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**THE POETRY OF SRI AUROBINDO:
MANTRA, METRICS AND MEANING**

BY ROD HEMSELL

Abstract: These lectures present the poetry of Sri Aurobindo in the context of two treatises that he wrote on the theory of poetry. *The Future Poetry*, originally serialized in the magazine *Arya* from 1917 to 1920, was revised by him in 1950 and first published in book form in 1953. *On Quantitative Metre* was written and published in 1942. This is an attempt to introduce the theories presented in these works and also to introduce a wide and representative selection of Sri Aurobindo's poetry, both as illustration and in order to provide a relatively substantive sample of his poetic achievement. Because these lectures were based on minimal notes and presented rather informally over a period of three months, they rely more on the verbal context and auditory association than on academic rigor or literary analysis. Like the poetry itself, this content was meant to be heard rather than read. Although the literal transcription has been edited to some extent for readability, the interested reader is encouraged to listen to the original, especially in order to fully appreciate the poetry, which has been presented especially for its remarkable, and essential, sound quality, as well as for its important spiritual message. It was Sri Aurobindo's gift, and his intention, to create for us an inspired word-music which he believed had the potential to transform consciousness.

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The Poetry of Sri Aurobindo – 1

Mantra, Metrics and Meaning

In this course, I would like to approach Sri Aurobindo's poetry from the point of view of Mantra, Metrics and Meaning, each of which I believe to be unique to Sri Aurobindo. Sri Aurobindo's interpretation and application of the principle of Mantra is unique. What poetry is or should be, for Sri Aurobindo, is a special peculiar intensity of speech. He identifies it as Mantra, which indicates both a form and a content. But, it is inspirational and transformational in a way that is not even generally understood by the term *mantra*. The term mantra applies to a superhuman inspiration and speech. Sri Aurobindo applies the term to a kind of poetic creativity that conveys the truth of things, normal human things, in a different way. He says,

“The Mantra is a direct and most heightened, and intensest, and most divinely burdened rhythmic word which embodies an intuitive and revelatory inspiration and ensouls the mind with the sight and presence of the very self, the inmost reality of things.”¹

Not gods, not divine planes of consciousness – Things. This is a theory of poetry, he says, which is very different from any that we now hold. And in fact, he says, no thinking age has been so far removed from such a view. In *The Future Poetry*, while he is exploring different periods and styles, he points out that since the 18th century or so we have lost the ability to read poetry. We have learned to ‘read’ poetry, but not to read *poetry*. We look at the words and the images on the page and we think about what they mean. By doing that, by generally accepting through the last couple of hundred years that this is what we are supposed to do, that this is what poetry is, we lose touch with the essence of poetry. The kind of poetry that Sri Aurobindo bases his theory on is basically classical, mythical poetry - the poetry of Homer, Vyasa and Valmiki, the poetry of Virgil. And the subject matter of those poets was heroic, the heroic time when the gods and men conversed, when the gods were visible, and the poet mediated them. He says, to read Homer in the original Greek is literally to bring down the gods from Mount Olympus. The poetry of the Veda is meant to bring down the gods, to reveal them, to allow that Word to express itself, which reveals that of which it speaks to the hearer. It's Divine speech. Sri Aurobindo says, Savitri is the Goddess of illumined speech. He refers to Her continually in *Savitri* as the Word, the Rhythm, the Sound, and the Silence. She is the Word and the Silence. So, that ‘word’ comes from somewhere else, and it comes on a kind of rhythm, it is carried by a rhythm which you hear and through which you see.

