untainted by the harsh experience of life and death.

Farther the king tells Narad about Savitri's journey:

*Arisen into an air of flaming dawn
Like a bright bird in her lonely branch,
To find her own lord, since to her on earth
He came not yet, this sweetness wandered forth
Cleaving her way with the beat of her rapid wings.
Led by a distant call her vague swift flight
Threaded the summer morns and sunset lands.* (Ibid, pp.423-4)

This bird-image shows that Savitri has a nature of free-thinking; it is not her father who decides for her. She is still alone; she must look for a mate. She does not wait passively – there is no passivity in her nature – all is light and burning energy. There is in her the sweetness of the dove but that does not in any way diminish her enterprising nature and her strength and quickness of action. She is a woman who does not wait patiently for the lover to come and woo her. She undertakes the journey in the wide world; she intuitively knows – note the words — “*led by a distant call*” – that there is somewhere one whom she can love and who will love her. There is in all this an inner spiritual certitude but that does not make her only a vague symbol – she is a real woman with human feelings and sensations.

The eternal spirit in Savitri is divine, but she is also a woman, she has to work like a human being to show him the way to his immortality and divinisation. She must assume the whole human condition and accept all things human in her being:

*“...Accepting his darkness thou must bring to him light,
Accepting his sorrow thou must bring to him bliss.
In Matter's body find thy heaven-born soul.”* (Ibid, p.488)

In her great adventure of self-discovery she meets high soul-expressions which still are partial. Even the Madonna of light, Mother of joy and peace, Savitri's luminous soul-force, whose light makes the human soul draw near to God, is not her integral soul-

expression, because this form is yet incapable of transforming earth-nature. This idea too is expressed with a bird-image. Savitri says:

*But not by showering heaven's golden rain
Upon the intellect's hard and rocky soil
Can the trees of Paradise flower on earthly ground
And the Bird of Paradise sit upon life's boughs
And the winds of Paradise visit mortal air.* (Ibid, p.520)

The Bird of Paradise in the future transformed earth-nature is a strongly evocative symbol which at the sensuous level gives us a visual image. But the context makes it clear that it is more than an image only. What does it signify? Is it the descent of the Supramental on the earth-soil?

Savitri is human – she has the loving heart of a woman in love, she bears in her heart also the motherly love that is known to protect her children, she knows also human anxiety, sorrow and fear. When she holds Satyavan's lifeless body she feels the pangs of immense loss. But it is also at that moment of emotional intensity that her search for her soul culminates. The eternal spirit above is also the spirit secret in nature. The revelation comes in three steps:

1. the knowledge that one is not the mind:
*The veil is torn, the thinker is no more:
Only the spirit sees and all is known.* (Ibid, p.571)
2. the ascension of the spirit:
*The Spirit who had hidden in Nature soared
Out of his luminous nest within the worlds:* (Ibid, p.572)
3. and finally the descent of the spirit's force, the full realisation of Savitri's divinity.
*“A force descended trailing endless lights”; and
Her being's spaces quivered with its touch,
It covered her as with immortal wings;* (Ibid, p.573)

Again the bird-image expresses the idea of Savitri's total divinity. She is covered with the wings of the Spirit-bird. She is now fully conscious of her divinity; she can confidently face Death. And her luminous soul rises towards Satyavan's, which is in the grasp of Death. A strong bird-image brings this fearless ascension vividly before our senses:

*Then flaming from her body's nest alarmed
Her violent spirit soared at Satyavan.
Out mid the plunge of heaven-surrounded rocks
So in a terror and a wrath divine
From her eyrie streams against the ascending death,
Indignant at its crouching point of steel,
A fierce she-eagle threatened in her brood,
Borne on a rush of puissance and a cry,
Outwinging like a mass of golden fire.* (Ibid, p.578)

The eagle is the archetypal symbol of invincible strength and majesty. This powerful image shows Savitri's force and determination in her encounter with Death.

The body is the nest, the eyrie, where the spirit dwells. At the moment of terror, the puissant spirit must rise to fight against the great injustice. The human part is but the violent spirit – this is not the negative violence that wants to hurt and revenge, but a sure forcefulness that is determined to win against all adversities. The poet compares this spirit with the she-eagle. Why the feminine? The mother-bird that protects her loved brood with all her violence is here more felicitous than the father-bird that is distant. It highlights the love and fierce determination, the wrath to see that the loved ones are threatened by death. She who keeps vigil crouching on her steely claws flies out to fight impending death: the water rising towards the nest. For the World-Mother Savitri, to conquer death and to bring back Satyavan's soul is the certitude that her human children will one day become deathless and divine.

Her strength and determination are most eloquently exposed in her encounter with Death. The figure with whom she must measure her illumined strength is the lord of absolute negation. He claims to be the all-powerful creator of the world out of his void. How does a woman dare to question his immutable decree? It is of no avail. Yet in his heart he knows her greatness. So he says:

*Hast thou god-wings or feet that tread my stars,
Frail creature with the courage that aspires,
Forgetting thy bounds of thought, thy mortal role?* (Ibid, p.590)

Here too the ascending bird-image is implied – the bird that leaving the earth's gravitation rises to the sky to roam among the stars. Her spirit, she knows, and Death also knows, is no longer bound to the lower ignorant sphere, to the reasoning mind by the “*bounds of thought*”. But Death is not the God Savitri recognises, the God who “*has reared his temple in my thoughts*”, Savitri tells the dire Shadow, he who has “*made his sacred floor my human heart*” is the divine Will and divine Love. Love too is imaged as a bird:

*Love's golden wings have power to fan thy void:
The eyes of love gaze star-like through death's night,
The feet of love tread naked hardest worlds.* (Ibid, p.592)

Does this bird not remind us of the Blue Bird, the Bird of God, which rises from the mortal soil, and measures the worlds with its ruby eyes?

Death tries to dissuade Savitri to follow him. It is only a delusion that one can take the soul from the clutch of death. The true lucidity, true knowledge for the mortals, is to accept the ineluctable. It is the blindness of the heart to think that the dead can ever again return among the living. Death thus admonishes Savitri:

*And thou, go back alone to thy frail world:
Chastise thy heart with knowledge, unhood to see,
Thy nature raised into clear living heights,
The heaven-bird's view from unimagined peaks.* (Ibid, p.612)

In falconry the hawk kept hooded cannot see; it is as if blind. Only when the hood is removed can it see all around it. The implication of the image is that Savitri does not

see reality as it is; she lives in a dream. It is ignorance. To have real knowledge she must remove the hood and then she can see. She has reached the height of knowledge that the human mind is capable of, and she can see like the heaven-bird from its unimagined peaks – like some ancient seekers who from the spiritual heights to which they rose, saw the truth as an eternal Void. And that, Death insists, is the real truth. When one has renounced joy, hope and tears one can experience nirvana – “*a happy Nothingness and wordless Calm*”.

But Savitri's vision is the undying creative vision of Love:

*My love is not a hunger of the heart,
My love is not a craving of the flesh;
It came to me from God, to God returns.* (Ibid, p.612)

This divine love gives her the strength to face the darkness. The world Death depicts is a shadow-world. Savitri knows that love is greater than death. Man's seeking does not end in this annihilation. But Death keeps hidden the final secret. He still tries to dissuade Savitri by repeating that love is only an illusion, “*a bright hallucination*” of her thoughts that make love the eternal truth. These thoughts are nothing but the passionate outpouring of the heart:

*Thou sendest eagle-poised to meet the sun
Words winged with the red splendour of thy heart.* (Ibid, p.615)

“*Eagle-poised*” – Death knows her determination, her strength and steadfastness. The eagle-image reminds us of Tennyson's depiction of the eagle:

*He clasps the crag with hooked hands:
Close to the sun in lonely lands,
Ringed with the azure world, he stands.* (The Eagle)

Indeed, Savitri is poised alone and steadfast in the vast occult space. Her winged words rise towards the sun – the luminous truth of existence. Death knows the power of truth and will in those words, but he still is bent on perpetuating his reign – he still keeps his mask and does not reveal his real essence. All aspiring souls have to pass through ordeals – Nachiketas, Gautama and Jesus – before they can reach their cherished destination.

Here the stake is immense – the vast riches of worlds that yet lie hidden behind the barrier erected by death will be revealed. Death argues with the premises of the ancient spirituality: love is not the wisdom, “*knowledge dwells not in the passionate heart;/ The heart's words fall back unheard from Wisdom's throne.*” But the passion in Savitri's heart is not the blind passion, not the outburst of uncontrollable desire and unregenerate emotions. Her winged words that rise towards the sun of wisdom will surely not fall back, unheard.

Farther, in the same speech, Death uses an image that has associations with the bird – wings, flight, ascension — but which is to show that human wisdom and human love are not really the strong-winged eagle. Their wings are not real:

*If they aspire beyond earth's dullard air,
Arriving sunwards with frail waxen wings
How high could reach that forced unnatural flight?* (Ibid, p.619)

The reference, as one at once perceives, is to the Greek myth of Daedalus and Icarus. To escape from the labyrinth Daedalus made wings with feathers and fixed them with wax to himself and his son Icarus. They flew out. Daedalus warned Icarus not to fly too high, for then the sun's heat would melt the wax. But the boy disregarded his father's admonition and rose towards the sun, higher and higher and the wax melted and he fell in the sea and drowned.

Such, Death says, is the fate of human wisdom and love. On earth there can be no divine wisdom, no divine love. These are truths of heaven and only in heaven can they live.

But Savitri's love is not a thing of the earth. The divine Mother had told Aswapathy that in his daughter's body would live immortal Love. Again there is here a felicitous bird-image:

*And in her body as on his homing tree
Immortal Love shall beat his glorious wings.* (Ibid, p.346)

This love is not uncontrolled passion; this has the effective divine wisdom and will to conquer death and bring down the treasures of the hidden supernal worlds to mankind. Man has seen, through the Mind's windows, the Unknown, and "looked on Truth's veil-less face". And

*He stands awake in Supernature's light
And sees a glory of arisen wings
And sees the vast descending might of God.* (Ibid, p.623)

And farther, Savitri says:

*As knowledge grows Light flames up from within:
It is a shining warrior in the mind,
An eagle of dreams in the divining heart,* (Ibid, p.626)

This eagle of dreams is not an unsubstantial and unreal figure seen in sleep, but the force to realise the high ideal – a real idea – seen by the divining heart.

Death tries with all his cunning, sophistry and scriptural allusions to persuade her not to pursue her "impossible" dream; he gives her boons, even the promise that when she goes back to earth, she with a new "husband dear and true" will beget beautiful daughters and heroic sons. But no boon, no promise can make her swerve from her destined love. Satyavan and Savitri are not an ordinary couple: she is "the Woman..., the force of God" and he "the Eternal's delegate soul in man".

She knows; her mind is freed from "twilight thoughts" and to her the secrets of the gods "are plain". All struggles will lead to a vast victory, what was imperfect will be raised to heavenly perfection:

The heavens accept our broken flights at last. (Ibid, p.638)

Her thoughts had lost the mist of the twilight; she is fully conscious of her strength:

*... in the glittering mist
A deepening half-light fled with pearly wings
As if to reach some far ideal Morn.* (Ibid, p.639)

There was no haze in her mind. With the vanishing twilight

*Outlined her thoughts flew through the gleaming haze
Mingling bright-pinioned with its lights and veils* (Ibid, p.639)

Her thoughts are like bright-pinioned birds flying toward the glorious morning. She is firm in her resolve. It is love that leads her, gives her strength and wisdom.

What is the love that dares Death and ineluctable fate? It is the incarnation of the bliss of Brahman that has created the soul and resides in the awakened soul as love. In the world, the All-Wonderful pervades all things. He is ever present. And as the world wakes at dawn he appears as a singing bird:

He wakes at dawn and calls from every bough, (Ibid, p.630)

And in Savitri's heart this singing creative delight is expressed as undying and all-conquering love. This immortal bliss is again described as a heaven-bird.

*In the vast golden laughter of Truth's sun
Like a great heaven-bird on a motionless sea
Is poised her winged ardour of creative joy
On the still deep of the Eternal's peace.* (Ibid, p.632)

But Love's victory is yet uncertain. Death has still Satyavan's soul. But Savitri's soul, brilliant, powerful, a vast heaven-bird, follows him:

*A heaven-bird upon jewelled wings of wind
Borne like a coloured and embosomed fire,
By spirits carried in a pearl-hued cave,
On through the enchanted dimness moved her soul.* (Ibid, p.640)

She follows Death, resolutely, conscious of the force of her love. But Death is yet unrelenting. He has the world's past experience of man's failure and argues that what has never been will never be: Nature follows an immutable order, and "where Nature changes not, man cannot change". Man is his mind; he, Death asserts, cannot soar beyond thought. The incapacity of soaring is expressed with a bird-image:

*He sees but cannot mount to his greater heavens;
Even winged, he sinks back to his native soil.
He is a captive in his net of mind*

And beats soul-wings against the walls of life. (Ibid, p.644)

Man's soul, Death says, is caught in mind's net; he is not free to fly – even if he does, his weak wings or his waxen wings cannot make him rise above his mortality. Who is the fowler that has put the net? We can perhaps deduce that Death is the fowler who keeps the human souls in the mental net.

Savitri revolts against the so-called ineluctable law of nature, against Death, the dark fowler. She has flung aside all ancient rules and ancient realisations: if she had followed the path of known knowledge she could be like the gods, "omniscient, calm":

*But the violent and passionate heart forbids.
It is the storm bird of an anarch Power
That would upheave the world and tear from it
The undecipherable scroll of Fate,
Death's rule and Law and the unknowable Will.* (Ibid, p.650)

We can easily grasp that this bird-image reveals Savitri's nature. She has come

down to break the ancient order – for Death this is to create anarchy, for his veiled vision cannot foresee the new Order: that would be his downfall – his reign would come to an end.

Death still persists: he argues that there are two absolute opposites, eternal Yes and eternal No, *sat* and *asat*, and the twain shall never meet. This opposition is concretised in a bird-image:

*Two powers real but to each other untrue,
The white head and black tail of the mystic drake,
The swift and the lame foot, wing strong, wing broken,
Sustaining the body of the uncertain world,
A great surreal dragon in the skies.*

(Ibid, p.655)

The image seems to imply that there is perhaps the One only – one drake, but the white head and the black tail, the swift foot and the lame one, the strong wing and the broken wing, will forever remain unchanged. Truth will never inhabit the material nature. “*Truth has no home in earth’s irrational breast*”. And then Death defies Savitri to prove him wrong: “... *if she dwells within thy mortal heart, / Show me the body of the living Truth.*” Only if she can then will he accept defeat and give back Satyavan’s soul.

Savitri meets the challenge; her divine self comes to the front and she declares the truth: the great truth revealed to the ancient seers, that “*all this indeed is Brahman*”, the great affirmation and the great negation, the One and the Many, is the eternal Same, but for the purpose of creation – self-deployment in the universe – the Absolute split himself into two poles of existence: “*Two contraries needed for his great World-task, / Two poles whose currents wake the immense World-Force*”. But the truth is one. And Savitri emphasises this oneness with a bird-image:

*In the stupendous secrecy of his Self
Above the world brooding with equal wings,
He is both in one, beginningless, without end:
Transcending both, he enters the Absolute.*

(Ibid, p.657)

The image counters the drake-image that Death had put forward. It is only the ignorant human mind that sees the contraries; in the true vision to which mind will rise one day, the picture is different: the bird does not have one strong wing and one broken wing: in the Self the wings are equal. But the supreme truth is yet unthinkable by the mind, inexpressible by speech. ‘*If*’, Savitri tells Death, “*thou couldst touch the Truth supreme, / Thou wouldst grow suddenly wise and cease to be.*”

But Death still is unconvinced. If Truth transcends the world who can build the bridge to join that Truth to the phenomenal world that appears as a dream, who can make truth leave the eternal felicity and suffer pain – “*to tread the harsh globe with wounded feet*”. Have you, Savitri, that strength?

*Is thine that strength, O beauty of mortal limbs,
O soul who flutterest to escape my net?*

(Ibid p.663)

Savitri has assumed a mortal’s fate. Her soul is caught in the terrible net of the fowler Death. How can she release herself? “...*where is thy strength to conquer Time and Death?*” If you have the power, reveal it to me and I will give back Satyavan’s soul. And Savitri reveals her secret Self and the dire Shadow disappears into the Void.

“... *there is no incalculable Fate*”, Sri Aurobindo writes elsewhere, “*no blind, cruel and ineluctable Necessity against which the wings of the soul must dash themselves in vain as if it were a bird snared by a monstrous Fowler in a dim-lit and fantastic cage.*”²⁰ This image which he uses in this prose writing, occurs, we have seen, powerfully also in the epic. Savitri, the woman-in-love, but also the divine soul incarnate, has made Fate vanish so that Satyavan, the soul of the world, may one day realise immortality and freedom on earth.

The drama is not complete yet. The last act still has to be enacted. Savitri’s heart’s desire cannot yet be fulfilled. She yet does not have the assurance that the work for which the World-Mother has come down will be done. A “*translucent wall*” yet keeps the two lives apart.

Night had gone. The curtain now rises on a vast new scene: “*God’s everlasting day surrounded her*”. And Savitri sees the heavens of endless light and immutable felicity, “*the seven immortal earths*”, “*Homes of the blest released from death and sleep*”. Wonderfully bright and happy heavens where eternal beauty roamed, and

*Songs thrilled of birds upon unfading boughs
The colours of whose plumage had been caught
From the rainbow of imagination’s wings.*

(Ibid 674)

Within the luscious description this bird-image reveals the glory of immortal harmonies and wonder of colours that the heavenly landscape holds.

Her sight soars – we may here be reminded of “*the lark ascending*” – towards higher and ever higher heavens:

*“Realm upon realm received her soaring view.”
Into those heights her spirit went floating up
Like an upsoaring bird who mounts unseen
Voicing to the ascent his throbbing heart
Of melody till a pause of closing wings
Comes quivering in his last contended cry
And he is silent with his soul discharged,
Delivered of his heart’s burden of delight.
Experience mounted on joy’s coloured breast
To inaccessible spheres in spiral flight.*

(Ibid, p.676)

(Ibid, p.678)

The potent bird-image makes the reader realise Savitri’s ascent passing the tiered heavens, her heart athrob with melody, like the ascending lark. And finally she reaches the place where the two opposites are reconciled. She is “*drowned in a sea of splendour and bliss.*” Where did this come from? She turns and sees the Being who was the Source of this beauty and glory, and she

*... knew him for the same who snares our lives
Captured in his terrifying pitiless net,*

(Ibid, p.678)

He is the same as Death the Fowler, yet not the same, for he was the luminous transfiguration of Death. The dark tail of the mystic drake, cleansed of its darkness, and the bright head were reconciled into one formidable brightness.