Sri Aurobindo speaks about this at length in *The Future Poetry* where he says that this age is perhaps further than any other from such a view. And then he says, “a greater era of man’s living seems to be in promise, but first there must intervene a poetry which will lead him towards it.”² This is a theory of poetry as revelatory power and guide, a kind of intercessor whose purpose is to “cleave the darkness, raise the Earth-soul to Light, and bring down God into the lives of men”.³

The importance that Sri Aurobindo gives to this theory of poetry can be noted in the archival discovery that he revised 20 chapters of *The Future Poetry* in 1950. He spent the years of the 30’s and 40’s writing poetry. The master of the Supramental knowledge spent those years writing poetry. He worked on the poem *Ilion*, and in 1942 he published a book on quantitative metre about the theory of poetry that he was applying at that time in the major works he was writing. His theory of poetry is written about that writing that he was doing. He didn’t write the theory of quantitative metre in 1893 when he wrote his early poems, nor in 1931 when he was writing about the inspiration of poetry from the Overmind. He wrote about it in 1942. He was undoubtedly then at the very height of his poetic power and artistry. This is when he enlarged and completed *Savitri*. This was the big push when many chapters of *Savitri* were added, all the rest completed, and the purpose of it and style of creating it could not have been more present to his consciousness.

Just the mere fact of the importance that Sri Aurobindo gave to this work, considering who he was, his mission, is extraordinary, it’s unbelievable in a way. For us, then, to come to understand this a bit fully and in depth would perhaps be worthwhile: what it is that Sri Aurobindo thought so important to burn the midnight oil of the last 20 years of his life, and to say in 1944, that he regretted not having more time for *Ilion*... It was apparently disturbing that he didn’t have more time to finish it, and in fact he didn’t finish it. However, there are a hundred pages of it there, and it is magnificent and illustrates very well the theory.

So the best way to learn the theory is to read the poetry. There is absolutely no point in talking about or studying to a great extent the theory alone, but to know generally about it helps. It helped me to come to terms with this question of the importance of such poetry. Sri Aurobindo examines the principles of poetic structure that make mantric poetry possible. He writes about metrics, known in English as prosody. How one scans a line of poetry, what are the principles in the construction of a line of poetry; besides the inspiration and descent of force, there is technique. Sri Aurobindo mastered this technique of English poetry. About Mantra, that additional aspect of the technique, he mentions “the powerful sweep, the divine rush, or the assured truth of tread of that greater word music.”⁴ And here he is also speaking about something he calls the principle of quantity, quantitative metre, which he said at that time was not a principle that was applied very consciously in English poetry although it’s always there, it’s present. But in the classical languages it’s very prevalent. He endeavored to bring out in English this principle.

The principle of quantity that he insists upon is based upon the same principle found prominently in the classical poetry of Greek and Sanskrit. True quantity, he said, “must be something inherent in the tongue recognizable everywhere in its rhythm. Not an artifice or convention governing its verse forms but a technique of nature flowing spontaneously through the very texture of the language as a whole. It is this principle of rhythm and measure which is somehow synonymous with a free outflow of significant sound and harmonious word from the depths of the Spirit.”⁵

Sri Aurobindo defines three fundamental determinants of poetic metre or rhythm: accent, stress, and quantity. He points out that English poetry is usually constructed on the principles of accent and stress. So, I will demonstrate, and we will hear again and again, examples of these principles. Don't worry about understanding these principles analytically. They can only be heard. But, after you hear them you can distinguish and define how they work. He points out that the lack of a certain subtlety and power has been responsible for the deficit in English poetry of the principle of quantity, - a certain lack of subtlety and power. What could that possibly be, that degree of subtlety and that degree of power which would enable the English poet to bring forth this principle of quantity which is the outflow of the Spirit?

I would suggest it is especially because of a certain extraordinary subtlety and power of poetic consciousness that Sri Aurobindo was able to discover this secret. His consciousness, the yogic consciousness, combined with his poetic genius enabled him to see this, to do this. He said, “It requires a great poetic force which adds the atmosphere of the unexpressed reality of the thing in itself.”⁶ Even the thing itself doesn't express this degree of its reality, its Truth. Even the person, even the flower, even the sunrise, even the vast movement of human civilization doesn't express outwardly the innermost truth of itself. It labors, it lives, it exists for that purpose. But temporal reality is limited; the thing itself, the Being of the thing is unlimited, Infinite. Whitehead says in philosophy that we always move from the finite to the infinite and from the infinite to the finite in our attempt to allow the truth of things to become self evident and then to express that truth. We go from the most incremental here and now specificity to the most general ideal truth. We constantly try to relate them to each other in order to understand what things really are and not just what they appear to be, because their appearance is not the full expression of what they are.

Sri Aurobindo says then, - it is the atmosphere of the unexpressed reality of the thing itself, which it is in the power of rhythm, of word music, as of all music, to create. Here the poet, as Sri Aurobindo says, is not inventing poetry; the poet is channeling from the vital plane, from the mental plane, from the higher mind or Overmind, from the psychic plane; the poet is the channel of the thing itself. In this book, *Letters on Poetry*, which is a compilation of his letters, he says “Poetry comes always from some subtle plane through the creative vital and uses the outer mind and other external instruments for transmission only. The most genuine and perfect poetry is written when the original source is able to throw its inspiration, pure and undiminished, into the vital, and there takes its true native form and power of speech, exactly reproducing the inspiration without alteration, of what it receives from the godheads of the inner or superior spaces.”⁷

He is speaking about the poetry of the godheads, the principles, the universal truths of things in their manifestation, so that we can come to know both the limited manifestation and that divine reality which is trying to express itself in Things. “If the substance, rhythm, form, words, come down all together ready formed from the plane of poetic creation, that is the perfect type of inspiration. The Overmind is the ultimate source of intuition, illumination, or heightened power of the planes immediately below it, - higher mind, intuitive mind, poetic intelligence - it can lift them up into its own greater intensity or give out of its intensity to them or touch or combine their powers together with something of its own greater power. Or, they can receive or draw something from it or from each other...”⁸ – that is, the planes of consciousness can do this.

In one of his letters he says that in all of poetry there are only a few lines that have been touched by the Overmind inspiration directly. He also explains that his endeavor in writing *Savitri* was to write from that plane. In response to a critic who was criticizing his repeated use of so called “highlight words”, he said, “What of one who lives in an atmosphere full of these highlights, in a consciousness in which the finite, not only the occult but the earthly finite, is bathed in the sense of the Eternal, the Illimitable infinite, the immensities or intimacies of the Timeless. A new art of words written from a new consciousness demands a new technique.”⁹

In *The Future Poetry*, Sri Aurobindo is speaking about something which nobody perhaps understands. I’ve read it many times, and today when I pick it up and read it, I sometimes don’t know what he is talking about. Sometimes he writes four or five pages with this power, this incredible, synthetic view, his vision of what poetry is, explaining all of the planes, the images and what it is doing, and you are used to reading prose, philosophy and criticism. It’s only when you start reading the pages aloud that you begin to get some sense of what he is talking about. At least you know he knows what he is talking about. But, you still don’t get it. I challenge you. Read the last six chapters of *The Future Poetry* and tell me what he is talking about. That book, these letters, and the *Collected Poems* are on our reading list. We will read from each of them.

(Question) *Why don’t we understand Sri Aurobindo’s writings?*

If Sri Aurobindo is writing about Overmind inspiration, and he is writing about the kind of poetry that Overmind inspiration produces, how can we possibly understand that? He says that this kind of poetry is needed to show us what’s possible in the future evolution, that the further evolution of consciousness he envisions isn’t going to happen until something mediates between that plane of consciousness and our ordinary consciousness and begins to show us the way of seeing of that consciousness, the way of feeling, the way of being of that consciousness, and then we have an aid, an intercessor, a *paracleitos*, in Greek- the divine logos in the form of mantric poetry.