And that Spirit put before Savitri two options. The first was that she could take Satyavan and return to earth and live in the division that still for a very long time will keep the two eternal lovers, Heaven and Earth, apart, dreaming of each other but yet unable to meet. They can, for themselves make the division a “*delightful means / Of happy oneness rapturously enhanced*”. And on earth they can serve men to prepare for the “*celestial fate*”, for man to rise to Heaven.

But there is a second option, a very alluring one. They need not get involved in the human fate. She may now renounce the tie that binds her to earth and mankind, and abandoning the physical body “*Ascend, O soul, into thy blissful home*”.

Such was the new lure. She has successfully repelled Death’s temptation, now she is confronted with the “*ensnaring voice*” that tempts her with the far lure of heaven. But she rejects this option too, “*I climb not to thy everlasting Day*.” Her aim is to make earth divine, transform the human life to life divine.

The Godhead asks her with a smile: “*How shall earth-nature and man’s nature rise / To the celestial levels, yet earth abide?*” It is true that earth has the passing glimpses of the wonders of the Absolute, her heart aspires to truth-realizations, but, he with a bird-image tries to convince Savitri that these are earth’s unattainable dreams:

*In her heart there move celestial seekings soft
And beautiful like fluttering wings of birds,
Visions of joy that she can never win
Traverse the fading mirror of her dreams.* (Ibid, p.688)

But the Spirit-bird that is Savitri is not weak. She can rise to the eternal bliss:

*Out of the fruitless yearning of earth’s life,
Out of her feeble unconvincing dream,
Recovering wings that cross infinity
Pass back into the Power from which thou cam’st.
To that thou canst uplift thy formless flight,* (Ibid, p.691)

and live in the eternal bliss receiving Satyavan in her vastness and losing herself into infinite Satyavan.

No promise of celestial bliss can swerve her from her mission. “*To bring God down to the world on earth we came*”, she says, “*To change the earthly life to life divine*.”

Wonderful allurements come from the godhead, she remains unswerving. And finally the wonderful promise comes: “*O Sun-Word, thou shall raise the earth-soul to Light / And bring down God into the lives of men...*” And she may now go down to earth taking Satyavan’s soul. Her earthward descent is described with a tender image: bird held in the satisfied hands of a child:

*Amidst the headlong rapture of her fall
Held like a bird in a child’s satisfied hands,
In an enamoured grasp her spirit strove
Admitting no release till Time should end,* (Ibid, p.711)

This headlong downward fall could remind us of the plunge of the eagle, although the poet does not mention the bird. Earlier, we have seen, Savitri’s violent spirit had soared at Satyavan like an eagle. Now she, with Satyavan reclaimed from Death’s clutch,

falls towards the earth. The eagle, as described by Tennyson falls in the same way:

*The wrinkled sea beneath him crawls;
He watches from his mountain walls,
And like a thunderbolt he falls.*

And the lovers return to the earth. She is once more human, “*earth’s Savitri / Yet felt in her illimitable change*.”

The Flight of Thought and Life

In man’s spiritual ascension, in the beginning, the spirit works from behind the veil. Only after the psychic transformation does the psychic being come to the front and become the leader of our adventure. However, the two forces that are the light and force in man are thought and life. Thought, the faculty of mental consciousness, tries to explore the truth of existence; and its discoveries are reflected in life and make life evolve accordingly. In the spiritual ascension there is the flight of these two basic principles. Some bird-images in the epic make this flight concretely present to the reader’s understanding.

What is thought? It is not the product of the human mind: it “transcends the circles of moral mind.” In its true figure

*It moves eternal in the spirit’s field,
A runner towards the far spiritual light,
A child and servant of the spirit’s force.* (Ibid, p.260)

Thought is a runner, but it can also be said that it is a flyer. In the poem *Thought the Paraclete* ²¹, Sri Aurobindo has made it fly ever upwards until it loses itself into the Infinite. In a letter he comments on it: “*As thought rises in the scale, it ceases to be intellectual, becomes illumined, then intuitive, then overmental and finally disappears seeking the last Beyond*.”²²

Thought is the expressive power of the Mind, but not just that of the human mind, the intellect and its logic. The thinking human being is still bound to murky animal propensities, yet on the wings of the thought-bird he can rise towards the heaven.

He wallows in mud, yet heavenward soars in thought; (Ibid, p.659)

The mind too has higher statuses beyond.²³ The ascending thought crosses one by one these higher mental regions of which we find a general scheme in Sri Aurobindo’s above letter: the illumined, the intuitive and the overmental. Thought’s wings take the mind to higher and inner worlds:

*Adventuring into infinite mind-space
He unfolds his wings of thought in inner air,* (Ibid, p.479)

When in the process of his spiritual ascension man leaves behind the “*outward mind*”, greater thoughts plunge down like eagles from above, and hidden thoughts rise up from subliminal depths like fishes:

*Thoughts leaped down from a superconscious field
Like eagles swooping from a viewless peak,
Thoughts gleamed up from the screened subliminal depths
Like golden fishes from a hidden sea.* (Ibid, p.541)

Thought is the expression of consciousness in nature, from the inconscient where
A leaden Nescience weighs the wings of Thought, (Ibid 196)
 to the superconscience that is not merged in the all-negating Absolute. Thought's flight is "*a winging of conscious spirit*". When Savitri stands at the threshold of the absolute nirvanic silence, she experiences thoughts which are "*children of cosmic nature from a far world*":

Out of some far expanse they seemed to come

As if carried on vast wings like large white sails, (Ibid, p.544)

The adventure of human consciousness is most fully described in Aswapathy's yoga and his world-travel through the occult and spiritual ranges. As his consciousness and vision grow, they take "*an ampler sweep, a loftier flight*". (Ibid, p.31) And he gradually receives "*strange riches*". Among those riches from "*the all-powerful Mystery above*":

... stooped the eagles of Omniscience. (Ibid, p.37)

Are not these eagles the thoughts that come down from the superconscience?

The human thoughts are not exudations of the brain. Our thoughts come to the brain from some subtler world. In Aswapathy's experience they are seen to descend from a higher world; they are not denizens of the material world. There is a world of subtle matter through the veil of which "*heaven's meanings*" descend. In the process of evolution, in this world where God, the eternal Child, enacts his play (*lilā*) these thoughts are the early utterances.

The embodiments of his outwinging thoughts

Laved in a bright everlasting wonder's tints

And lulled by whispers of that lucid air

Take dream-hued rest like birds on timeless trees

Before they dive to float on earth-time's sea. (Ibid, p.104)

This familiar image of seabirds that dive down and float on the waves brings home vividly the idea that thoughts are not born in the cerebral mechanism but come from the spiritual heights and pervade the earthly atmosphere: such is indeed the experience that men and women who fix their attention in meditation to silence the mind have; they see that thoughts enter the brain from outside. When one arrives at concentrating one's attention and reject the incoming thoughts one attains the mental silence.²⁴

The yogi may silence the mind and reach the absolute Silence, *nirvāṇa*. But return to the silence is not the goal of Brahman's self-deployment in the world and as the world. The goal is the realisation of the supreme knowledge, force and joy in earth-life. And to achieve that Thought's ascension is a necessary step. But thought here is normally not capable of this endeavour, because

A leaden Nescience weighs the wings of Thought. (Ibid, p.196)

All the ideas and efforts of the mind have not been able to free Thought. Great thinkers have raised the mental thought to its utmost height and have made theories that would solve all problems of ill by

...carrying thought in its ultimate zenith flight

And trumpeting supreme discovery; (Ibid, p.198)

but everything has proved vain. To realise the Spirit's evolutionary aim Thought has to be released so that it can soar to higher planes: Thought must become "*the great-winged wanderer paraclete*".

But as it is, in the life of mortal man, thought is yet chained to desires, interests, hatred and violence; it serves even the purpose of evil-doers. When evil reigns thought's wings are not bird-wings but insect-wings. In the occult world of Night, Aswapathy sees:

The air was packed with longings brute and fierce;

Crowding and stinging in a monstrous swarm

Pressed with a noxious hum into his mind

Thoughts that could poison Nature's heavenliest breath, (Ibid, p.214)

In evil's "*grim totalitarian reign*" demagogues

...climbed in speech upon high wings of thought

But harboured all that is subhuman, vile

And lower than the lowest reptile's crawl. (Ibid, p.215)

Thoughts here seem to have wings – demagogues use arguments and logic that to the unsuspecting seem to fly on high wings. Alas, these wings are not those that can lift mankind to love and freedom, to knowledge and harmony.

Our human mind is not everywhere and at all times equally conscious; there are gradations which the traveller of the occult worlds passes through. There is first the little mind where limited knowledge is recognised as final and absolute. At its top he sees the possibility of a greater mind, yet it was not pure: it is "*a prototypal deft Intelligence*" that toils

Half-poised on equal wings of thought and doubt (Ibid, p.241)

The wings of the thought-bird are equal, but are they able to lift the Intelligence to higher realms of knowledge? The image suggests that the thought-wing that could rise higher becomes ineffective by the weight of doubt that pulls the bird downward. The intelligence can only flutter uncertainly without reaching any destination.

The little mind with some uncertain glimmer of light at the top is our human mind. Thought does not cease here, it "*transcends the circles of mortal mind, / It is greater than its earthly instrument.*" Above there is a greater mind where Thought is fraught with the creative life-force that can uplift and transform. This is the "*Life-Thought*":

A power to uplift the laggard world,

Imperious rode a huge high-winged Life-Thought

Unwont to tread the firm unchanging soil:

Accustomed to a blue infinity,

It planed in sunlit sky and starlit air; (Ibid, p.258)

Here is a magnificent image of a huge bird that is accustomed to fly high in the air and glide there spreading its wide wings. One could perhaps think of the albatross.²⁵

And finally above the high ranges of the Mind Thought ceases, the *wanderer paraclete* uses itself in the Absolute: "*Self was left, lone, limitless, nude, immune.*" (*Thought the Paraclete*). In the epic this is described as the hushed air in which thought's "*winging cry*" ceases:

*On sorrowless heights no winging cry disturbs,
Pure and untouched above this mortal play
Is spread the spirit's hushed immobile air.* (Ibid, p.320)

The Silence is not the ultimate goal. Beyond is the World-Mother, the great creatrix of a divine world. Aswapathy receives the boon that this Mother-force will incarnate to make the earth divine; in her, along with all might and greatness, there will manifest the death-conquering love.

With the divine assurance the king returns to earth. His thoughts have undergone a sea-change:

*Once more he moved amid material scenes,
Lifted by intimations from the heights
And in the pause of the building brain
Touched by the thoughts that skim the fathomless surge
Of Nature and wing back to hidden shores.* (Ibid, p.347)

When the brain is still, he sees the thoughts – heavenly birds – that float on the deep ocean of nature and fly back to the far, luminous shores.

With the ascension of thought the seeker reaches the sovereign knowledge; he attains his spiritual goal. But for the fulfilment of evolution's goal life has also to rise. This is the second power that is given to mankind for divinising the earthly existence.

In the poem *Life* Sri Aurobindo writes:

*Mystic, Miracle, daughter of Delight,
Life, thou ecstasy
Let the radius of thy flight
Be eternity.*²⁶

Life is winged. She too comes from the Infinite but when she comes down to the material world, she loses her wings. But that is not her destiny; she must rise to higher levels of expression and gradually evolve to divine life.

In the world of subtle matter although she is not self-lost as in the gross, yet her flight is curtailed: she is bound to “*the small happiness of body's act*” and is a force assigned to the physical mind. She is “*forgetful of the heights*”.

*She had no wings for wide and dangerous flight,
She faced no peril of sky or of abyss,
She knew no vistas and no mighty dreams,
No yearning for her lost infinitudes.* (Ibid, pp.114-15)

Her essential nature is to fly to the heights: She is born of the divine delight and the range of her flight is boundless.

Behind the bounded and fallen life there is the life of eternal glory. There is life's true nature of bliss revealed. Even life's opposites were “*lovers or natural friends*”; their “*life was a happy laughter on their wings*”, and

The cry of the Birds of Wonder called from the skies (Ibid, p.124)

Are not the birds of wonder life itself which is a “*mystic Miracle*”? But life that is in the mortal is fallen; a “*mystic mark of death and pain*” hides her true nature.

*Interned now in the slow and suffering years
Sojourns the winged and wonderful wayfarer* (Ibid, p.130)

In material nature life is interned but life in its higher glory expresses its joys in a nature evolved to a greater truth. Life there has hopes that are vaster and more splendid, although to the veiled human sight they lie hidden. But Aswapathy's visionary eyes see them:

*He glimpsed the hidden wings of her songster hopes,
A glimmer of blue and gold and scarlet fire.* (Ibid, p.190)

Hopes are often glimmering shadows to which defeated and desperate men and women cling to be able to go on living. But these hopes in the greater life are not illusions; they sing joyfully like songster birds; their bright-hued glimmer is that of a burning fire that has light and force.

And from the high peaks to which life can rise without merging in her original source, the absolute Silence, Aswapathy

*... saw her loose into Infinity
Her hooded eagles of significance,
Messengers of Thought to the Unknowable.* (Ibid, p.191)

Life in Nature cannot know the unknowable Absolute. She sends the Thoughts as messengers to that Absolute, but they too are hooded – they are like the falconer's hunting eagle whom the falconer unhoods before he lets it fly to hunt in the sky – but here they are still without the real vision, the sense that we get from the Infinite is therefore only an intimation.

An animal life with a thinking brain is not the end of evolution: Sri Aurobindo holds before us the possibility of a farther evolution when life will “*ride on the spirit's wing*”:

*Ascending from the soil where creep our days,
Earth's consciousness may marry with the Sun,
Our mortal life ride on the spirit's wings,* (Ibid, p.256)

The mortal life, we have seen earlier, has no wings. But it too can ride on the spirit's wing; and as it rises higher, when it gets transmuted to the greater life, it will have strong wings. Even in its fallen state there is “*a mighty life-self*” that supports it “*with its inner power*”. But one day

It can graft upon our crawl two puissant wings. (Ibid, p.485)

Our life that is “*a marvel missed, an art gone wry*” may fly today towards heaven, but does not have the power to go in:

Its heavenward flights reach closed and keyless gates, (Ibid, p.439)

When the spirit and the vast life-self make it powerful, lift it up or graft puissant wings, in the course of evolution it will become divine. This is seen by Aswapathy:

*And at the unimaginable end
Of the huge riddle of created things
Appeared the far-seen Godhead of the whole,
His feet firm-based on Life's stupendous wings,* (Ibid, p. 307)

Conclusion

One of the suggestions of the bird-image is that of flight and especially the flight to higher regions. In *Savitri* there are, however, other suggestive uses of the image. We shall only give a few examples to show its richness.

Descriptive images are intensely just and striking, sometimes visual, sometimes auditive. For example:

King-fisher flashing to a darkling pool; (Ibid, p.405)

or the description of the rains after the summer's heat:

*Rain-tide burst in upon torn wings of heat,
Startled with lightnings air's unquiet drowse,
Lashed with life-giving streams the torpid soil,
Overcast with flare and sound and storm-winged dark* (Ibid, p.349)

or the evocation of birds in the forest:

*The white crane stood, a vivid motionless streak,
Peacock and parrot jewelled soil and tree,
The dove's soft moan enriched the enamoured air
And fire-winged wild-drakes swam in silvery pools.* (Ibid, p.390)

These are vivid descriptions but they are more than just that. The last one, for example, is also a symbol because it describes the destined meeting place of Savitri and Satyavan; it evokes the perfect scene where the soul can meet its eternal mate – a place of beauty. In that woodland hearing too is touched by bird's songs:

And chant of the magic singers on the boughs (Ibid, p.393)

or:

The branches haunted by the wild bird's call. (Ibid, p.394)

The metaphorical images abound and are rich in variety. Abstract things become concrete: Feeling is “a heaven-bird poised on dreaming wings” (Ibid, p.264); love has “peacock wings” (Ibid, p.11), and joy too becomes a bird:

*And overhead a blue-winged ecstasy
Fluttered from bough to bough with high-pitched call.* (Ibid, p.715)

Joy is also “peacock-plumaged” (Ibid, p.63). Expectation is like a huge bird: in the destined meeting-place “expectation beat wide sudden wings”. (Ibid, p.389)

Imagination is a bird: it...

*Outspread luxuriantly in golden air
Truth's iris-coloured wings of fantasy,
Or sang to the intuitive heart of joy
Wonder's dream-notes that bring the Real close.* (Ibid, p.327)

and elsewhere,

Birds like pale-bosomed imaginations flew. (Ibid, p.602)

A hymn is like a heron or a flamingo:

*Answer to that inarticulate questioning,
There stooped with lightning neck and thunder's wings
A radiant hymn to the Inexpressible* (Ibid, p.30)

And again:

The wide-winged hymn of a great priestly wind. (Ibid, p.4)

In the poem “*Ascent*”²⁷ Sri Aurobindo visualises the Spirit as the swan:

Swan of the supreme and spaceless ether wandering winged through the universe,

and in the Veda the swan is the symbol of the ascending soul. “*The soul of man*”, Sri Aurobindo writes, “soars as the Bird, the Hansa, past the shining firmaments of physical and mental consciousness, climbs as the traveller and fighter beyond earth of body and heaven and mind by the ascending path of the Truth to find this Godhead waiting for us, leaning down to us from the secrecy of the highest supreme where it is seated in the triple divine Principle and the source of Beatitude”.²⁸ In *Savitri*'s ascension her spirit rises like a bird.

In other places too the image is used:

The Spirit rises mightier by defeat;

Its godlike wings grow wider with each fall. (Ibid, p.458)

and the spirit that is greater than thought:

*Its feet are steadied upon finite things,
Its wings can dare to cross the Infinite.* (Ibid, p.260)

Here we have different stages of the evolving spirit, but it never loses its capacity to rise higher. Finally it is the immortal Spirit, the great Swan: And the soul-swan flies in the brightness:

A sun-frank winging of the soul to bliss, (Ibid, p.127)

These are some of the bird-images which concretely bring before our understanding vision truths that are to the mind often abstract. But these images do not exhaust the vast metaphorical range of the epic. There are often various images put together in order to bring home with great clarity and suggestiveness the subtle nuances of the mystic-spiritual realities. The study of one image cannot reveal the whole implication. “*Rapid transitions*”, Sri Aurobindo writes, “from one image to another are a constant feature in *Savitri* as in most mystic poetry.”²⁹ To get a more comprehensive understanding of the whole other images also have to be explored. We can only hope that more studies will be done so that the significance of the vast occult spiritual adventure becomes clearer to our mental understanding. The reader may intuitively plunge in the epic and his spirit be enriched by the mantric power of its poetry, but I think, we should not refuse the effort of the mind to penetrate into its many-textured significance.