I’ll save the bit on English accent, stress and quantity until next time, and we will go a little more in depth into that. There are two things, I think, to be realized. One is what we’ve been talking about: that Sri Aurobindo’s poetry is unique and that the principle and

power of Mantra is being applied in a way that it was not previously applied. That's more about the metrics and the music. The meaning is that the poet is describing the processes of being and knowing on the planes, the godheads of the planes, the powers of the planes: the vital as a whole is his territory, the mind as a whole, the intuitive and higher mind as a whole, are his territory; his consciousness is dwelling on the level of the universal planes. He is not speaking from mortal experience. Even if he speaks "about" mortal experience, he is not speaking from the plane of mortal experience.

Another special poetic experiment he conducted at the time he was also writing *Ilion* and *Savitri* is called *Ahana*. This one is different from the others in that it combines quantitative hexameter with rhymed couplets. Normally he writes free verse or unrhymed verse; *Ilion* is like that. He uses different kinds of rhyme in different poems and in *Savitri* it is an extraordinarily subtle and free kind of rhyme or blank verse. In the poem *Ahana*, which is especially musical, he uses both quantitative hexameter and rhymed couplets, which he does not use in *Savitri*. There he uses pentameter. Hexameter is a very long line, actually two lines of poetry combined, with a change of metre between the segments and it requires an extraordinary concentration and power of speech, and balance from line to line. This is Sri Aurobindo's poetic art at its absolute height, but he is using it for a very light melodic purpose here. The meaning as always in Sri Aurobindo's poetry is that he is performing the Vedic sacrifice, aspiring to the plane of the gods, communicating with the gods, and allowing the gods to respond through him. That is the meaning of all his poems.

His little introductory statement says, "Ahana, the dawn of God, descends on the world, where amid the strife and trouble of mortality, the hunters of joy, the seekers after knowledge, the climbers in the quest of power are toiling up the slopes or waiting in the valleys. As she stands on the mountains of the east, voices of the hunters of joy are the first to greet her."¹⁰ Sri Aurobindo is identifying himself here with a type of humanity that we would probably learn about only in the classics: the hunters of joy, those for whom the delight of life is paramount. Should we dare such a thing? These ascetic and serious souls striving for transformation, should we dare such a thing? Sri Aurobindo seems to think it has some importance.

"Vision delightful alone on the hills whom the silences cover,
Closer yet lean to mortality; human stoop to thy lover.
Wonderful, gold like a moon in the square of the sun where thou strayest
Glimmers thy face amid crystal purities; mighty thou playest
Sole on the peaks of the world, unafraid of thy loneliness. Glances
Leap down from thee to us, dream-seas and light-falls and magical trances;
Sun-drops flake from thy eyes and the heart's caverns packed are with pleasure
Strange like a song without words or the dance of a measureless measure.
Tread through the edges of dawn, over twilight's grey-lidded margin;
Heal earth's unease with thy feet, O heaven born delicate virgin.
Children of Time whose spirits came down from eternity, seizing
Joys that escape us, yoked by our hearts to a labour unceasing,
Earth-bound, torn with our longings, our life is a brief incompleteness.

Thou hast the stars to sport with, the winds run like bees to thy sweetness.
 Art thou not heaven-bound even as I with the earth? Hast thou ended
 All desirable things in a stillness lone and unfriended?
 Only is calm so sweet? Is our close tranquility only?
 Cold are the rivers of peace and their banks are leafless and lonely.
 Heavy is godhead to bear with its mighty sun burden of luster.
 Art thou not weary of only the stars in their solemn muster?
 Sky-hung the chill bare plateaus and peaks where the eagle rejoices
 In the inhuman height of his nesting, solitudes voices
 Making the heart of the silences lonelier? Strong and untiring,
 Death with the cry of the waterfall, lonely the pine lives aspiring.
 Two are the ends of existence, two are the dreams of the Mother:
 Heaven unchanging, earth with her time-beats, yearn to each other –
 Earth-souls needing the touch of the heavens peace to recapture,
 Heaven needing earth's passion to quiver its peace into rapture.
 Marry O lightning eternal, the passion of a moment-born fire!
 Out of thy greatness draw close to the breast of our mortal desire!
 Is he thy master, Rudra the mighty, Shiva ascetic?
 Has he denied thee his world? In his dance that they tell of, ecstatic,
 Slaying, creating, calm in the midst of the movement and madness,
 Stole there no rhythm of an earthly joy and a mortal sadness?
 Wast thou not made in the shape of a woman? Sweetness and beauty
 Move like a song of the gods in thy limbs and to love is thy duty
 Graved in thy heart as on tablets of fate; joy's delicate blossom
 Sleeps in thy lids of delight; all Nature hides in thy bosom
 Claiming her children unborn and the food of her love and her laughter.
 Is he the first? Was there none then before him? Shall none come after?
 He who denies and his blows beat down on our hearts like a hammer's,
 He whose calm is the silent reply to our passion and clamours!
 Is not there deity greater here new-born in a noble
 Labour and sorrow and struggle than stilled in to rapture immobile?
 Earth has beatitudes warmer than heaven's that are bare and undying,
 Marvels of Time on the crest of the moments to Infinity flying.
 Earth has her godheads; the Tritons sway on the toss of the billows,
 Emerald locks of the Nereids stream on their foam-crested pillows, -
 Dryads peer out from the branches, Naiads glance up from the waters;
 High are her flame-points of joy and the gods are ensnared by her daughters."¹¹

This poem is about twenty-five minutes long, altogether, and it ends with an absolutely ecstatic triumphant joy. Another principle of mantric poetry as Sri Aurobindo applies it, is that its rhythms gradually bring you up to that level of inspiration where you see those qualities of beauty and joy and they begin to flow like honey in the atmosphere. This is Sri Aurobindo's poetry. In the next lecture we shall look closely at his theory of quantitative metre and begin to explore how it works. For this we will concentrate on some of the shorter poems. Then, to explore more deeply both the music and the meaning

of Sri Aurobindo's poetry we will dwell for sometime on *Savitri*. And at the end we will return to the epic hexametres of *Ilion*.

Savitri Bhavan
17/09/2008

Notes

1. Sri Aurobindo, *The Future Poetry* (1997 ed.), p. 218
2. Ibid. p. 219
3. Sri Aurobindo, *Savitri* (1993 ed.), pp. 172 and 699
4. Op. cit., p. 322
5. Ibid. p. 321
6. Ibid. p. 327
7. Sri Aurobindo, *Letters on Poetry* (1972), p. 5
8. Ibid. p. 7
9. Ibid. p. 81
10. Sri Aurobindo, *Collected Poems* (1972), p. 523



The Poetry of Sri Aurobindo – 2

The Theory of Quantitative Metre

The purpose of these next few sessions will be to further the general aim, known philosophically as the “final cause”, of being able to read Sri Aurobindo’s poetry, especially *Savitri*, aurally, which is to say, to be heard. Basically, what I want to go over is pages 324-342 of *The Future Poetry*, but not everything there. I don’t mean to say that there is not more which is worth reading. But the essential things are here.

We are going to learn the basics of English metrics. Sri Aurobindo has given very clear, simple and direct indications, but unless you are familiar with the subject, even reading his definitions and examples might not make a very strong impression on you. If you have read a great deal of English poetry then his commentary will make an impression on you, just by reading it. But how many people today have read a great deal of English poetry? Who here has read, for example, the major part of Shelly’s poetry?

Sri Aurobindo read the major part of Shelley’s poetry, and also of Wordsworth’s, and of Keats’ and Byron’s poetry, and so on, all the way up to, here, there are also a few pages on Whitman and on T.S. Eliot. The essay we are reading on quantitative metre was written in 1942. In 1942 Sri Aurobindo was the master poet. He was well into the writing of *Savitri* and *Ilion*. He was not “fooling around” anymore with lyrics. He was writing very serious poetry. *Savitri* has an intention which can only be communicated through poetry, as we know. Otherwise, he would have been happy to stay with *The Life Divine* and translations of the Upanishads. So, he knew that something else was needed, as we read last time from an early chapter of *The Future Poetry*. He believed that a new poetry was needed for the evolution of consciousness, as a bridge between the ordinary mentality and the higher mind, before the Overmind could descend.