Notes and references

The quotations from the works of Sri Aurobindo are according to the Sri Aurobindo Birth Centenary Library (SABCL), Pondicherry 1972.

The number in brackets after a quotation from *Savitri* (Vols. 28-29) is the page number.

1 *The Future Poetry*, SABCL, Vol. 9, p.209

2 Seamus Heaney, *Preoccupations. Selected Prose 1968-1978*, London, 1980, p.47

3 *Letters on Poetry, Literature and Art*, SABCL, Vol. 9, p.333

- 4 *The Future Poetry*, SABCL, p.24
- 5 *Ibid.* p.6
- 6 Here the formal distinction between the metaphor and the simile is overlooked.
- 7 For a technical discussion of the subject see: Jean-Michel Adam, *Linguistique et discours littéraire. Théorie et pratique des textes*, Paris, 1976, pp.143-146
- 8 Goethe, *Werke*. Hamburger Ausgabe, Vol. 12, pp.470-471
- 9 *Letters on Yoga*, SABCL, Vol. 22, pp.179-180
- 10 *Letters on "Savitri"*, SABCL, Vol. 29, pp.731-2
- 11 *The Future Poetry*, op. cit, p.114
- 12 *The Life Divine*, SABCL, Vols. 18-19, pp.911-912
- 13 *Savitri*, SABCL, Vols. 28-29, p.35
- 14 *Letters on Poetry, Literature and Art*, op.cit, vol. 9, p.528
- 15 *The Future Poetry*, op.cit, p.164
- 16 *Letters on Poetry, Literature and Art*, op.cit, p.360
- 17 *Letters on "Savitri"*, op.cit, p.765
- 18 *Letters on Poetry, Literature and Art*, op.cit, p.531
- 19 *Letters on "Savitri"*, op.cit, p.762
- 20 *All-Will and Free-Will*, SABCL, Vol 16, p.282
- 21 *Collected Poems*, SABCL, Vol. 5, p.582
- 22 *Letters on Yoga*, SABCL, Vol. 24, p.1155
- 23 *Savitri*, op.cit, pp.659 ff.
- 24 See *On Himself*, SABCL, Vol. 26, p. 82, Sri Aurobindo speaks of his own experience about the matter.
- 25 See, Charles Baudelaire, *L'albatros*, king of the blue, but clumsy on the ground.
- 26 *Collected Poems*, op.cit, p.95
- 27 *Collected Poems*, op.cit, pp.567-8
- 28 *Hymns to the Mystic Fire*, SABCL, Vol.11, p.22
- 29 *Letters on "Savitri"*, op.cit, p. 733

The Everlasting Yes *Savitri*, the Epic of Affirmation

Richard Hartz

Much of the world's great literature dwells on the tragic aspect of human experience. Normally we try to keep our contact with this unhappy side of existence to a minimum. Yet it has always attracted poets, dramatists, novelists and their audiences. In Western culture, the choice of a tragic theme has often been regarded as a sign of seriousness of purpose, as if tales of fate, suffering and death revealed the true nature of things in a way that is missed by a more optimistic use of the imagination. Most critics would agree that Aeschylus sounded depths unknown to Aristophanes, and that Shakespeare's genius expressed itself more powerfully in *Macbeth* than in *Much Ado about Nothing*. In India a supposedly pessimistic worldview produced no comparable tradition of tragic drama, but we find tragedy in works as central to the culture as the Ramayana and the Mahabharata.

Thinkers everywhere have pondered over the appeal of tragedy. Why should the presentation of catastrophic events be conducive to the highest art? Various answers were given in ancient times, from Aristotle's theory of *katharsis* to the *rasa* concept of Sanskrit poetics. More recently, Schopenhauer reflected his Vedantic and Buddhist affinities when he wrote: "What gives to everything tragic . . . the characteristic tendency to the sublime, is the dawning of the knowledge that the world and life can afford us no true satisfaction, and are therefore not worth our attachment to them."¹ Nietzsche, deeply influenced by Schopenhauer though he rejected his asceticism, saw tragedy as pointing "to the eternity of true being surviving every phenomenal change"² and as "tending toward the shattering of the individual and his fusion with the original Oneness".³ Keenly aware of the "tragedy at the heart of things, . . . the contrariety at the centre of the universe",⁴ Nietzsche found the Dionysian key to the psychology of tragic literature in the act of "saying Yes to life even in its strangest and hardest problems, the will to life rejoicing over its own inexhaustibility even in the very sacrifice of its highest types".⁵

In India, from the global vantage point of the early twentieth century, Sri Aurobindo drew on several past views, Eastern and Western, in order to explain "why the poet is able to transmute pain and sorrow and the most tragic and terrible and ugly things into forms of poetic beauty".⁶ Greek and Indian aesthetics, Vedantic philosophy and Nietzschean affirmation meet in Sri Aurobindo's account of the secret of poetry:

The mental and vital interest, pleasure, pain of thought, life, action is not the source of poetic delight and beauty and can be turned into that deeper thing only when they have sunk into the soul and been transmuted in the soul's radiant memory into spiritual experience,— that perhaps was what the Greeks meant when they made Mnemosyne the eternal mother of the muses; the passions can only change into poetic matter when they have been spiritualised in the same bright sources and have undergone the purification, the *katharsis*, spoken of by the Greek critic. . . .

The ancient Indian critics defined the essence of poetry as *rasa* and by that word they meant a concentrated taste, a spiritual essence of emotion, an essential aesthesis, the soul's pleasure in the pure and perfect sources of feeling. The memory of the soul that takes in, broods over and transmutes the mind's thought, feeling and experience, is . . . only a common way by which we get at something that stands behind, the spiritual being in us which has the secret of the universal delight and the eternal beauty of existence.⁷

Tragic Fate in *Ilion* and *Savitri*

When this passage in *The Future Poetry* was published in 1920, Sri Aurobindo had been working for a number of years on the two epics, *Ilion* and *Savitri*, which are his most substantial contributions to the poetry of the English language. In both epics he came to grips with the tragic dimension of life, collective or personal, represented in one case by the fall of Troy and in the other by the death of Satyavan. But the sense of the inescapability of fate that overshadows *Ilion* is overcome in *Savitri*.

In *Ilion*, Sri Aurobindo depicts life with all its vicissitudes as a divine Lila or cosmic game in which something in us takes an irrepressible delight. Listen, for example, to Helen's words to Paris:

“Yes, it is good,” she cried, “what the gods do and actions of mortals;
Good is this play of the world; it is good, the joy and the torture. . . .
Never can Death undo what life has done for us, Paris.
Nor, whatsoever betide, can the hour be unliv'd of our rapture.
This too is good that nations should meet in the shock of the battle,
Heroes be slain and a theme be made for the songs of the poets,
Songs that shall thrill with the name of Helen, the beauty of Paris.
Well is this also that empires should fall for the eyes of a woman;
Well that for Helen Hector ended, Memnon was slaughtered,
Strong Sarpedon fell and Troilus ceased in his boyhood.
Troy for Helen burning, her glory, her empire, her riches,
This is the sign of the gods and the type of things that are mortal. . . .”⁸

Ilion pulsates with the Nietzschean and Dionysian “Yes” to life even at its strangest and hardest. But this, even in a Vedantic form, was far from being the whole of Sri

Aurobindo's message. Ananke, the Greek personification of adamant Necessity, has the final word in *Ilion*. But the story of Troy's downfall could not provide a framework for Sri Aurobindo to convey what he was ultimately seeking, the discovery of a “greater luminous spiritual Necessity and its sovereign imperative” which “alone can displace or entirely penetrate, transform into itself and so replace the blind Ananke of the Inconscience.”⁹ Consequently he turned from Greek to Indian legend. There he found the symbol of a more integral affirmation in the myth of Savitri, the young woman who follows the god of death into the realm of eternal darkness in order to win back the life of her husband, Satyavan.

“The Knot of Matter” and the Genesis of *Savitri*

The opening of the first known manuscript of *Savitri* is dated the 8th and 9th of August, 1916. Sri Aurobindo must have just completed the chapter of *The Life Divine* entitled “The Knot of Matter”, which was published in that month's issue of the *Arya* (scheduled to come out on the 15th). In this chapter he probes the nature of matter to understand why life in the physical world is “stricken with death and pain” and whether it could be different. He concludes that indeed it could be, if certain conditions were fulfilled. These are explained in the remainder of the thousand and more pages to which his major philosophical work eventually grew, justifying the possibility of a transformed life on earth as a natural and logical outcome of the continuing evolution of consciousness.

It seems significant that, as far as we can ascertain, Sri Aurobindo began *Savitri* immediately after writing a chapter that is so directly relevant to the fundamental issues at the heart of the poem. In “The Knot of Matter”, he approaches the problem created by matter's apparent denial of the spirit by first setting out to state the difficulty “entirely, trenchantly, with exaggeration, if need be, rather than with diminution”. In so doing, he temporarily sets aside the detachment of the philosopher and resorts to language whose intensity is closer to that of poetry than metaphysics. Identifying himself with the plight of half-conscious beings in an unconscious world, he writes:

For this is the monstrous thing, the terrible and pitiless miracle of the material universe that out of this no-Mind . . . minds emerge and find themselves struggling feebly for light, helpless individually, only less helpless when in self-defence they associate their individual feeblenesses in the midst of the giant Ignorance which is the law of the universe. Out of this heartless Inconscience and within its rigorous jurisdiction hearts have been born and aspire and are tortured and bleed under the weight of the blind and insentient cruelty of this iron existence, a cruelty which lays its law upon them and becomes sentient in their sentience, brutal, ferocious, horrible.¹⁰

In the midst of a seemingly abstract philosophical exposition, here is the voice of the poet who three years earlier, in “The Meditations of Mandavya”, had entertained a vision of the world as

only a dumb Void that belches forth
 Numberless larvae and phantasmal shapes
 Into a void less happy than itself
 Because this feels. O if this dream were true,
 This iron, brute, gigantic helpless toy
 They call a world, this thing that turns and turns
 And shrieks and bleeds and cannot stop, this victim
 Broken and living yet on its own wheel,
 And if a Will created this, what name
 Shall best blaspheme against that tyrant God?¹¹

To be sure, this Promethean outburst against the notion of an extra-cosmic Creator expressed only the mood of a moment; for the poet goes on to affirm the “One, multitudinous, nameless, yet a Name”¹² and the poem ends in ecstasy. But we see that, whether in poetry or prose, Sri Aurobindo had the dramatist’s gift for taking opposite viewpoints, affirmative and negative, and expressing them with equal force.

The Debate with Death

This method is employed with the greatest power in the epic debate of Savitri and Death. A sketch of parts of that debate can be found in the draft of the poem, consisting of a few hundred lines, begun in August 1916 and revised and recopied by November of that year. At this stage much of the eventual epic is only in an embryonic form. But even in this comparatively undeveloped version, Savitri is as much an incarnation of the spirit of affirmation as Death is a personification of the negation of things.

After Satyavan is struck down by Death’s invisible hand, the contest of wills gets under way with the appearance of the god of death himself in a form perceptible to Savitri’s inner sight. In Sri Aurobindo’s fair copy of the first manuscript this passage is shorter than the final text, but we find much of it already in its definitive form. Here Death’s entry is described in these imposing lines:

Something stood there unearthly, sombre, grand,
 A limitless denial of all being
 That wore the wonder of a shape. The Form
 Bore the deep pity of destroying gods
 In its appalling eyes. Eternal Night
 In the dire beauty of an immortal face
 Pitying arose, receiving all that lives
 Into its fathomless heart for ever. Its limbs
 Were monuments of transience and beneath
 Brows of unwearying calm large godlike lids
 Silent beheld the writhing that is life.

The two opposed each other with their eyes,
 Woman and universal god.¹³

In an age when the gods are normally dismissed as old wives’ tales, the god of death as depicted by Sri Aurobindo has few of the trappings of mythology. The suspension of disbelief demanded of the modern mind is minimal. Moreover, Death is represented as the archetypal materialist with whom today’s materialist is often likely to agree, as when he describes man’s proclivity for creating gods in his own image:

He sees above him with a longing heart
 Bare spaces more unconscious than himself
 That have not even his privilege of mind,
 And empty of all but their unreal blue,
 And peoples them with bright and merciful powers.
 For the sea roars around him and earth quakes
 Beneath his steps, and fire is at his doors,
 And death prowls baying through the woods of life.¹⁴

Any lingering suspicion of anthropomorphism in the representation of Death as a being with whom Savitri can interact – though a cosmic being, whose “shape was nothingness made real” and whose voice “seemed the whole adverse world’s”¹⁵ – is dispelled when Death says:

I have no body and no tongue to speak,
 I commune not with human eye and ear;
 Only thy thought gave a figure to my void.
 Because, O aspirant to divinity,
 Thou calledst me to wrestle with thy soul,
 I have assumed a face, a form, a voice.¹⁶

Sri Aurobindo exercised his poetic abilities to the utmost in evoking the formidable figure of Death, as much as in portraying Death’s indomitable antagonist, Savitri. Death’s ironic critique of human hopes and ideals is devastating. His arguments, whether drawn from scientific materialism or life-negating mysticism, often seem unanswerable. He makes a plausible case against the whole project of evolution championed by his opponent:

When all unconscious was, then all was well.
 I, Death, was king and kept my regal state,
 Designing my unwilling, unerring plan. . . .
 Then Thought came in and spoiled the harmonious world:
 Matter began to hope and think and feel,
 Tissue and nerve bore joy and agony. . . .

A trouble rocked the great world's blind still heart
And Nature lost her wide immortal calm.
Thus came this warped incomprehensible scene. . . .¹⁷

A certain tragic grandeur in the materialistic vision is conveyed in several of the speeches Sri Aurobindo has put in the mouth of Death. At times the picture of the human condition painted in these speeches brings to mind the most moving passages in Bertrand Russell's celebrated essay, "A Free Man's Worship":

In the spectacle of Death, in the endurance of intolerable pain, . . . there is a sacredness, an overpowering awe, a feeling of the vastness, the depth, the inexhaustible mystery of existence. . . . In these moments of insight, we lose all eagerness of temporary desire, all struggling and striving for petty ends, all care for the little trivial things that, to a superficial view, make up the common life of day by day; we see, surrounding the narrow raft illumined by the flickering light of human comradeship, the dark ocean on whose rolling waves we toss for a brief hour; . . . all the loneliness of humanity amid hostile forces is concentrated upon the individual soul, which must struggle alone, with what of courage it can command, against the whole weight of a universe that cares nothing for its hopes and fears. . . . Brief and powerless is Man's life; on him and all his race the slow, sure doom falls pitiless and dark. Blind to good and evil, reckless of destruction, omnipotent matter rolls on its relentless way. . . .¹⁸

While Sri Aurobindo dissented from the pessimism of the materialistic worldview and its limited assessment of human possibilities, he did not underestimate the aspect of life on which it takes its stand. The central question raised in his epic is whether that discouraging aspect is the whole picture, or whether there is after all something in us that is not as isolated, transient and powerless as our surface consciousness – something that, as it struggles for survival in an inhospitable universe, not only can feel the mystery of existence, but whose inner strength is potentially a match for matter's seeming omnipotence. The presence of this incalculable factor is what Sri Aurobindo suggests through his heroine's response to her husband's doom:

Across the awful march no eye can see,
Barring its dreadful route no will can change,
She faced the engines of the universe;
A heart stood in the way of the driving wheels:
Its giant workings paused in front of a mind,
Its stark conventions met the flame of a soul.¹⁹

The Two Negations

Though there is an archaic element in *Savitri* that links it to an ancient tradition, Sri Aurobindo was preoccupied with contemporary realities as much as with timeless truths. The challenge to spirituality posed by rationalistic materialism was a reality that could not be ignored. Sri Aurobindo was concerned not merely with refuting the materialist position, however, but with disengaging the truth from which it derives its force and incorporating that in a larger synthesis. In his poetry, furthermore, intellectual truth had to be transfigured into artistic revelation. In *Savitri*, the materialist's denial of the spirit is voiced by Death with all the inspired force of language and image at the poet's command. At the same time, the truth and attraction of the ascetic refusal which is the mirror image of that denial are given an equally compelling statement, as in Death's admonition to Savitri:

The One lives for ever. There no Satyavan
Changing was born and there no Savitri
Claims from brief life her bribe of joy. There love
Came never with his fretful eyes of tears,
Nor Time is there nor the vain vasts of Space. . . .
If thou desirest immortality,
Be then alone sufficient to thy soul:
Live in thyself; forget the man thou lov'st.
My last grand death shall rescue thee from life;
Then shalt thou rise into thy unmoved source.²⁰

The two negations, materialistic and spiritual, contradictory though they appear to be, agree in ruling out the possibility of the fulfilment of the spirit in matter. By splitting reality into incompatible parts that reject each other, both serve the purpose of Death, the great divider. As he points out,

Where Matter is all, there Spirit is a dream:
If all are the Spirit, Matter is a lie. . . .

The mutual exclusion of the two poles of existence makes the problem of life insoluble and leaves extinction, physical or spiritual, as the only way out:

Two only are the doors of man's escape,
Death of his body Matter's gate to peace,
Death of his soul his last felicity.
In me all take refuge, for I, Death, am God.²¹

Remaking the Universe

Convincing as Death's nihilism may be to the logical mind and however tempting to the disillusioned and the world-weary, there is something deep within us that can hardly fail to leap up at Savitri's response. Remaining silent at first, when she finally speaks it is to assert the unconquerableness of the human soul in a world where Death seems all-powerful:

"I bow not to thee, O huge mask of death,
Black lie of night to the cowed soul of man,
Unreal, inescapable end of things,
Thou grim jest played with the immortal spirit. . . ."22

Sri Aurobindo anticipates here the tone of a talk given years later, after his passing, by the Mother who was undoubtedly his model for the character of Savitri. Calling death a "macabre joke of Nature", she commented on the reactions that the first contact with it arouses in individuals with a somewhat awakened consciousness:

In persons who are sensitive, it produces horror; in others, indignation. There is a tendency to ask oneself: "What is this monstrous farce in which one takes part without wanting to, without understanding it? Why are we born, if it is only to die? Why all this effort for development, progress, the flowering of the faculties, if it is to come to a diminution ending in decline and disintegration?..." Some feel a revolt in them, others less strong feel despair and always this question arises: "If there is a conscious Will behind all that, this Will seems to be monstrous."