This is the large structure. At some point in our reading, we will understand very well what Sri Aurobindo means by the Overmind inspiration coming through poetry. That will be one of our long-term goals. And, in order to know that, we must be able to hear it. It is possible to get a direct descent from the reading of and listening to the poetry without knowing what we are going to learn. But that is a boon, a grace given to those who happen to be in the presence of that invocation at that moment. To use that tool, that gift,

continually for transformation is the real point. So then, the question is how to do that most effectively?

Sri Aurobindo explains in great detail that there is a certain aspect of that new poetry which is essential. The ‘eye’ doesn’t get it, he says; the ear gets it, and it is rhythm. That’s it. That rhythm only comes through a kind of energetic sound transmission. The rhythm builds up, and the images become clearer, and your mind begins to resonate with that plane of vision. Sound and sight then become simultaneous. And as that sound and sight build, the energy flows in. That stillness, vastness, universality, and also that vibration in the being; that is really what it is. To get to that point we will start with small baby steps today. We begin with the elemental structure of English poetry, and specifically accentual metre.

 / / / / /
[The way / was long], / [the wind / was cold], /

 / \ / / /
[The min / strel] [was / infirm] / [and old] /

“Here there is a regular iambic beat determined by the persistent accentual high pitch or low pitch falling on the second syllable of the foot.”¹ If you read this verse with your eye you might not hear anything. Try it, silently, and see what you hear. Sri Aurobindo has kindly marked the beat for us. Eventually, you will simply know, when you read the line aloud, where the accent, the stress, and the quantity length, or weight, lies. As he will explain, it’s the weight which is really essential. But he is beginning on a simple level. If you read this verse aloud you may hear the accents that are marked.

You may have ingrained in your mind a standard poetic rhythm like short-long, short-long: - -, - -, which comes naturally as you read, but Sri Aurobindo will tell you that this kind of artificial imposition on the line of poetry doesn’t work. It doesn’t give you a true reading. It is what we were taught in school: 1-2 3-4, 1-2 3-4, da daa, da daa, da daa, da daa. Be aware that you may tend to look for and impose those patterns on what you read. We have shown in brackets the natural weight lengths of the lines which help to break such a monotonous pattern.

What we are going to survey tonight is a variety of metric structures like those above, which are generally iambic. We are going to look at spondee, which is two long accents. Trochee is a long and a short. Iamb is a short and a long. These are common, similar feet, or metric measurements. Then we will look at dactyl, which has a long and two shorts, and anapest, which is two shorts and a long. Anapest and dactyl are used all the time in Sri Aurobindo’s poetry. And in classical hexameter generally, these are extremely common, as we will start to hear. Corresponding to spondee there is something called pyrrhic, like a flame or breath – two shorts. Then we have a bacchius, a short and two longs. And there is the anti-bacchius, two longs and a short. Then we have the amphibrach, short-long-short.

A “measure” is a foot of poetry, usually either two or three syllables. There is a limited, finite number of possible combinations of sound in English poetry. If you put together three, four, or five syllables and you say them all the different possible ways, the ways you would say them are those given above. For example, < get lost / you dog > is a line of two iambic feet.

The iambic pattern is a well known and regular metre in English, as the example above shows. As Sri Aurobindo says, “the instance given is an example of iambic verse with an extreme, almost mechanical regularity of beats; so, for completeness, we may turn to poetry of a freer and larger type.”²

Full man/y a glo/rrious mor/ning have / I seen
 Flattering / the moun/tain-tops / with sove/reign eye

We will see examples of considerably greater freedom than this, but for now this is the example he gives us, and he has marked the feet. Let’s read it aloud. (...reading with natural stress...)