The Mother acknowledged that this process of perpetual destruction and new creation can be looked at as a game that Nature enjoys, even if we do not. But she believed that it is possible "to convince Nature that there are other methods than hers". She added: "This looks like madness, but all new things have always seemed like madness before they became realities."²³

Madness or not, there is an epic sublimity in Savitri's defiance of Death for which one could not easily find a parallel in recent poetry. When he warns her of the divine retribution awaiting those who violate the law of things, she replies:

"Who is this God imagined by thy night,
Contemptuously creating worlds disdained,
Who made for vanity the brilliant stars?
Not he who has reared his temple in my thoughts
And made his sacred floor my human heart.
My God is will and triumphs in his paths,
My God is love and sweetly suffers all. . . ."

A traveller of the million roads of life,
His steps familiar with the lights of heaven
Tread without pain the sword-paved courts of hell;
There he descends to edge eternal joy.
Love's golden wings have power to fan thy void:
The eyes of love gaze starlike through death's night,
The feet of love tread naked hardest worlds.
He labours in the depths, exults on the heights;
He shall remake thy universe, O Death."²⁴

The remaking of the universe would seem to require divine intervention in the cosmic process, but what individuals can do is to remake themselves. By the time Sri Aurobindo took up *Savitri*, this self-refashioning had been his principal occupation for several years. We cannot begin to understand his epic without an idea of the spiritual practice and realisations that led to its composition and make it something more than a work of literature. Some of his prose writings, his other poetry, his letters and especially his diary, the *Record of Yoga*, give glimpses of the Yogi's inner life. They confirm the largely autobiographical nature of *Savitri*, his final self-revelatory masterpiece, which complements and completes these other sources.

Affirmations of the Developing God

Sri Aurobindo's sadhana followed an inner guidance rather than an established tradition, though the Sanskrit terminology he employed shows his indebtedness to the ancient spiritual culture of India. Under this inner guidance, the formulation of his personal system of Yoga took a significant turn in June 1914. This was a little over two years before he started to write *Savitri* and two months before the publication of the first issue of the *Arya*, the monthly philosophical review in which for the next few years he would present his thought and vision to the world in works such as *The Life Divine* and *The Synthesis of Yoga*. In fact, the introduction of what he called the "affirmations" into his sadhana coincided with the beginning of his work for the *Arya*. This development in his Yoga was to influence perceptibly some of the writings that appeared in the *Arya*, especially *The Life Divine*, and is relevant to appreciating the spirit of affirmation that is characteristic of *Savitri*.

On June 10th and 12th, 1914, Sri Aurobindo listed nine items in his diary which he described as "affirmations, stomach, of the developing God"²⁵ We will come back to the precise meaning of the Vedic term *stoma* in connection with *Savitri*. For now let us take a glance at some of these affirmations. They were written down in three groups under the heading "Script". Script in the *Record of Yoga* was a communication, received through a process resembling automatic writing, from a source which was often identified as the Master of the Yoga, Sri Aurobindo's inner guide.

Four affirmations were given first, with an indication that there were more to come; the next three followed on the same day and the last pair two days later. The original

grouping into four, three and two was to remain important throughout the coming year, during which the affirmations come up repeatedly in the *Record*. In an entry dated a year after they were first received, the three groups are referred to as the “four Brahma affirmations”, the “three Krishna affirmations” and the “two Prakriti affirmations”.²⁶ Frequently only seven affirmations are mentioned, however, the last two being perceived as dependent on the perfection of the other seven.

The division of the first seven affirmations into those concerned with Brahman and with Krishna, with the impersonal and the personal experience of the divine Reality, is a helpful simplification; but in practice Sri Aurobindo found that these aspects could not be separated. They are combined in the second affirmation of the first group, which was later placed first:

The universal sense of the Anandamaya Lilamaya Krishna in the Brahmadrishti as the continent of all the conscious activity.²⁷

Here we get a clue to the reason for the prominence of Krishna in the affirmations – for Sri Aurobindo was not a Vaishnava and there was nothing sectarian in his references to Krishna. Krishna is the lord of the Lila, the divine play. The sense of the world as Lila was strong in Sri Aurobindo’s consciousness at this time, evidently due to the increasing intensity of his realisation of the Brahman as Ananda, the eternal and universal delight of being. This brought with it a heightened awareness of the living Personality behind all things. He explains in *The Life Divine* that the world can be seen in terms of Maya if we regard it “in its relation to pure, infinite, indivisible, immutable Existence” (Sat). Or if we look at it in relation to pure consciousness (Chit), it is natural to view the world as a movement of Force, as Prakriti. But world-existence can also be experienced “in its relation to the self-delight of eternally existent being”. In that case,

we may regard, describe and realise it as Lila, the play, the child’s joy, the poet’s joy, the actor’s joy, the mechanician’s joy of the Soul of things eternally young, perpetually inexhaustible, creating and re-creating Himself in Himself for the sheer bliss of that self-creation, of that self-representation,—Himself the play, Himself the player, Himself the playground.²⁸

When Sri Aurobindo drafted his first version of *Savitri*, he evoked the vision of this Lila using imagery traditionally associated with Krishna. The final text of this passage differs little from what it was in 1916:

One who came love and lover and beloved
Eternal, built himself a wondrous field
And wove the measures of a marvellous dance.
There in its circles and its magic turns
Attracted he arrives, repelled he flees. . . .

His bliss laughs to us or it calls concealed
Like a far-heard unseen entrancing flute
From moonlit branches in the throbbing woods,
Tempting our angry search and passionate pain.²⁹

The affirmations in the *Record* are of interest to us here mainly as part of the background of the composition of *Savitri*. For our immediate purpose, therefore, the affirmation of Krishna’s Ananda and Lila in the vision of Brahman can be taken to represent the first group of four. We will come back to two other affirmations in this group in connection with *The Life Divine*. The three Krishna affirmations proper, pertaining to the personal relation with the Lord and Lover, form the second group. A convenient summary of them is found in an entry within a month after the affirmations were initially recorded. On 7 July 1914, Sri Aurobindo noted an instance of what he termed “lipi”, or etheric writing seen with the faculty of subtle vision. The words he saw were “*Ecstasy – Love – God*”. Later in the same entry he commented: “Love . . . ecstasy . . . God is the formula of fulfilment of the second group of affirmations.”³⁰ The last item in this group affirms the acceptance of all experience as “a slave & instrument of the Lover”.³¹ When he drafted the first version of *Savitri* in 1916, Sri Aurobindo described this condition of rapturous surrender in a passage near the end, where a divine voice speaks to Savitri:

Thou shalt drink down my sweetness unalloyed
And bear my ruthless beauty unabridged
Amid the world’s intolerable wrongs. . . .
Insistent, careless of thy lonely right,
My creatures shall demand me from thy heart.
All that thou hast shall be for others’ bliss;
All that thou art shall to my hands belong.
I will pour delight from thee as from a jar
And whirl thee as my chariot through the ways
And use thee as my sword and as my lyre
And play on thee my minstrelsies of thought.
And when thou art vibrant with all ecstasies
And when thou liv’st one spirit with all things,
Men seeing thee shall feel my siege of joy,
And nearer draw to me because thou art. . . .
This shalt thou henceforth learn from thy heartbeats,
That conquering me thou art my captive made,
And who possess me are by me possessed.
For ever love, O beautiful slave of God.³²

The affirmations as formulated in June 1914 and restated in December were a major feature of the *Record of Yoga* only for a year or so. During that period the last pair of

affirmations lagged behind the other seven. These two final affirmations implied an expansion of the scope of the Yoga, an acceleration of its pace and a more decisive application to life. Only a preparation for this was possible while the foundation outlined in the other affirmations was being laid. But the twin Prakriti affirmations anticipated subsequent developments in Sri Aurobindo's sadhana that figure prominently in *Savitri*. The eighth affirmation is:

Siddhi must be on the basis of the largeness in the five worlds & not a selective & limited siddhi.³³

This was rephrased six months later in a manner that again brought in the sense of Lila and connected the Prakriti affirmations with the preceding Krishna affirmations:

The field of play of Krishna the five worlds working themselves out in the fifth, Bhurloka.³⁴

A detailed account of the worlds was not part of the original scheme of *Savitri*, but was introduced in the late 1920s into what eventually became the longest of the twelve books of the epic. Sri Aurobindo did not pursue or expound the knowledge of the supraphysical planes in the spirit of an otherworldly mysticism, however. As the reformulated affirmation suggests, what preoccupied him was the worlds of life, mind, supermind and Sachchidananda "working themselves out" in the world of matter represented by the earth ("Bhurloka"). In *Savitri*, the impact on the terrestrial plane of the subtle forces proper to higher grades of substance and consciousness is the subject of much of the Book of the Traveller of the Worlds. This interconnectedness is indicated in the opening canto of Book Two, "The World-Stair":

Our earth is a fragment and a residue;
Her power is packed with the stuff of greater worlds
And steeped in their colour-lustres dimmed by her drowse;
An atavism of higher births is hers,
Her sleep is stirred by their buried memories
Recalling the lost spheres from which they fell.
Unsatisfied forces in her bosom move;
They are partners of her greater growing fate
And her return to immortality. . . .³⁵

The final affirmation deals with the question of time. This was crucial if the thoroughgoing transformation envisaged by Sri Aurobindo was to be achieved within the span of a single life. In its original form, the ninth affirmation reads:

Time must be no longer a determinative, but only an instrumental factor in the siddhi. So also with Space & Circumstance.³⁶

In Savitri's dialogue with Death, her adversary rebukes her as one of those spirits who

Have come into the narrow bounds of life
With too large natures overleaping time.

Death argues for respecting the established order and letting time take its meandering course:

The wise think with the cycles, they hear the tread
Of far-off things; patient, unmoved they keep
Their dangerous wisdom in their depths restrained,
Lest man's frail days into the unknown should sink
Dragged like a ship by bound leviathan
Into the abyss of his stupendous seas.
Lo, how all shakes when the gods tread too near!
All moves, is in peril, anguished, torn, upheaved.

But Savitri insists on a dynamic view of the process of time, invoking the lives of heroes and geniuses, prophets and incarnations to support her optimism:

Ever to the new and the unknown press on
The speeding aeons justifying God.
What were earth's ages if the grey restraint
Were never broken and glories sprang not forth
Bursting their obscure seed, while man's slow life
Leaped hurried into sudden splendid paths
By divine words and human gods revealed? . . .
I claim from Time my will's eternity,
God from his moments.³⁷

The Affirmations of Vedanta

Ten days after writing out the first seven affirmations, Sri Aurobindo noted in his diary: "the first Book of the Life Divine begun (the Vedantic Affirmations)."³⁸ His major philosophical work was thus initiated in the spirit of the principle he had adopted in his personal sadhana, summed up in the third affirmation in the *Record of Yoga*: "The principle of Affirmation to replace the principle of rejection & denial."³⁹ A statement in *The Life Divine* suggests the underlying rationale of this "principle of Affirmation" justifying its inclusion among the "Brahma affirmations":

All affirmations are denied only to lead to a wider affirmation of the same Reality. All antinomies confront each other in order to recognise one Truth in

their opposed aspects and embrace by the way of conflict their mutual Unity. Brahman is the Alpha and the Omega. Brahman is the One besides whom there is nothing else existent.⁴⁰

When the opening chapter of *The Life Divine* appeared on 15 August 1914 in the first issue of the *Arya*, the heading “Book I / The Affirmations of Vedanta” was printed above the title of the chapter. In the text itself, significant occurrences of the word “affirmation” begin with the second paragraph:

These persistent ideals of the race are at once the contradiction of its normal experience and the affirmation of higher and deeper experiences. . . .⁴¹

Although Sri Aurobindo later substituted “Omnipresent Reality and the Universe” for “The Affirmations of Vedanta” as the title of Book One, the idea of affirmation and the Vedantic interpretation of it continued to be a persistent feature of *The Life Divine*, found even in passages he added or rewrote when he revised and expanded it to its present dimensions twenty-five years after its serial publication began in the *Arya*. The best explanation of what he meant by “the affirmations of Vedanta” occurs in such a passage, first published in the 1940 edition of Book Two:

In the Upanishads, in the inspired scripture of the most ancient Vedanta, we find the affirmation of the Absolute, the experience-concept of the utter and ineffable Transcendence; but we find also, not in contradiction to it but as its corollary, an affirmation of the cosmic Divinity, an experience-concept of the cosmic Self and the becoming of Brahman in the universe. Equally, we find the affirmation of the Divine Reality in the individual: this too is an experience-concept; it is seized upon not as an appearance, but as an actual becoming. In place of a sole supreme exclusive affirmation negating all else than the transcendent Absolute we find a comprehensive affirmation carried to its farthest conclusion: this concept of Reality and of Knowledge enveloping in one view the cosmic and the Absolute coincides fundamentally with our own. . . .⁴²

In *Savitri*, these “experience-concepts” are affirmed in the evocative language of poetry. In a well-known passage in “The Secret Knowledge”, for instance, we meet first the transcendent Absolute, but not as an “exclusive affirmation negating all else”:

The Absolute, the Perfect, the Alone
Has called out of the Silence his mute Force
Where she lay in the featureless and formless hush
Guarding from Time by her immobile sleep
The ineffable puissance of his solitude.

This leads to the affirmation of the same Absolute as the cosmic Self that becomes the universe:

The Absolute, the Perfect, the Alone
Has entered with his silence into space:
He has fashioned these countless persons of one self;
He has built a million figures of his power;
He lives in all, who lived in his Vast alone;
Space is himself and Time is only he.

Finally, the divine Reality in the individual is affirmed:

The Absolute, the Perfect, the Immune,
One who is in us as our secret self,
Our mask of imperfection has assumed,
He has made this tenement of flesh his own,
His image in the human measure cast
That to his divine measure we might rise. . . .⁴³

The Everlasting No and the Everlasting Yes

Meanwhile, the mask of our imperfection hides very effectively whatever divinity is within us. This fact has led to two opposite conclusions. At one extreme of the spectrum of thought are those who deny the divinity altogether. At the other extreme are those who, while affirming the divinity, reject not only the mask, but the tenement. These two negations, the materialist denial and the refusal of the ascetic, are contrasted in the second and third chapters of *The Life Divine*. Each affirms what the other rejects, but both affirmations are radically incomplete and vitiated by their own one-sidedness. As Sri Aurobindo observes:

Liberty pursued by exclusion of the thing exceeded leads along the path of negation to the refusal of that which God has accepted. Activity pursued by absorption in the act and the energy leads to an inferior affirmation and the denial of the Highest.⁴⁴

In place of these limiting alternatives, Sri Aurobindo proposes a complete affirmation. He explains its nature most clearly in “The Problem of Life”, a chapter of *The Life Divine* originally published in the *Arya* in May 1916, three months before he commenced his work on *Savitri*.

“All life,” he writes, “depends for its nature on the fundamental poise of its own constituting consciousness. . . .” Consciousness can take any of four poises. First there is its poise in the unity of Sachchidananda, the infinite existence-consciousness-

bliss that is the source of all. At the other end of things, consciousness seems to disappear in the enormous machinery of material nature. Out of this self-oblivion has arisen the third poise, the divided consciousness of mind, “limiting itself in various centres, . . . aware of things and forces in their apparent division and opposition to each other but not in their real unity”. The final possibility is consciousness “in possession of both the diversity and the unity”, whose nature is “the One knowing itself as the Many and the Many knowing themselves as the One”.

Force has a different relation to consciousness in each of these poises. In Sachchidananda they are one. In the material world, characterised by Sri Aurobindo as “the great denial of Sachchidananda by Himself”, we see “the utter apparent separation of Force from Consciousness, the specious miracle of the all-governing and infallible Inconscient”. The third relation describes our own condition. It “is the poise of being in Mind and in the Life which we see emerging out of this denial, bewildered by it, struggling . . . against the thousand and one problems involved in this perplexing apparition of man the half-potent conscient being out of the omnipotent Inconscience of the material universe.” But this unsatisfactory state of affairs is not the end of the matter. Sri Aurobindo continues:

The fourth relation is the poise of being in Supermind: it is the fulfilled existence which will eventually solve all this complex problem created by the partial affirmation emerging out of the total denial; and it must needs solve it in the only possible way, by the complete affirmation fulfilling all that was secretly there contained in potentiality and intended in fact of evolution behind the mask of the great denial.⁴⁵

This brief summary of Sri Aurobindo’s philosophy provides a framework in which to interpret *Savitri*. The entire epic can be understood in these terms – not surprisingly, since the whole of existence appears to be encompassed in this all-inclusive scheme. Numerous passages in the poem could be cited pertaining to each of the four poises. But what is symbolised in *Savitri* as a whole is the “complete affirmation” belonging to the poise in Supermind (Vijnana) where consciousness and force are reunited as inseparable equals. This integral affirmation is not envisioned as an exit from the manifestation and a return to the starting-point in undifferentiated Sachchidananda. Rather, it corresponds to the “Vijnanamaya Sachchidananda” mentioned in a reformulation of the fourth affirmation in the *Record of Yoga*, which is to bring “the fulfilment of mind, life & body”.⁴⁶

The occurrences of the verb “affirm” in *Savitri* will provide us with a sample of passages illustrating the kinds of affirmation proper to the various poises of consciousness in the universe and beyond. But first it may be observed that, though the noun “affirmation” itself does not occur in the poem, we find its opposites, “denial”, “negation”, “refusal” – often in connection with Death, who personifies the cosmic opposition to the spirit of affirmation embodied in Savitri herself. We have already seen Death

described as a “limitless denial of all being”.⁴⁷ Let us look at a few more of these negative expressions:

Across the fruitless labour of the worlds
His huge denial’s all-defeating might
Pursued the ignorant march of dolorous Time.⁴⁸

Immutable, Death’s denial met her cry. . . .⁴⁹

A great Negation was the Real’s face
Prohibiting the vain process of Time. . . .⁵⁰

On all that claims here to be Truth and God
And conscious self and the revealing Word
And the creative rapture of the Mind
And Love and Knowledge and heart’s delight, there fell
The immense refusal of the eternal No.⁵¹

As the last phrase suggests, “Yes” and “No” are of course equivalent to affirmation and negation or refusal. Their occurrences should also be included, therefore, in a study of *Savitri* as the epic of affirmation. But here we have to take into account a complexity in the idea of negation which enriches at the same time the concept of affirmation. In *The Life Divine*, Sri Aurobindo refers to a “superior Negation” as well as an “inferior negation”.⁵² The inferior one evidently corresponds to the “great denial” and the “immense refusal” we have already encountered. With regard to the superior negation, Sri Aurobindo points out that “it is through both a supreme affirmation and a supreme negation that we can arrive at the Absolute.”⁵³ He elaborates on this elsewhere:

The Absolute is in itself indefinable by reason, ineffable to the speech; it has to be approached through experience. It can be approached through an absolute negation of existence, as if it were itself a supreme Non-Existence, a mysterious infinite Nihil. It can be approached through an absolute affirmation of all the fundamentals of our own existence. . . .⁵⁴

Consequently there is a certain ambivalence in Sri Aurobindo’s use of the word “No” in *Savitri*. He describes the all-negating Absolute as

An endless No to all that seems to be,
An endless Yes to things ever unconceived
And all that is unimagined and unthought. . . .⁵⁵

Nevertheless, as we saw in the *Record of Yoga*, Sri Aurobindo's approach was to replace the principle of rejection and denial as far as possible by the principle of affirmation. Accordingly, after the canto in Book Three entitled "The Pursuit of the Unknowable", a powerful evocation of the "stillness absolute, incommunicable" that "makes unreal all that mind has known" is followed by the warning:

Only the everlasting No has neared
And stared into thy eyes and killed thy heart:
But where is the Lover's everlasting Yes. . . ?⁵⁶

The Epic of Affirmation

After Savitri experiences Nirvana in the "all-negating Absolute", she seems to be on the verge of the "last annulment", when a very different spiritual outcome is suggested:

Even now her splendid being might flame back
Out of the silence and the nullity,
A gleaming portion of the All-Wonderful,
A power of some all-affirming Absolute. . . .⁵⁷

This is one of four occurrences of "affirming" or "affirmed" in *Savitri*. Interestingly, these can be correlated with the four poises of consciousness outlined in *The Life Divine*. The "all-affirming Absolute" would belong to the first, the poise of consciousness in the infinity of Sachchidananda.

Another occurrence of "affirming" is in "The Book of the Divine Mother". It relates to Sachchidananda's aspect of eternal delight, but only as a concealed presence in the unconscious and insentient universe where life has evolved. This is the second poise:

Affirming in life a hidden ecstasy
It held the spirit to its miraculous course;
Carrying immortal values to the hours
It justified the labour of the suns.⁵⁸

"Affirming" is found a third time (reversing the order in which these passages occur in the poem) in "The Kingdoms and Godheads of the Greater Life", the sixth canto of Book Two:

All powers of Life towards their godhead tend
In the wideness and the daring of that air,
Each builds its temple and expands its cult,
And Sin too there is a divinity.

Affirming the beauty and splendour of her law
She claims life as her natural domain. . . .⁵⁹

Sin and evil, as we experience them, clearly belong to the "partial affirmation" of a consciousness divided against itself, emerging with its "thousand and one problems" out of matter's negation of Sachchidananda.⁶⁰ But these lines in "The Book of the Traveller of the Worlds" express an occult truth explained in *The Life Divine*:

Those life impulses which are to earth-nature inordinate and out of measure and appear here as perverse and abnormal, find in their own province of being an independent fulfilment and an unrestricted play of their type and principle. . . . Here on earth these things exist in an unsatisfied and therefore unsatisfactory and obscure state of struggle and mixture, but there reveal their secret and their motive of being because they are there established in their native power and full form of nature in their own world and their own exclusive atmosphere.⁶¹

Every aspect of existence in this and other worlds finds a place in Sri Aurobindo's epic. In a sense, all is affirmed because behind all there is a truth, however partial. By itself this might lead only to a Nietzschean "Yes" to life even at its strangest and hardest. The aesthetic appreciation of tragedy gives a kind of meaning to reality as it is. But Sri Aurobindo goes on to posit a fourth poise of consciousness, where the reaffirmation of Sachchidananda in Supermind – the "Vijnanamaya Sachchidananda" of the *Record of Yoga* – is expected to solve the myriad problems that have arisen in the third poise.

The introduction of a supramental consciousness into the scheme of things is grounded in experience as well as philosophy. This factor distinguishes *Savitri* from *Iliad*. It also justifies the story's happy ending as something more than a fairy tale; for the Supermind would heal the division between consciousness and force, enabling the illumined and empowered will to override the decrees of Ananke. The result of this Siddhi is symbolised by the victory of Savitri over Death. The poem's climactic event is anticipated at the end of the second canto, "The Issue". Here, significantly, is the remaining occurrence of the verb "affirm":

A living choice reversed fate's cold dead turn,
Affirmed the spirit's tread on Circumstance,
Pressed back the senseless dire revolving Wheel
And stopped the mute march of Necessity.⁶²

The passage concludes a few lines later with the bursting of "the bounds of consciousness and Time". We are reminded of the last affirmation in the *Record of Yoga*, which insists that time, space and circumstance must be no longer "determinative", but only "instrumental".⁶³

Much of what we find in *Savitri* is explained in Sri Aurobindo's prose writings in ways that may seem more accessible to the logical mind. Undoubtedly a comparison with these writings is helpful for understanding the meaning of *Savitri*. But in the end, it is not to convey logical ideas that it was written. In the first chapter of the work that was originally called *The Psychology of Social Development* and later revised and published as *The Human Cycle*, Sri Aurobindo spoke in passing of the higher function of poetry in ancient times. It is worth noting that along with "The Knot of Matter", quoted earlier, this appeared in the *Arya* in the month when he began to draft what we now know as *Savitri*:

To us poetry is a revel of intellect and fancy, imagination a plaything and caterer for our amusement, our entertainer, the nautch-girl of the mind. But to the men of old the poet was a seer, a revealer of hidden truths, imagination no dancing courtesan but a priestess in God's house commissioned not to spin fictions but to image difficult and hidden truths. . . .⁶⁴

It was as "a revealer of hidden truths", like the Rishis of the Vedic age, that Sri Aurobindo wrote *Savitri*. But besides the disclosure of mystic truth, Vedic poetry had a closely related intention. The Vedic *sūkta* was also called a *stoma*, translated by Sri Aurobindo as "hymn of affirmation".⁶⁵ Incidentally, as we have seen, he applied the same word, *stoma*, to the affirmations which played an important role during a substantial period of his sadhana as recorded in his diary. During this period he began to write and publish, in monthly instalments, several of his major works including *The Secret of the Veda*. In one of the first commentaries on selected Vedic hymns which accompanied that work, he explained the meaning of *stoma* as he understood it:

By expression then we create and men are even said to create the gods in themselves by the mantra. Again, that which we have created in our consciousness by the Word, we can fix there by the Word to become part of ourselves and effective not only in our inner life but upon the outer physical world. By expression we form, by affirmation we establish. As a power of expression the word is termed *gīh* or *vacas*; as a power of affirmation, *stoma*. In either aspect it is named *manma* or *mantra*. . . .⁶⁶

Affirmation of the truth – in the sense of fixing or establishing it in our consciousness – was, then, part of the function of the Vedic *mantra* according to Sri Aurobindo. This idea also enters into his broader concept of the Mantra as extended to poetry in general, where it designates "the highest power of the inspired word".⁶⁷ It was probably in 1950, when he was occupied with the final revision of *Savitri*, that Sri Aurobindo dictated a paragraph on the Mantra for *The Future Poetry*. The Mantra, he says here, "is the word that carries the godhead in it or the power of the godhead, can bring it into the consciousness and fix there it and its workings, awaken there the thrill of the infinite, the force of something absolute".⁶⁸

In this sense we can speak of *Savitri* as the epic of affirmation, a Vedic *stoma* on a grand scale. Affirming our divine potential, it can bring the godhead into our consciousness and "fix there it and its workings"; yet it does not reject or disparage our humanity, which is a mask but also a tenement of God. Sri Aurobindo's epic, like its heroine, is "the living body of his light". Like her, the poem houses the Name and the Nameless, "the Word or Name vibrating out of the nameless Silence".⁶⁹ Challenging Death's power over aspiring humanity, *Savitri*'s words epitomise the spirit of affirmation she represents – the everlasting Yes:

"Yes, I am human. Yet shall man by me,
Since in humanity waits his hour the God,
Trample thee down to reach the immortal heights,
Transcending grief and pain and fate and death.
Yes, my humanity is a mask of God:
He dwells in me, the mover of my acts,
Turning the great wheel of his cosmic work.
I am the living body of his light,
I am the thinking instrument of his power,
I incarnate Wisdom in an earthly breast,
I am his conquering and unslayable will.
The formless Spirit drew in me its shape;
In me are the Nameless and the secret Name."⁷⁰

Notes

- 1 Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, vol. 2, trans. E. F. J. Payne (New York: Dover, 1966), pp. 433–34.
- 2 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, in *The Birth of Tragedy and The Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Francis Golffing (New York: Anchor Books, 1956), p. 53.
- 3 Ibid., p. 56.
- 4 Ibid., p. 64.
- 5 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Twilight of the Idols*, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kaufman (New York: Penguin Books, 1976), p. 562.
- 6 Sri Aurobindo, *The Future Poetry, with On Quantitative Metre* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1997), p. 259.
- 7 Ibid., p. 262. First published in *Arya: A Philosophical Review*, vol. 6, no. 8 (March 1920), pp. 506–7.
- 8 Sri Aurobindo, *Collected Poems* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 2009), p. 397.
- 9 Sri Aurobindo, *The Life Divine* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 2005), p. 997.
- 10 Ibid., p. 258. First published in *Arya*, vol. 3, no. 1 (August 1916), pp. 6–7.
- 11 *Collected Poems*, p. 513.
- 12 Ibid., p. 515.
- 13 "Sri Aurobindo's First Fair Copy of His Earliest Version of *Savitri*", *Mother India: Monthly Review of Culture*, vol. 33, no. 11 (November 1981), p. 622. Cf. *Savitri: A Legend and a Symbol* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1993), p. 574.

- 14 *Savitri*, pp. 586–87.
- 15 Ibid., pp. 574–75.
- 16 Ibid., p. 593.
- 17 Ibid., p. 617.
- 18 Bertrand Russell, “A Free Man’s Worship”, [http://www.skeptic.ca/Bertrand Russell Collection.pdf](http://www.skeptic.ca/Bertrand%20Russell%20Collection.pdf).
- 19 *Savitri*, p. 20.
- 20 Ibid., pp. 593–94. Cf. *Mother India*, vol. 33, no. 12 (December 1981), p. 696.
- 21 *Savitri*, p. 635.
- 22 Ibid., p. 588.
- 23 The Mother, *Questions and Answers 1957–1958* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 2004), pp. 33–36.
- 24 *Savitri*, pp. 591–92. Cf. *Mother India*, vol. 33, no. 12 (December 1981), p. 695.
- 25 Sri Aurobindo, *Record of Yoga* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 2001), p. 485.
- 26 Ibid., p. 880.
- 27 Ibid., p. 484.
- 28 *The Life Divine*, pp. 109–11. First published in *Arya*, vol. 1, no. 12 (July 1915), pp. 706–8. In a summary of the state of his sadhana at the beginning of the month in which this chapter (“Delight of Existence: The Solution”) appeared in the *Arya*, Sri Aurobindo observed: “The Anandam Brahma is now fixed in the vision of all things and only occasionally goes back for a moment into the Anantam Jnanam Brahma. Along with this finality there is also the finality of the *Lilamaya darshana* in all existences. . . .” (*Record of Yoga*, p. 883)
- 29 *Savitri*, pp. 613–14. Cf. *Mother India*, vol. 33, no. 12 (December 1981), p. 699.
- 30 *Record of Yoga*, pp. 535–36.
- 31 Ibid., p. 485.
- 32 *Mother India*, vol. 34, no. 2 (February 1982), pp. 82–83. Cf. *Savitri*, pp. 700–702.
- 33 *Record of Yoga*, p. 488.
- 34 Ibid., p. 766.
- 35 *Savitri*, pp. 99–100.
- 36 *Record of Yoga*, p. 488.
- 37 *Savitri*, pp. 650–52. Cf. *Mother India*, vol. 34, no. 1 (January 1982), pp. 5–6.
- 38 *Record of Yoga*, p. 504.
- 39 Ibid., p. 484.
- 40 *The Life Divine*, p. 38.
- 41 Ibid., p. 4. First published in *Arya*, vol. 1, no. 1 (August 1914), p. 2.
- 42 *The Life Divine*, pp. 661–62. This passage is the revised version of the following sentence in the *Arya*, vol. 3, no. 8 (March 1917), p. 452: “On the other hand in the Isha Upanishad we find the tendency of comprehensive affirmation carried to its farthest conclusion and a point of view arrived at which coincides with our own.”
- 43 *Savitri*, p. 67.
- 44 *The Life Divine*, p. 46.
- 45 Ibid., pp. 223–25.
- 46 *Record of Yoga*, p. 765.
- 47 *Savitri*, p. 574.
- 48 Ibid., p. 643.
- 49 Ibid., p. 654.

- 50 Ibid., p. 600.
- 51 Ibid., p. 583.
- 52 *The Life Divine*, p. 53.
- 53 Ibid., p. 663.
- 54 Ibid., p. 493.
- 55 *Savitri*, p. 547.
- 56 Ibid., p. 310.
- 57 Ibid., p. 549.
- 58 Ibid., p. 313.
- 59 Ibid., p. 185.
- 60 *The Life Divine*, pp. 224–25.
- 61 Ibid., pp. 813–14.
- 62 *Savitri*, p. 21.
- 63 *Record of Yoga*, p. 488.
- 64 *The Human Cycle, The Ideal of Human Unity, War and Self-Determination* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1997), p. 9. First published in *Arya*, vol. 3, no. 1 (August 1916), p. 30.
- 65 *The Secret of the Veda, with Selected Hymns* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1998), p. 270.
- 66 Ibid., p. 271. First published in *Arya*, vol. 1, no. 2 (September 1914), p. 34.
- 67 *The Future Poetry*, p. 240.
- 68 Ibid., p. 313.
- 69 *The Life Divine*, p. 165.
- 70 *Savitri*, p. 634.

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The Mother and Her Work

Sunayana Panda

Once Champaklal asked the Mother why she had chosen to be born in France, perhaps curious to know why India was not her land of birth. The Mother's answer was quite straightforward. She said that it was because a certain education was necessary for her work.

We have to go back in time in order to understand the significance of that statement.

When the Mother came to live permanently in Pondicherry, she was forty-two years old. At the beginning of the 20th Century, when the general life expectancy was not beyond 60 years, that would have been considered well into the second half of a person's life. In the first part of her life the Mother had gone through many kinds of experiences. She came to her *karmabhumi* after a long preparation.

To begin with, the fact that she was born in a well-to-do family and brought up in Paris meant that she had had an upbringing which was entirely European and of a high quality. This gave her a practical sense and a thorough knowledge of material things. She had travelled to places, such as Algeria and Japan, where most European women did not have the opportunity to go. She had met people who had been seekers of Truth and from whom she had learnt many things. In short, she had lived a most unconventional life but which had given her a vast first-hand knowledge of the world.

In the early years of the Ashram she was a disciple among others who lived in the household of the Master. She and Datta (Miss Dorothy Hodgson) had been living in a rented house along the beach road but on a cyclonic night when there was a real danger to their safety they were asked to come and live in the house on François Martin Street where all the other disciples were living with Sri Aurobindo. She was not totally new to this group of revolutionaries who had chosen the path of *sadhana* and with whom she had come to stay. She had already had a first short stay in Pondicherry before the First World War broke out. She had come back after a brief return to France and four years in Japan.

It was only natural that once the Mother and Datta came to live with them, they took charge of the household work and began supervising the cooking and the cleaning. By and by, it became clear that the Mother was spiritually not on the same level as the others, that she was not a novice and that she was not starting out on

this path at that point in her life, as some others were. In 1922 the group moved to the house on Rue de la Marine, which is now the Main Building of the Ashram, and the Mother was already organising the life of the disciples. By this time a few ladies had joined the group of seekers and the Mother meditated with them. In an informal way she had brought some basic discipline to the group which was then largely made up of those who had been with Sri Aurobindo in his political life. Before this new development these men had lived a very free and disorganised life. The Mother even set an example of how they should behave in Sri Aurobindo's presence.

On the Siddhi Day in 1926 the Mother was formally given the place of Sri Aurobindo's spiritual equal. She took up the responsibility of the day-to-day running of the Ashram while Sri Aurobindo withdrew from the public and concentrated on his *sadhana*. This was a turning point in everyone's life. Sri Aurobindo remained undisturbed and out of sight of the community of disciples, deeply connected to his inner life, although not cut off from the world and the whole work of organising and maintaining a community of seekers rested on the Mother's shoulders. All her previous experience, her years of living in different parts of the world, had given her a vast reserve of knowledge on which she could draw in order to look after the needs of such a large group of people.

The Mother's Western background gave her the required skills to run this gigantic family, balancing its finances and seeing to every practical detail that the others may not have understood. On the exterior it looked as if she was at the head of a large organisation which she ran entirely on her own terms but if one looked at it more closely it was more like a family where work was delegated and shared and everything was centralised in her.

Coming as she did from the West she did not see any incongruity in commerce having a place in the life of a spiritual community. As long as this commerce was being done in an honest way, there was no difficulty in accepting it as a part of the life of the Ashram. It was a very matter-of-fact way of looking at the question of how to survive if one wants to follow one's inner call of following a spiritual path. She gave an equal importance to the material conditions in which the work was going to be carried out, which was diametrically opposite to the way spiritual life was seen until then in our country. Money was another power in her scheme of things.

Already during her first stay in Pondicherry, before the outbreak of the First World War, she had set up the Arya Store, so that Sri Aurobindo's household could be sustained by a regular income. It was the Mother who kept the accounts at the outset and wanted to train up the others to carry on this work in her absence. Her coming brought to the group a direction and a sense of responsibility. Before this it was taken for granted that the group would survive on donations. It was her presence which finally set the household to think in practical terms.

What distinguishes the Mother from all other spiritual personalities in India is her insistence on beauty. She brought beauty and order to everything she touched. This is in striking contrast to many spiritual paths where the very notion of spirituality is opposed to all that is beautiful, as if in some way they were two totally

incompatible ideas. This comes from the popular belief that beauty is wealth and wealth is unspiritual. But the Mother turned these traditional views on their heads by making sure that beauty was a part of the spiritual seeking as much as knowledge, love and disinterested work.