The way we have read it, we haven’t tried to emphasize anything. We have just read the lines as if we were reporting an interesting event. If you listen and watch the markings, these lines have a very subtle and precise metre. But if you read it like a fourth grader, it will be a da da, da da, da da, da da, and its nonsense. The natural stress lengths fall like this:

Full many / a glorious morning / have I seen

Here we can begin to hear the natural weight of the sound value, which falls in this case most heavily on the words “many”, “morning”, and “seen”, while the underlying accentual measure has been marked according to conventional scansion in the first example. You shouldn’t decide artificially where the stress is, however. The meaning of true rhythm in poetry is that it is natural. Sri Aurobindo complains in this essay that poets sometimes use a couple of pre-determined principles of accent and stress and try to write complex quantitative hexameter using these principles, and it is a complete failure. He says that what English poets haven’t fully recognized is that quantity is natural to the language. We will learn what he means by this more natural quantitative length or weight measure in his next example, where it becomes absolutely clear. Here he uses a line from Webster, who is better known of course for the American dictionary, to illustrate the freedom of the basic iambic structure, along with the natural weight that makes it work:

Cover / her face; / my eyes daz/zle; she / died young

Sri Aurobindo says, ”...where there is only one iamb in the five feet of the line, the other four feet are respectively a trochee, a bacchius, a pyrrhic and a closing spondee. Nevertheless, the basic system of the metre or at least some form of its spirit asserts itself even here by a predominant beat on the final syllable of most of the feet: all the variations

[Are of / imag/ina/|tion] [all / compact]:
[One sees / more de/vils] [than / vast hell] / [can hold];

That is, the madman; the lover, all as frantic,
Sees Helen's beauty in a brow of Egypt:
The poet's eye, in a fine frenzy rolling,
Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven;
And as imagination bodies forth
The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen
Turns them to shapes and gives to airy nothing
A local habitation and a name.⁵

Lets see if we can hear where the weight is - The lunatic, the lover, and the poet. Where is the quantity there? Where are the quantitative breaks? The lunatic, the lover, and the poet - three quantitative feet. Where is the accentual foot? The lun/atic, / the lov/er, and / the poet.

“Are of imagination all-compact”. Final accent: compact. Are of / imag/ina/|tion all / compact / – that would be the conventional scansion. But “imagination” has pretty equal stress distribution on all the syllables. It has three minor stresses, though there is a little more accent on the third syllable.

It's not Spanish so it's not *imagination*.

Imag-ina-tionall-compact. You can scan it like that, but you don't read it or write it like that. If you are scanning poetry and you don't know about quantity, it's not going to sound like it ought to, read like this. It will sound artificial if you only scan it for accent, and it will not really be the sound of poetry. When you read it with your eye and you want to know whether it's poetry, you can find the accents with your eye but you have to think about it. But if you read the line out loud, you just hear it:

The lunatic, the lover, and the poet / Are of imagination all compact./
One sees more devils than vast hell can hold./
That is the madman / . It's dramatic. It's eloquent.

The lover, all as frantic,
Sees Helen's beauty in a brow of Egypt:

All he has to do is look at the map and he sees Helen's beauty. He is intoxicated with beauty. Everything is beautiful for the lover.

The poet's eye in a fine frenzy rolling, doth glance from heaven to earth;
And as imagination bodies forth the forms of things unknown,
The poet's pen turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothing
A local habitation and a name.

"A local habitation" is a weighted phrase. It's right here on the page, this habitation. It's a unity of sound-quantity, not fragments of stress. It has a definite meaning. It's not a global, general or etheric habitation. He looks at both ends of the spectrum and creates a weighted form here, and a name, for the habitation of meaning. This is the difference between quantity and stress measures. The phrase has the concreteness of the habitation given by the poet to that airy nothing.