In the Integral Yoga all aspects of the world and self have to be included, nothing must be left out. It is not a turning away from the world – it is taking the world and making it more perfect. The physical world, the most material aspect of our lives, had to be transformed. The Mother made it clear that in the physical plane it was through beauty that the Divine manifests itself. This clearly means that beauty is one of the faces of the Divine and that looking for beauty is another way of looking for the Divine. Whether it was the Dining Room or the School or the Library, the places were immaculately maintained and beautifully kept.

She was not looking for opulence — she turned the focus to harmony and order. Many old-timers recount how when she informed a department that she was coming to visit, everyone made sure that the rooms, as well all shelves and cupboards, were in impeccable order. The Mother would very often walk straight to a corner or a cupboard which was untidy and where things had been hurriedly pushed away. When houses were bought or rented the Mother made sure that they were maintained and not allowed to deteriorate.

While guiding everyone on the path of spirituality the Mother also guided people in the most practical aspect of the running of the institution. Whether it was giving advice to doctors on how to treat a particular patient, or whether it was taking a decision on the construction of buildings, she could give her own opinion from experience. She had the inside knowledge, sometimes from practical experience and often by intuition. It was this diversity of knowledge and her familiarity with the workings of the material world that made the Ashram run smoothly.

The Mother had a way of looking at things that was, for those times at least, very unusual.

She had at the same time a very wide view of things as well as an eye for details. Nothing escaped her attention. Her four-year stay in Japan had given a view of Asian life and a direct experience of life where simplicity and beauty went hand in hand. When she came to Pondicherry she followed this principle of beauty but always staying within the parameters of simplicity.

The Mother's sense of organisation was only matched by her skill in communication and keeping strong personal bonds with everybody. She had a way of expressing herself that left no doubt in anyone's mind about her affection for those who were in her care. Sri Aurobindo, on the other hand, admitted that having been brought up in England he was shy and rather reserved.

One of the important features of the Ashram was the way birthdays of *sadhaks* and *sadhikas* were observed. On their birthdays all the members of the Ashram, and this included the children of the school, could go and see the Mother. It became an occasion when they could express themselves directly to her and when she could have a moment of personal interaction with them. People looked forward to that day

in the year when they knew they would be able to see her and get a card with loving words from her.

The same ability of making an impression and an immediate contact which she had with individuals was also extended to visiting dignitaries. She had a graciousness in her dealings with them that showed the Ashram in a favourable light to them. The Mother saw two Prime Ministers of the country, the King of Nepal, the Dalai Lama and other important people. At all times they were received with grace and warmth.

The most extraordinary aspect of this spiritual community was the emotional bonding that the Mother created. There was an ambience where all the members could develop a harmonious fellow-feeling. There was, and still is, a sense of brotherhood in this community that comes from sharing a common love for the Mother and a great devotion for Sri Aurobindo.

People were connected to each other through her. Whatever may have been the age of the person, men were addressed as “dada” with the suffix “da” or “bhai” added to their names and ladies were “didi” with “di” or “ben” added to their names. People who were old enough to be grandfathers were called “da” while one was addressing their sons and daughters as “dada” or “didi” also. On the one hand it was the Mother's own equal treatment of the old and the young; on the other hand it was the *sadhaks* themselves who were so free of ego that we could look upon stalwarts like Nolini-da or Nirod-da as elder brothers. It was the Mother who instilled in everyone the sense of the spiritual family and of equality.

There were many mental barriers that the Mother broke without saying a word about it in an official manner. She considered men and women as equals and following her example everyone behaved in that manner. She never wrote or said anything about gender equality because it was unnecessary. The facts were there before everyone's eyes. Women were heads of departments and were among the main teachers and coaches of the school and were held in respect by everyone. It was very touching to see the elders of the group, people like Nolini-da, Amrita-da or Pavitra-da, all brilliant minds and well-grounded in their fields, turning to the Mother for her approval and nod in all matters. If at the head of the organisation there was a feminine figure it naturally followed that women in general were seen as equals.

Much has been said about the Mother's sense of organisation and practical knowledge but what held this huge family together was her role of the mother in a very human way. She actually remained the human mother in spite of being the spiritual teacher and the object of everyone's devotion. In her early life the Mother had been a wife and a mother and many must wonder why she went through this experience if she knew that she had a special role to play in the future. By marrying and having a child she did not disqualify herself as a spiritual teacher. If anything, it only served her as experience to know the world better and having known motherhood in a human way she could be a better spiritual mother.

In fact, having gone through a certain number of experiences in one set of circumstances she could then apply them to another set of circumstances. She had a first-hand knowledge of caring, providing and guiding. As long as there were only adults in the Ashram, most of whom had gone through many difficult situations in life, the Mother was a spiritual mother and her love and care remained on the emotional and intellectual and spiritual level. But once the children came and joined the adults, the Mother actually had to take on the role of a human mother as well. The job of bringing up children was before her as it would have been before a young biological mother. The only difference was that she had hundreds of children to bring up. She knew how to handle the situation as a person who had been through it all—concerned with their health, their education and their emotional needs. Somehow, when she said “Mon petit (my little one)...” it rang so true. It was not a manner of speaking—it was actually an endearment that came straight from her heart, words she must have used for her own biological child.

There is a general misconception that after coming to Pondicherry, Sri Aurobindo decided to set up an Ashram. Nothing can be further from the truth. The fact remains that the Ashram grew in an organic way and things were rarely planned in the initial years. Sri Aurobindo was engaged in his own sadhana and until as late as 1920 he was still keeping his options open to return to Bengal. People began to gather around him, and an informal group formed itself when they came to live in his house. He was quite reluctant to start anything formal. It was only after the Mother joined this group and many others began to follow the path shown by the Master that the Ashram took on a formal shape. To a large extent it was the Mother’s willingness to take up this responsibility, and it was a very heavy responsibility, which made it possible for the Ashram to come into existence.

It has to be remembered that the Mother was already on a path of seeking from her very early years. She has said that since her youth she had wanted to create a little world where people could live entirely dedicated to the service of the divine, free from the pressures of having to earn a living. She also adds that this opportunity was given to her in what is generally considered the middle of one’s life. So, the creation of the Ashram was a fulfilment of her own dream too.

This was the work for which she had come to the world—to make Sri Aurobindo’s high thoughts a reality in the material physical world. She has said “Without him I exist not; without me he is unmanifest”. Everything is summed up in those few words.

What Arjuna saw: the Dark Side of the Force

Georges Van Vrekhem

1. *Kurukshetra*: the field of the Kurus

The *Bhagavad Gita*, a part of the ancient Indian epos *Mahabharata*, is one of the great creations of the human spirit, if not the greatest. Indeed, when compared with the most brilliant passages of the *Gilgamesh* epic, Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, the works of the Greek tragedians, Dante’s *Divina Commedia* or the best of Shakespeare, the *Gita* soars above them all because of its philosophical and spiritual depth, its representative significance for the human condition, and the tragic though glorious setting of its action.

Arjuna, one of the five Pandavas, is the foremost *kshatriya* or knight of his time. His charioteer is his friend and mentor Krishna, king of the Vrishnis and in fact the avatar Sri Krishna. In the internecine quarrel within the Kuru clan, to which the Pandavas as well as the Kauravas belong, most kingdoms of the subcontinent have chosen sides and the day of the great confrontation, the battle in *kurukshetra*, the field of the Kurus, has dawned. Of this great slaughter Arjuna is to be the chief instrument. Among the principal enemies are close relatives, former friends and even his former gurus. Many of them he will have to kill. Arjuna “*finds suddenly that it has led him to become the protagonist of a terrific and unparalleled slaughter, a monstrous civil war involving all the cultured Aryan nations which must lead to the complete destruction of the flower of their manhood and threatens their ordered civilisation with chaos and collapse.*”¹

Overwhelmed by the tragic purport of the moment, Arjuna asks Sri Krishna to drive his chariot into the space between the two battle-ready armies, “*for he wishes to look upon all these kings of men who have come here to champion against him the cause of unrighteousness and establish as a rule of life the disregard of law, justice and truth which they would replace by the rule of a selfish and arrogant egoism.*”² Being well aware of the importance and the righteousness of his cause, he is yet suddenly overwhelmed by dejection. “O Krishna, I behold these kinsmen and friends arrayed in hostile armies, and my limbs sink beneath me and my face grows dry, and there are shudderings in my body, and my hair stands on end. Gandiva [his bow] falls from my hand and my very skin is on fire. Yea, I cannot stand and my brain whirls...” (*Gita* I, 28-32) Arjuna “thus lapsed into unheroic weakness,” a weakness which might cause him to fail in his *dharma*, his inherent duty as a warrior. And this is where Sri Krishna at first

rebukes him, and then, making him see the essential, divine justification of it all, instructs him in the yoga. Arjuna receives his initiation on the battlefield.

That the Mahabharata, the great war of the Bharatas, has been a historic event is not in doubt, but the date of the war is still under discussion. In the introduction to his *Search for the Historical Krishna*, Navaratna S. Rajaram writes: “It is beginning to be seen that even the chronology of ancient India based on the so-called Kali Date (3102 BC) for the Mahabharata period is not lacking in scientific support, falling as it does at the beginning of what we now call the Harappan Civilisation. The Kali Age – especially its harbinger, the Mahabharata War – may be seen as marking the end of the spiritual age of the Vedas to be replaced by the materialistic age in which we live. Its origins go back some 5000 years. The Mahabharata War stands at the threshold of this transition.”

The historic significance of this war was therefore considerable. No less is its significance in the spiritual progress of humanity, as it constitutes the background of the avatic Work of Sri Krishna. And the lasting significance of Sri Krishna’s teaching to the present day – witness the role it played in Sri Aurobindo’s Yoga and his marvellous *Essays on the Gita* – is that it remains an inexhaustible guide for spiritual practice, especially useful on the daily “battlefield” of us, present-day humans.

2. Dharmakshetra: the field of dharma

The *Gita*, together with the Upanishads, was the text which Sri Aurobindo constantly studied and worked out in the practice of his Yoga during the year of his imprisonment in Alipore Jail (starting in May 1908). His realisations resulted in a completely new understanding of the rationale and destiny of the world and humanity. Considering the Vedantic premise that “All is That,” he drew the ineluctable conclusion that the Earth and life on it also were That, that their essence and their meaning must be spiritual, and that therefore the aim of life and yoga could not be an egoistic escape into a Hereafter or a Nirvana, but that the aim of earthly existence had to be the evolutionary recovery of the Divine.

As the Mother once said, Sri Aurobindo’s avatic action was “an immense spiritual revolution rehabilitating Matter and the creation.” Sri Aurobindo himself wrote in a letter: “I am concerned with the earth, not with worlds beyond for their own sake; it is a terrestrial realisation that I seek and not a flight to distant summits. All other yogas regard this life as an illusion or a passing phase; the supramental yoga alone regards it as a thing created by the Divine for a progressive manifestation and takes the fulfilment of the life and the body for its object.”³

Although the evolutionary and supramental vision of Sri Aurobindo is well known, his radical attitude towards Reality, including material reality, is sometimes forgotten or diluted in ways more in line with traditional views. The following passages from *Essays on the Gita* may remind us of the true contents of his teaching.

“From a clash of material or other forces everything in this world, if not the world itself, seems to be born; by a struggle of forces, tendencies, principles, beings it seems

to proceed, ever creating new things, ever destroying the old, marching one knows not very well whither... However that may be, this is certain that there is not only no construction here without destruction, no harmony except by a poise of contending forces won out of many actual and potential discords, but also no continued existence of life except by a constant self-feeding and devouring of other life... The command seems to have gone out from the beginning, ‘Thou shalt not conquer except by battle with thy fellows and thy surroundings; thou shalt not even live except by battle and struggle and by absorbing into thyself other life. The first law of this world that I have made is creation and preservation by destruction.’

“Ancient thought accepted this starting-point so far as it could see it by scrutiny of the universe. The old Upanishads saw it very clearly and phrased it with an uncompromising thoroughness which will have nothing to do with any honeyed glosses or optimistic scuttlings of the truth. Hunger that is Death, they said, is the creator and master of this world, and they figured vital existence in the image of the Horse of the sacrifice. Matter they described by a name which means ordinarily food and they said, we call it food because it is devoured and devours creatures. The eater eating is eaten, this is the formula of the material world.”⁴

“War, said Heraclitus, is the father of all things, war is the king of all; and the saying, like most of the apophthegms of the Greek thinker, suggests a profound truth. From a clash of material or other forces everything in this world, if not the world itself, seems to be born; by a struggle of forces, tendencies, principles, beings it seems to proceed, ever creating new things, ever destroying the old ...”⁵ Words like these are rarely found in books on spirituality and yoga. Still the truth is that the world can only be changed by confronting it without excluding any of its problems, not by sidestepping them or trying to escape from them in what is fundamentally an act of egoism.

“It is only a few religions which have had the courage to say without any reserve, like the Indian, that this enigmatic World-Power is one Deity, one Trinity, to lift up the image of the Force that acts in the world in the figure not only of the beneficent Durga, but of the terrible Kali in her blood-stained dance of destruction and to say, ‘This too is the Mother; this also know to be God; this too, if thou hast the strength, adore.’”⁶ Therefore: “We must acknowledge Kurukshetra; we must submit to the law of life by Death before we can find our way to the life immortal; we must open our eyes, with a less appalled gaze than Arjuna’s, to the vision of our Lord of Time and Death and cease to deny, hate or recoil from the universal Destroyer.”⁷

Which brings us to what Arjuna was given to see on the battlefield, between two armies lined up to attack each other.

3. What Arjuna saw

After having been told by Sri Krishna that his dejection is unworthy of his dharma as a fighter, Arjuna, “the representative man of a great world-struggle and divinely guided movement of men and nations,” (SABCL, vol.13, *Essays on the Gita*, p.18) is initiated in yoga on the battlefield. Now he learns “what is the sense of the birth and

passing away of existences. He knows that the imperishable greatness of the divine conscious Soul is the secret of all these appearances.”⁸

As a confirmation of the revelation he has received from the Avatar, the Master of the Yoga himself, “he would see too the very form and body of this Godhead,” of the Absolute Existence about whom he has been told and who has done the telling.

“Thou shalt see”, replies the Avatar, “my hundreds and thousands of divine forms, various in kind, various in shape and hue ... Thou shalt see... wonders that none has beheld. Thou shalt see today the whole world related and unified in my body and whatever else thou wilt to behold.” Yet what Arjuna has to see, the human eye cannot grasp. “But there is a divine eye, an inmost seeing, by which the supreme Godhead in his Yoga can be beheld, and that eye I now give to thee,” says Sri Krishna.⁹

The glory of the Supreme is disclosed to the warrior. “The supreme Form is then made visible. It is that of the infinite Godhead whose faces are everywhere and in whom are all the wonders of existence, who multiplies all the many marvellous revelations of his being, a world-wide Divinity seeing with innumerable eyes, speaking from innumerable mouths, armed for battle with numberless divine uplifted weapons, glorious with divine ornaments of beauty, robed in heavenly raiment of deity, lovely with garlands of divine flowers, fragrant with divine perfumes. Such is the light of this body of God as if a thousand suns had risen at once in heaven. The whole world multitudinously divided and yet unified is visible in the body of the God of Gods.” Arjuna, in ecstasy, cries out: “Thou art the supreme Immutable whom we have to know, thou art the high foundation and abode of the universe, thou art the imperishable guardian of the eternal laws, thou art the sempiternal soul of existence!” (SABCL, vol.13, *Essays on the Gita*, p.364)

However, in the absoluteness of the God of Gods there is also the opposite side, the terrible dark side completing the glorious bright side. This aspect of his being too Sri Krishna reveals to Arjuna, “This Godhead who embraces the worlds with his numberless arms and destroys with his million hands, whose eyes are suns and moons, has a face of blazing fire and is ever burning up the whole universe with the flame of his energy ... The companies of the gods enter [that Being] ... It has enormous burning eyes; it has mouths that gape to devour, terrible with many tusks of destruction; it has faces like the fires of Death and Time. The kings and the captains and the heroes on both sides of the world-battle are hastening into its tusked and terrible jaws, and some are seen with crushed and bleeding heads caught between its teeth of power; the nations are rushing to destruction with helpless speed into its mouths of flame ... With those burning mouths the Form of Dread is licking all the regions around; the whole world is full of his burning energies and baked in the fierceness of his lustres ...” (SABCL, vol.13, *Essays on the Gita*, pp.364-365)

Arjuna, the protagonist in the world-battle at that time in human history, receives the full initiation. “This is the figure of the supreme and universal Being,” writes Sri Aurobindo, “the Ancient of Days who is for ever, *sanātanam puruṣam purāṇam*, this is he who for ever creates ... he who keeps the world always in existence, for he is the

guardian of the eternal laws, but who is always too destroying in order that he may new-create, who is Time, who is Death, who is Rudra the Dancer of the calm and awful dance, who is Kali with her garland of skulls trampling naked in battle and flecked with the blood of the slaughtered Titans, who is the cyclone and the fire and the earthquake and pain and famine and revolution and ruin and the swallowing ocean.” This aspect of the Divine “is an aspect from which the mind in men willingly turns away and ostrich-like hides its head so that perchance, not seeing, it may not be seen by the Terrible. The weakness of the human heart wants only fair and comforting truths or in their absence pleasant fables; it will not have the truth in its entirety because there there is much that is not clear and pleasant and comfortable but hard to understand and harder to bear.”¹⁰

4. The battle that is our battle

In the words of Sri Aurobindo, “Arjuna is the representative man of a great world-struggle and divinely guided movement of men and nations.” “...in the Gita he typifies the human soul of action brought face to face through that action in its highest and most violent crisis with the problem of human life and its apparent incompatibility with the spiritual state or even with a purely ethical ideal of perfection.”¹¹ When putting the teachings of the Gita into practice, Sri Aurobindo himself was constantly guided by Sri Krishna whom afterwards he declared to have been the Master of his Yoga (and who later incarnated into him). The Gita formed an integral part of the foundation of his avataric realisation – which is one reason why his *Essays on the Gita* remains an essential source of inspiration for all who want to follow in his footsteps. The battle on the field of the Kurus is the battle of striving humanity; it is our battle.

“This world of our battle and labour is a fierce dangerous destructive devouring world in which life exists precariously and the soul and body of man move among enormous perils, a world in which by every step forward, whether we will it or no, something is crushed and broken, in which every breath of life is a breath too of death. To put away the responsibility for all that seems to us evil or terrible on the shoulders of a semi-omnipotent Devil, or to put it aside as part of Nature, making an unbridgeable opposition between world-nature and God-Nature, as if Nature were independent of God, or to throw the responsibility on man and his sins, as if he had a preponderant voice in the making of this world or could create anything against the will of God, are clumsily comfortable devices... We have to look courageously in the face of the reality and see that it is God and none else who has made this world in his being and that so he has made it. We have to see that Nature devouring her children, Time eating up the lives of creatures, Death universal and ineluctable and the violence of the Rudra forces in man and Nature are also the supreme Godhead in one of his cosmic figures. We have to see that God the bountiful and prodigal creator, God the helpful, strong and benignant preserver is also God the devourer and destroyer. The torment of the couch of pain and evil on which we are racked is his touch as much as happiness and sweetness and pleasure. It is only when we see with the eye of the complete union and

feel his truth in the depths of our being that we can entirely discover behind that mask too the calm and beautiful face of the all-blissful Godhead and in this touch that tests our imperfection the touch of the friend and builder of the spirit in man. The discords of the world are God's discords and it is only by accepting and proceeding through them that we can arrive at the greater concords of his supreme harmony, the summits and thrilled vastnesses of his transcendent and his cosmic Ananda.”¹²

Sri Aurobindo touches here upon the question that has been on the mind of all humans since their appearance on the Earth, and to which all religions have to provide an answer: the justification of a benevolent, omnipotent and omniscient God in view of the existence of evil and suffering. In *The Life Divine* he formulates the problem as follows: “God being All-Good, who created pain and evil? If we say that pain is a trial and an ordeal, we do not solve the moral problem, we arrive at an immoral or non-moral God – an excellent world-mechanist perhaps, a cunning psychologist, but not a God of Good and Love whom we can worship, only a God of might to whose law we must submit or whose caprice we may hope to propitiate. For one who invents torture as a means of test or ordeal, stands convicted either of deliberate cruelty or of moral insensibility and, if a moral being at all, is inferior to the highest instinct of his own creatures.”¹³

As Sri Aurobindo writes in the letters of which *The Riddle of This World* is composed: no answer has ever been given to satisfy the human mind because the answer requires a consciousness vaster than ours, a cosmic consciousness, only obtainable in an advanced state of yoga. The path towards such understanding is the path of faith and surrender, warranted by the Vedantic affirmation that all is the Brahman and that our souls have chosen to incarnate in this evolutionary universe. “If it be true that the Self alone exists, it must also be true that all is the Self.”

“The gospel of universal peace and goodwill among men – for without a universal and entire mutual goodwill there can be no real and abiding peace – has never succeeded for a moment in possessing itself of human life during the historic cycle of our progress, because morally, socially, spiritually the race was not prepared and the poise of Nature in its evolution would not admit of its being immediately prepared for any such transcendence. ... A day may come, must surely come, we will say, when humanity will be ready spiritually, morally, socially for the reign of universal peace; meanwhile the aspect of battle and the nature and function of man as a fighter have to be accepted and accounted for by any practical philosophy and religion.” (SABCL, vol.13, *Essays on the Gita*, pp.44-45)

5. The Work of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother

In September 1943, when the Second World War was at its height and undecided, Sri Aurobindo wrote in a letter: “Ours is a Sadhana which involves not only devotion or union with the Divine or a perception of Him in all things, but also action as workers and instruments and a work to be done in the world or a force to be brought in the world under difficult conditions ... It does not seem to me that X is wrong in seeing in

it [i.e. the Second World War] the same problem as in Kurukshetra.” “...in this yoga,” he wrote on another occasion, “all sides of the Truth are taken up, not in the systematic forms given them formerly but in their essence, and carried to the fullest and highest significance.”¹⁴

It cannot be overstressed that the Integral Yoga of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother is a radical, revolutionary effort to change human nature. As it is “integral,” it takes up the essence and many processes of the old yogas, but it is new in its aim (the transformation and divinisation of human nature); its standpoint (if all is the Brahman, the world and the body in which we are incarnated is also the Brahman; instead of the search for escape, the appreciation of their Work must lead to an understanding and realisation of their purposes); and the totality of its method (including the yogas of devotion, knowledge and works).

The Integral Yoga is also new “because the object sought after is not an individual achievement of divine realisation for the sake of the individual, but something to be gained for the earth-consciousness here, a cosmic, not solely a supra-cosmic achievement.” And it is new “because a method has been preconized for achieving this purpose which is as total and integral as the aim set before it, viz., the total and integral change of the consciousness and nature ... I have not found this method (as a whole) or anything like it professed or realised in the old yogas,” writes Sri Aurobindo. “If I had, I should not have wasted my time in hewing out a road and in thirty years of search and inner creation when I could have hastened home safely to my goal in an easy canter over paths already blazed out, laid down, perfectly mapped, macadamised, made secure and public. Our yoga is not a retreading of old walks, but a spiritual adventure.”¹⁵

Hewing out a new road, broadening and deepening the destiny of humankind, is the task of the Avatar. In Sri Aurobindo's words: “...the Avatar is one who comes to open the Way for humanity to a higher consciousness. ... The Divine being all-powerful can lift people up without bothering to come down on earth. It is only if it is a part of the world-arrangement that he should take upon himself the burden of humanity and open the Way that Avatarhood has any meaning.... The Avatar is not bound to do extraordinary actions, but he is bound to give his acts or his work or what he is – any of these or all – a significance and an effective power that are part of something essential to be done in the history of the earth and its races. ... The Avatar is necessary when a special work is to be done and in crises of the evolution,” as Sri Krishna himself gives Arjuna to understand, saying that he incarnates as an Avatar *yuge yuge*, from age to age.¹⁶

Extraordinary actions abounded in the lives of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, the most extraordinary being of course that they hewed out the road by preparing the Earth for the descent and action of the Supermind. To this end they had to fight the good fight as no incarnated beings before them had done, for – and this is essential – the Avatar, to achieve the change he has come down for, has to take upon him the entire burden of the past, the burden of the evolution. In *Savitri* we find the lines:

*But when God's messenger comes to help the world
And lead the soul of earth to higher things,
He too must carry the yoke he came to unloose; ...
But though to the outward eye no sign appears
And peace is given to our torn human hearts,
The struggle is there and paid the unseen price;
The fire, the strife, the wrestle are within.
He carries the suffering world in his own breast ...*¹⁷

[He]

*Fought shadowy combats in mute eyeless depths,
Assaults of Hell endured and Titan strokes
And bore the fierce inner wounds that are slow to heal.*¹⁸

And in that marvellous poem "A God's Labour," which could also be called "The Avatar's Song," we read:

*My gaping wounds are a thousand and one
And the Titan kings assail,
But I cannot rest till my task is done
And wrought the eternal will.*¹⁹

Although in a case like this comparisons are otiose, we might say that the Mother's burden has been no less, as witnessed for instance by some of her conversations in *The Mother's Agenda*. At that time her transformational work in the depths of the subconscious had its repercussions in her physical body, while she had to perform what she called *la besogne obscure*, the obscure chore, and to confront *toutes les horreurs de la création*, all the horrors of creation. Now Sri Aurobindo and the Mother are accepted and adored as Gods by many; few realise that they were also the Great Warriors – Kalki with the sword, Kali doing battle – who had, unknown, to fight the crusade for the future of humanity. The reality of their Work, even of the little we know of it, is much more epochal than any of the religious myths.

*"Krishna calls upon Arjuna to carry on war of the most terrible kind and by his example encourage men to do every kind of human work, sarvakarmani. Do you contend that Krishna was an unspiritual man and that his advice to Arjuna was mistaken or wrong in principle?" asked Sri Aurobindo in a letter to a disciple. Each spiritual effort attracts automatically the adverse forces, who do not want that change and progress should occur in their dominion on Earth. It was so at the time of the Vedic Rishis; it was so at the time of the Mahabharata; it is so today in the experience of anybody who sincerely steps upon the path of yoga. "This yoga is a spiritual battle," wrote Sri Aurobindo to a disciple, "its very attempt raises all sorts of adverse forces..."*²⁰

Fighting, war, courage and heroism are not among the favourite social occurrences and virtues of the civilised mind at present, and, as mentioned above, the practice of "yoga" is usually associated with the search for tranquillity, peace and feeling well. Such, however, is not the path of the Integral Yoga, although some of its professed

practitioners seek to level the path in imitation of more familiar traditional ways. Referring to the quotations from Sri Aurobindo, such an attitude *cannot* agree with the Integral Yoga because Sri Aurobindo's and the Mother's Yoga is about changing the human nature, which is such a difficult undertaking that formerly no spiritual path, and certainly no religious one, has even tried to attempt it.

As every aspirant is soon to find out: *"This yoga is a spiritual battle; its very attempt raises all sorts of adverse forces."* The battlefield, however, is we ourselves, we composite, complex human beings. It is a *"war of our members"* in which every member, like every creature, has the right of its highest possible development. It is *"a battle, a long war with ourselves and with opposing forces around us."*

Without heroism, avers Sri Aurobindo, no human can grow into the Godhead. *"Courage, energy and strength are among the very first principles of the divine nature in action."* And the Mother had the following prayer printed in the Ashram School notebooks: *"Make of us the hero-warriors we aspire to become. May we fight successfully the great battle of the future that is to be born, against the past that seeks to endure, so that the new things may manifest and we be ready to receive them."*

*O soul, intruder in Nature's ignorance,
Armed traveller to the unseen supernal heights,
Thy spirit's fate is a battle and ceaseless march
Against invisible opponent Powers ...* (p.458)

*.....
All who would raise the fallen world must come
Under the dangerous arches of their power;
For even the radiant children of the gods
To darken their privilege is and dreadful right.
None can reach heaven who has not passed through hell.*²¹ (p.227)

6. Kurukshetra in the twentieth century

The Second World War is long past and is by most people today but vaguely remembered. Countless books have been written about it, but its true significance is to be found in the sparse comments and statements by Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, providing us with a glimpse of the crucial importance of that war for humanity, and of their part in it. It may therefore be apposite here to quote once again the following lines from a letter by Sri Aurobindo to a disciple, written in September 1943, when the situation was critical not only for the world, but also for Sri Aurobindo, the Mother and the Ashram: *"Ours is a Sadhana which involves not only devotion or union with the Divine or a perception of Him in all things and beings but also action as workers and instruments and a work to be done in the world or a force to be brought in the world under difficult conditions ... it does not seem to me that X is wrong in seeing in it [i.e. the ongoing war] the same problem as in Kurukshetra."* (SABCL, vol.26, *On Himself*, vol.26, p.398, 3.9.1943)

When “more than half” of the Ashram inmates were sympathetic towards Hitler, most of them out of hatred towards the British colonial regime, Sri Aurobindo made his and the Mother’s standpoint clear: *“I affirm again to you most strongly that this is the Mother’s war ... It is a struggle for an ideal that has to establish itself on earth in the life of humanity, for a Truth that has yet to realise itself fully and against a darkness and falsehood that are trying to overwhelm the earth and mankind in the immediate future. It is the forces behind the battle that have to be seen and not this or that superficial circumstance ...*

“It is a struggle for the liberty of mankind to develop, for conditions in which men have freedom and room to think and act according to the light in them and grow in the Truth, grow in the Spirit. There cannot be the slightest doubt that if one side wins, there will be an end of all such freedom and hope of light and truth and the work that has to be done will be subjected to conditions which would make it humanly impossible; there will be a reign of falsehood and darkness, a cruel oppression and degradation for most of the human race such as people in this country do not dream of and cannot yet at all realise.” (SABCL, vol.26, *On Himself*, p.394, 29.7.1942)

“The victory of one side (the Allies) would keep the path open for the evolutionary forces: the victory of the other side would drag back humanity, degrade it horribly and might lead even, at the worst, to its eventual failure as a race, as others in the past evolution failed and perished.” (SABCL, vol.26, *On Himself*, vol.26, p.396, 3.9.1943)

This was the Avatar speaking in defence of the Work he had come to do, to *“keep the path open for the evolutionary force.”* (SABCL, vol.26, *On Himself*, vol.26, p.396, 3.9.1943). It is at the vital, decisive evolutionary moments that the Avatar incarnates, *yuge yuge*, to create the possibility of an evolutionary step forwards and to do battle with the Forces who oppose his action with all their terrific, egoistic powers. Sri Rama had to fight Ravana at the time of the mentalisation of humanity; Sri Krishna led the fight of the Mahabharata war, supporting with his physical presence and his spiritual Power the Pandavas against the ill-intentioned Kauravas. Sri Aurobindo and the Mother were for the first time in human history the complete, bi-poled male-female Avatar. May it at last be realised that their crucial avataric effort of transforming humanity, to make a better world possible, impelled the Hostile Forces to retaliate and caused the twentieth-century wars. Actually the First and Second World War, together with the third Cold War, are closely interrelated and should be seen as one.

A direct result of the Second World War was that it brought the Yoga of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother to a halt, and this at the moment that they expected the supramental Descent to take place. Sri Aurobindo wrote later on about *“these times of world-crisis when I have to be on guard and concentrated all the time to prevent irremediable catastrophes.”*²² The Mother reminisced more explicitly: *“There was such a constant tension for Sri Aurobindo and me that it interrupted the yoga completely during the whole war. And it was for that reason that the war had come: to stop the Work. For there was an extraordinary descent of the Supermind at that time, it came like this [massive gesture]! That was exactly in 1939. Then the war came and brought*

*everything to a standstill, completely. For if we had gone on with the Work personally, we would not have been sure that there was enough time to finish it before ‘the other one’ [the Asura of Falsehood, “Hitler’s God”] had made a mess of the world, and the whole affair would have been postponed for centuries. This had to be stopped first of all: the action of the Lord of Nations – the Lord of Falsehood.”*²³

Hitler, his Nazis and the supporting Fascists of several countries lost the war. Yet the Lord of the Nations is not bound to any country or personality, and while the Allied nations were at their victory jig, he intensified his action in the knowledge that, if he did not win one way or another, there would come an end to his reign over the peoples. The situation was *“as clear as a pike-staff”* to Sri Aurobindo’s yogic knowledge and insight. *“There was a time when Hitler was victorious everywhere and it seemed certain that a black yoke of the Asura would be imposed on the whole world; but where is Hitler now and where is his rule?”* However: *“Other blacknesses threaten to overshadow or even engulf mankind ...”*²⁴

May Aurobindians bear these words of Sri Aurobindo in mind: *“It is not enough that our own hands should remain clean and our souls unstained for the law of strife and destruction to die out of the world; that which is its root must first disappear out of humanity.”* (SABCL, vol.13, *Essays on the Gita*, p.40) – *“...not till the Time-Spirit in man is ready, can the inner and ultimate prevail over the outer and immediate reality. Christ and Buddha have come and gone. But it is Rudra who still holds the world in the hollow of his hand. And meanwhile the fierce forward labour of mankind tormented and oppressed by the Powers that are profiteers of egoistic force and their servants cries for the sword of the Hero of the struggle and the word of the prophet.”*²⁵

*“The gospel of universal peace and goodwill among men – for without a universal and entire mutual goodwill there can be no real and abiding peace – has never succeeded for a moment in possessing itself of human life during the historic cycle of our progress, because morally, socially, spiritually the race was not prepared and the poise of Nature in its evolution would not admit of its being immediately prepared for any such transcendence. ... A day may come, must surely come, we will say, when humanity will be ready spiritually, morally, socially for the reign of universal peace; meanwhile the aspect of battle and the nature and function of man as a fighter have to be accepted and accounted for by any practical philosophy and religion.”*²⁶

*“...the Yoga having come down against the bed-rock of Inconscience which is the fundamental basis of all resistance in the individual and in the world”*²⁷ the situation of the world worsened because the resistance against the avataric Work intensified. *“Things are bad, are growing worse and may at any time grow worst or worse than worst if that is possible – and anything however paradoxical seems possible in the present perturbed world.”* wrote Sri Aurobindo in July 1948.²⁸ And, after a life of avataric effort, he wrote the fateful words: *“I have no intention of giving my sanction to a new edition of the old fiasco, a partial and transient spiritual opening within with no true and radical change in the external nature”*²⁹ – as had happened when Christ and the Buddha had come and were gone.

“It is not enough that our own hands should remain clean and our souls unstained for the law of strife and destruction to die out of the world; that which is its root must first disappear out of humanity.”³⁰ And Sri Aurobindo, the Avatar and Warrior of the Supermind, prepared to descend into death to extirpate, at the root of the human condition, that which on all previous occasions had barred the way of Progress. This act was the ultimate condition of the descent of a greater, a divine Consciousness on Earth. Only six years after his voluntary descent into death (1950) the Supramental Consciousness manifested in the earth atmosphere (1956).

Coda

Years before he performed the yogic Master Act of consciously descending into death to purify and change the occult foundations of the world, Sri Aurobindo had written:

*And yet I know my footprints' track shall be
A pathway towards Immortality.³¹ (The Pilgrim of the Night)*

It is good for those who follow in his footprints to remember that they continue the arduous pilgrimage of so many predecessors, all of them belonging to the Fellowship of the Aspiration:

the sadhu conquering himself on the dusty or muddy roads of the world;
the gnostic in his quest for the knowledge of his soul and its redemption;
the hermetist pondering the teachings of his secret divinity;
the spiritual alchemist experimenting in his laboratory to realise his own transformation;
the Zen-monk battering his mind against the glass walls of insanity while trying to become truly sane, enlightened;
the nun and monk kneeling in their solitary cell till their prayer is answered by a touch of God –

and so many others, whenever and wherever, who were or are carried by the aspiration that animates our lives.

References

- 1 Sri Aurobindo: SABCL, vol.13, *Essays on the Gita*, p.23.
- 2 id., p.50.
- 3 Sri Aurobindo: SABCL, vol. 22, *Letters on Yoga*, p.91.
- 4 Sri Aurobindo: SABCL, vol.13, *Essays on the Gita*, pp.37-38.
- 5 id., p.37.
- 6 id., p.42.
- 7 id., p.42.
- 8 id., p.363.
- 9 These quotations and the following in this section are from SABCL, vol.13, *Essays on the Gita*, p.364

- 10 Sri Aurobindo: SABCL, vol.13, *Essays on the Gita*, pp.365-66 (emphasis added).
- 11 id., p.18.
- 12 id., pp.367-68.
- 13 Sri Aurobindo: SABCL, vol.18, *The Life Divine*, p.94.
- 14 Sri Aurobindo: SABCL, vol. 22, *Letters on Yoga*, p.73.
- 15 id., pp.100-101.
- 16 id., pp.408,409,414,401.
- 17 Sri Aurobindo: *Savitri*, 4th rev ed, 1993, p.446.
- 18 id., p.230.
- 19 Sri Aurobindo: SABCL, vol.5, *Collected Poems*, p.100.
- 20 Sri Aurobindo: SABCL, vol. 24, *Letters on Yoga*, p.1639.
- 21 Sri Aurobindo: *Savitri*, 4th rev ed, 1993, pp. 458,227.
- 22 Sri Aurobindo: SABCL, vol. 26, *On Himself*, p.188.
- 23 *L'Agenda de Mère 1961*, pp. 410-11.
- 24 Sri Aurobindo: SABCL, vol. 26, *On Himself*, p.169.
- 25 Sri Aurobindo: SABCL, vol.13, *Essays on the Gita*, p.372.
- 26 id., pp.44-45.
- 27 Sri Aurobindo: SABCL, vol. 26, *On Himself*, p.169.
- 28 id., p.171.
- 29 Sri Aurobindo: *Letters on Yoga*, p.130.
- 30 Sri Aurobindo: SABCL, vol.13, *Essays on the Gita*, p.40.
- 31 Sri Aurobindo: SABCL, vol.5, *Collected Poems*, p.132.

The Psychic Being—A Gift of Grace

A S Dalal

As commonly understood, Grace signifies what comes to one as a result of God's mercy or favour. In the deeper and wider sense in which the term is used here, Grace stands for the all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-beneficent evolutionary Force which impels and guides human beings towards self-realisation. It is this Force, as the Mother once put it, that "*does everything, is behind everything, organises everything, conducts everything, so that the march forward to the divine realisation may be as swift, as complete, as total and harmonious as possible, considering the circumstances of the world.*"¹ Among the agents of the evolutionary Force of Grace, the psychic being may be regarded as one of the greatest, for it is the seat and source of all forces that aid the evolution of the human being, such as the aspiration for progress, will for progress, faith and trust, and the alchemical agent which transmutes difficulties and suffering into an aid for inner growth. Therefore the Mother describes the psychic being as "*a special help*" to mankind "*to lead it faster.*"²

Many years ago, a senior sadhak of the Ashram asked the present writer the difference between the soul and the psychic being. It was somewhat surprising to be asked such a basic question by someone who was presumably well-read in the works of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, had lived in the Ashram for many years, and even had a voluminous correspondence with Sri Aurobindo. Such an instance brings home the need for study in order to clarify one's understanding. The Mother once gave this advice about an excellent method for studying Sri Aurobindo. She wrote:

*It is not by books that Sri Aurobindo ought to be studied but by subjects—what he has said on the Divine, on Unity, on religion, on evolution, on education, on self-perfection, on supermind, etc., etc.*³
The Mother,

On Education, CWM, Vol. 12, p. 208.

The Mother's advice on studying Sri Aurobindo by subjects applied perhaps even more to the Mother's own works, for they consist mostly of informal talks dealing with a wide variety of subjects rather than of systematic writings on specific subjects. The present article outlines some of the salient aspects of the subject of the psychic being as dealt with in the works of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. (The following part of the article has been reproduced verbatim from the Introduction to

the author's latest compilation, *Gifts of Grace — Five Aids for Inner Growth*, published by Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 2011. Interspersed throughout the text the reader will find some words within quotation marks followed by a number in parentheses. These words are quoted from passages in the book, the number in parentheses indicating the serial number of the passage from which the words have been quoted.)

A Special Grace

The Mother describes the psychic being as "*a special grace given to human beings*" (210). It is not given to beings of the vital worlds or to inhabitants of the higher worlds regarded by some as gods or demigods; "*all those beings who have never had an earthly existence — gods or demons, invisible beings and powers — do not possess what the Divine has put into man: the psychic being*" (222). The psychic makes man an evolutionary being, unlike the non-evolving vital beings and the gods. As an evolutionary being, man is capable of collaborating in the work of the Divine's progressive manifestation on earth in the infinite process of the evolution of consciousness. "*If he fulfils the required condition [surmounting the ego], man is nearer to the Supreme than the gods are*" (222).

Source of All Urge for Growth and Perfection

As stated earlier, all aspiration and will for progress originate in the psychic being. Without the aspiration and will for progress and growth "*human beings would be quite dismal, dull, they would have an altogether animal life*" (236). As the Mother says, "*All urge for perfection comes from it, but you are unaware of the source....*"⁴

Soul, Psychic Being and Jivatman

The concepts — soul, psychic being, and Jivatman⁵ — are closely related and need to be distinguished from one another for a better understanding of the three concepts.

The soul is the psychic essence, or the spark of the Divine Consciousness which is present in everything and every being. "*The divine spark is one, universal, the same everywhere and in everything, one and infinite, of the same kind in all. You cannot say that it is a being — it is the being, if you like, but not a being*" (214). This soul "*puts on a progressive individual form which becomes the psychic being*" (213) when evolution reaches the human stage. As Sri Aurobindo puts it, "*The psychic being is the spark growing into a Fire....*"⁶ When the psychic being is "*fully formed and wholly awakened*" it "*becomes the conscious sheath of the soul around which it is formed*" (212). Since the soul and the psychic being always co-exist in human beings, and constitute a single entity, the term "*soul*" and "*psychic being*" are used interchangeably in referring to the innermost part of the human being.

The Jivatman, like the psychic being, is an individual being, but whereas the psychic being is a *terrestrial formation* which comes into existence as a result of evolution on earth, the Jivatman exists *prior to evolution* and is unborn, outside the manifestation. The psychic being is a projection of the Jivatman into the manifestation and takes birth on earth, as a delegate of the Divine, “to awaken Matter out of its inertia so that it takes the path back to the Divine” (230). The Jivatman is immutable, and so does not evolve; it is “identified with the Divine, remains identified with the Divine and does not change” (229). On the other hand, the psychic being, in taking birth on earth, loses its identification with the Divine, becomes identified with the body, the vital, and the mental; it evolves, growing progressively from life to life until it discovers its identity. The Jivatman presides from above “over the different births one after the other, but is itself unborn” (228); the psychic being, on the other hand, supports the evolution of mind, life and body from behind. The Jivatman is the true individual self, an individual centre of the one universal Self, the Atman. However, the psychic being, a projection of the Jivatman, is also often described as one’s true self.

The Gita speaks of the Jivatman as a “portion of the Divine”, a term which is applied by Sri Aurobindo to the psychic being also.

Influence of the Psychic Being

In the majority of human beings the psychic is embryonic, little developed. “The psychic remains behind and acts only through the mind, vital and physical wherever it can. For this reason the psychic being except where it is very much developed has only a small and partial, concealed and mixed or diluted influence on the life of most men” (281). “It is very much veiled by them [mental, vital, and physical parts of the being] and has to act upon them as an influence rather than by its sovereign right of direct action” (228).

“In the ordinary life there’s not one person in a million who has a conscious contact with his psychic being, even momentarily. The psychic being may work from within, but so invisibly and unconsciously for the outer being that it is as though it did not exist. And in most cases, the immense majority, almost the totality of cases, it’s as though it were asleep, not at all active, in a kind of torpor” (274).

However, the psychic being “penetrates through the most opaque substances and acts even in the unconsciousness” (271). “A certain sensitive feeling for all that is true and good and beautiful, fine and pure and noble, a response to it, a demand for it...is the most usually recognised, the most general and characteristic, though not the sole sign of this influence of the psyche. Of the man who has not this element in him or does not respond at all to this urge, we say that he has no soul.”⁷ The “small and partial, concealed and mixed or diluted influence” of the psychic being spoken of above becomes more conscious and powerful when, with sadhana, the psychic being awakens and is no longer covered up by the mind and the vital, and comes forward. “By coming forward is meant that it comes from behind the veil, its presence is felt already in the waking daily consciousness, its influence fills, dominates, transforms the mind and vital and their movements, even the physical”

(281); “it begins to take hold of the rest of the being, to influence it and change it so that all may become the true expression of the inner soul” (282). Instead of exerting only a small and diluted influence on the outer parts, the psychic begins to dominate, govern and transform the outer being.

Contact with the Psychic Being — Discovery of the Soul

The phrase “contact with the psychic”, used by the Mother, generally means discovering, becoming aware of, establishing a union or identification with the psychic being as one’s true self. It is also spoken of as awakening of the psychic being.

“When the psychic being awakens, you grow conscious of your own soul; you know your self. And you no longer commit the mistake of identifying yourself with the mental or with the vital being. You do not mistake them for the soul” (284).

“One is aware of one’s soul, feels the psychic to be one’s true being, the mind and the rest begin to be only instruments of the inmost within us” (281).

“It is only with the sadhana and a very persistent effort that one succeeds in having a conscious contact with his psychic being. Naturally, it is possible that there are exceptional cases ...

“In almost, almost all cases, a very, very sustained effort is needed to become aware of one’s psychic being. Usually it is considered that if one can do it in thirty years one is very lucky — thirty years of sustained effort” (274).

A consciously attained contact with the psychic being in the sense of identification — which comes after a long sadhana — is definitive; that is, it cannot be undone. In other words, once someone is identified with the psychic being, one never loses the identification. But before there is a definitive conscious contact with the psychic being, one can have “momentary contacts”⁸ with it which come and go. It is more like coming “under the influence of the psychic even without knowing it...For example, when you find yourself in a very great difficulty or a very great physical danger, and suddenly feel this, this force coming into you, the force of a faith, an absolute trust in the divine Grace which helps you. So it means that there is a conscious contact with one’s psychic and it comes to help you — it is a special grace bestowed.”⁹

Thus a momentary contact with the psychic being is a *transient* experience, whereas a definite contact with one’s psychic is an *abiding realisation*.

Mission of the Psychic Being

The fundamental mission of the psychic being is to be an instrument of the Divine for the transformation of the outer physical, vital and mental being, so that the outer being can serve as a vehicle for the manifestation of the Divine on earth.

“...every psychic being which is in a body has states of being formed in the present formation. Its work is always to transform these; it is as though this were the part of the universe given to him for his work

of transformation. And even if he has a vaster mission than that of his own person, unless he does this work in his person he cannot do the other..." (245.)

"Each man has then a mission to fulfil, a role to play in the universe, a part he has been given to learn and take up in the cosmic Purpose, a part which he alone is capable of executing and none other" (241).

But the first step towards the transformation of the outer being is for the psychic being to discover itself and become one with the Divine. The psychic being, "from the very moment of birth in a physical body... pushes the whole being towards this fulfilment [discovery of one's Divine self]" (244)... It "seeks, seeks, seeks to awaken the consciousness and re-establish the union" (244).

Role of the Psychic: (a) Guiding the Outer Being

Before the self-discovery, when the psychic being is still veiled by and identified with the outer physical, vital and mental consciousness, it supports the growth of the outer being from behind, giving it a sense of continuity, and exerting an unconscious influence over it.

Besides exerting an unconscious influence on the outer being, the psychic being also organises, quite unconsciously for the outer being, its life circumstances so as to push it towards the spiritual goal:

"You may know nothing of the existence of a psychic being within you and yet be guided by it" (268).

"It is usually the psychic which guides the being. One knows nothing about it because one is not conscious of it but usually it is that which guides the being" (267).

"Absolutely unconsciously for the individual, most of the time; but it is the psychic which organises his existence" (265).

Role of the Psychic: (b) Unification of the Outer Being

From the viewpoint of Sri Aurobindo's yoga, a most important work for inner growth is the unification of the conflicting parts of the outer being — physical, vital, mental. It is only the psychic being that is capable of accomplishing this work of unification; the different parts of the outer being "can unite only under the psychic influence and action" (247).

"The work of unifying the being consists of:

"(1) becoming aware of one's psychic being.

"(2) putting before the psychic being, as one becomes aware of them, all one's movements, impulses, thoughts and acts of will, so that the psychic being may accept or reject each of these movements, impulses, thoughts or acts of will. Those that are accepted will be kept and carried out; those that are rejected will be driven out of the consciousness so that they may never come back again.

"It is a long and meticulous work that may take years to be done properly" (249).

This unification of the being by organising it around the psychic is indispensable if one wants to become a conscious instrument of the Divine.

"You may be moved, pushed into action and used as unconscious instruments by the divine Force, if you have a minimum of goodwill and sincerity. But to become a conscious instrument, capable of identification and conscious, willed movements, you must have this inner organisation; otherwise you will always be running into a chaos somewhere, a confusion somewhere or an obscurity, an unconsciousness somewhere. And naturally your action, even though guided exclusively by the Divine, will not have the perfection of expression it has when one has acquired a conscious organisation around this divine Centre" (277).

"When humanity was first created, the ego was the unifying element. It was around the ego that the different states of being were grouped; but now that the birth of superhumanity is being prepared, the ego has to disappear and give way to the psychic being, which has slowly been formed by divine intervention in order to manifest the Divine in the human being" (280).

Progress of the Psychic Being

Depending upon the stage of evolution of the psychic being, it "may be like a spark in the darkness of the being or it may be a being of light, conscious, fully formed and independent. There are all the gradations between the two" (235).

As stated previously, the psychic at its origin is only a spark of the Divine. Through progressive experience in successive lives it gradually builds up a conscious personality, and finally becomes "a fully individualised, fully conscious being and master of itself" (257).

"Each time that the soul takes birth in a new body it comes with the intention of having a new experience which will help it to develop and to perfect its personality. This is how the psychic being is formed from life to life and becomes a completely conscious and independent personality which, once it has arrived at the summit of its development, is free to choose not only the time of its incarnation, but the place, the purpose and the work to be accomplished" (258).

The psychic being "keeps on progressing in an unbroken line, its movement a continuous ascension. All other movements [physical, vital, mental] are broken and discontinuous" (259). "It is just because progress is not constant and perpetual in the physical world that there is a growth, an apogee, a decline and a decomposition. For anything that does not advance, falls back; all that does not progress, regresses" (257).

When the psychic being is fully developed, it becomes master of its destiny. It is free to decide whether to take another birth on earth or not. It can choose to retire and repose in bliss in the psychic world, or it can choose to come back in a body to help in the work of the infinitely progressive manifestation of the Divine on earth.

(Adapted from the Preface and the Introduction to the author's latest compilation, *Gifts of Grace — Five Aids for Inner Growth*, published by Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 2011)

Notes on Authors

(We shall include names of only those writers who have not figured previously in this section)

Dalal, Dr. A S A Moslem by birth, Dr. Dalal was born in Tanzania, moved to the Sri Aurobindo Ashram for seven years, then worked in the U.S. as a psychologist for over two decades before returning to the Ashram where he now lives. He has compiled about a dozen books based on the work of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, and has written two books integrating Sri Aurobindo's psychological thought with modern psychology. Various books of his, published in India and abroad, have been translated into French, Italian, German, Russian, Spanish, Portuguese, Lithuanian, Korean and several Indian languages.

Deshpande, RY (born 17 Apr. 1931) obtained his M.Sc in Physics from Osmania University, Hyderabad. Thereafter he worked as a Research Physicist successively at Tata Institute of Fundamental Research, Bombay, 1955-57, BARC, Bombay, 1957-80, and Lawrence Berkeley Laboratory, Berkeley, California, USA. Headed several Atomic Energy & Space Projects in Advanced technology. Prof. of Physics at SAICE, Pondicherry since 1981 where he also teaches Astrophysics, *Savitri*, *The Future Poetry* and Science & Society. Editor of Mother India, 1996-2004; Sr Editor of Science-Culture-Integral Yoga (SCIY) web magazine, founded in Los Angeles, 2007-8. A prolific writer, he has to his credit some 50 scientific research papers in professional journals, over 20 books of prose and poetry and nearly a dozen publications ready for publication or are under preparation.

Narad (Richard Eggenberger), is a longtime member of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram and Auroville. Landscaper, plumerian, gardener, musician and poet, Narad was born on 29th July 1938 at New Jersey, U.S.A. He studied the philosophy of Rudolf Steiner including his bio-dynamic practices and studied Raja Yoga from a Pandit, at the same time prepared for an operatic career for the Metropolitan Opera on a scholarship from one of the leading mezzo-sopranos of the day, Regina Resnick and took voice lessons from her teacher, Rosalie Miller. He arrived in Pondicherry on November 23rd 1961, when he had just turned 23. He began the OM Choirs in the Ashram, Auroville and many places around the world. Narad was asked by Mother in 1969 to design and build the Matrimandir Gardens. He was responsible for preparing the first slides of Huta's *Meditations on Savitri* paintings, which the Mother arranged to be shown in the Ashram theatre, and later in Auroville, in 1972 as part of the celebrations of

Sri Aurobindo's Birth Centenary. Narad worked personally with the Mother on the significances of flowers and on the Matrimandir Gardens in Auroville. He is past President of the Plumaria Society of America and author of numerous books and articles on tropical plants. He is the editor of the book "*Flowers and their messages*", the first book published by the Ashram on spiritual significance of flowers

Sethna, K D renamed **Amal Kiran** by Sri Aurobindo, was born in 1904. He joined the Ashram in 1927 and is one of the foremost disciples of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother fortunately still amongst us today. He is a distinguished poet, a literary critic, an artist and a seer (*kavi*). Apart from his own poems, he is a great prose writer on a wide variety of subjects – poetry, literature, history, Christianity, philosophy and of course Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. He was founder and editor of *Mother India: monthly review of culture* for 50 years and is acknowledged to be one of the greatest authorities on Sri Aurobindo's revelatory epic poem *Savitri – a legend and a symbol*.

Sunayana Panda grew up in the Ashram as a student of Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education and is in the editorial team of its alumni journal, *The Golden Chain*. She holds a M.A. in English Literature and has been in the field of education for over 25 years. Sunayana has brought to the stage several of Sri Aurobindo's poetical works and contributes regularly to various Ashram-related journals.

Vladimir Iatsenko, after graduating from St. Petersburg University of Russia in Sanskrit Language and Literature, General and Theoretical Linguistics, studied in Poona University 1991-92 Sanskrit Grammar: Panini Ashtadhyayi. From 1992 he is a member of Auroville community, working in Savitri Bhavan as Sanskrit teacher and researcher in the Vedas, the Upanishads and the Gita. He is also having courses in Indian Scriptures at ICIS in Delhi, SACAR and IPI in Pondicherry and University of Human Unity in Auroville