[A lo/cal hab/ ita/ tion] [and/ a name]

The iambic accentual metre is at the lowest level of the structure; then there is the stress, and then the quantity. These are just different levels of structure, like genes, cells, organs, functions, and personality. They are just layers of the same thing. At the top of that structure, where personality belongs in the human being, is Meaning, for poetry. There is the metric foot, the accent, the stress, the weight or quantity of sound, and then there is the meaning.

Can something like pause be inserted for effect? A local habitation... (pause)... and a name?

Nonsense, because it is just a mental addition. You may say to yourself that this suits your character better to make a pause and add an inflected meaning. You are thinking then about your meaning and not the poet's meaning. Sometimes there may be a truly dramatic pause, or as in this case just the slightest interval between the phrases, but when a true pause comes you know it because you can't move. It halts you in your tracks, so to speak; you are pinned. Then you are in the flow of the true poetry. Then the pause or the inflection isn't an artificial addition. People do this however, - imposing on the poem their idiosyncratic pauses and inflections - and it is the surest way to twist the poem's meaning, especially in a poem like *Savitri*.

If you are not reading it as poetry but as prose, or *sutra*, then it's a teaching. *Savitri* can be read like that, too. But it has many levels, and the inspiration, we know, is coming from the Overmind. Sri Aurobindo is using rhythm to convey force. Sometimes he will write eighty lines with hardly a breath; it is all a flow and nothing there is constructed or added. But you can't catch that if you are reading it line by line for an abstract meaning. It's only when you read the whole eighty lines in a sweep that you realize what's there. Then suddenly all of the images array themselves, the main meaning grabs you, and you know that you are in touch with something more.

Let us listen for a moment to an original poem of Sri Aurobindo with these principles in mind. I have marked with brackets what I consider to be the quantitative measures.

Descent⁶

[All my cells thrill] [swept by a surge] [of splendor],
[Soul and body stir] [with a mighty rapture]
[Light] [and still more light] [like an ocean] [billows
Over me], [round me].

[Rigid], [stone like], [fixed like a hill] [or statue],
[Vast my body feels] [and upbears] [the world's weight];
[Dire] [the large descent] [of the Godhead] [enters
Limbs] [that are mortal].

The “choriambic structure can be heard clearly, as so often in Sri Aurobindo’s lines, in many phrases here, like “Limbs that are mor/tal”, or in the first line “All my cells thrill”, where a trochee and an iamb are back to back and mirror each other.

[Voiceless], [thronged], [Infinity] [crowds upon me];
[Presses down a glory] [of power eternal];
[Mind and heart grow one] [with the cosmic wideness];
[Stilled] [are earth's murmurs].

“Rigid”, “dire”, “voiceless”, “stilled” whether of one or two syllables are words whose quantitative sound-length are units of meaning, where each word or phrase or word-group points towards and carries towards us a meaning that is not separate from its sound and its energy of expression.

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 the 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.

All the world is changed to a single oneness;
Souls undying, infinite forces, meeting,
Join in God-dance weaving a seamless Nature,
Rhythm of the Deathless.

Mind and heart and body, one harp of being,
Cry that anthem, finding the notes eternal, -
Light and might and bliss and immortal wisdom
Clasping for ever.

This is quantitative metre. “[Light] [and/ might] [and/ bliss] [and/ immor/tal] [wisdom]/

[Clasping for/ ever]”. Units. Weight-length. Clasping for ever. It’s not accent, or stress, it’s the weight of meaning carried by sound that corresponds with the inspiration. If you don’t get to the point of reading, where there at the end: “Clasping for ever”, is heard as a sound that extends into vast space, then you probably haven’t really gotten it.

There are five accentual feet, each of which has a similar accentual weight but they are transformed into five quantitative feet by the flow of sound. If you don’t give them all their full sound weight, then you don’t see or hear the whole. Seeing the whole requires you to give each its full voice weight. Similarly, when you read *Savitri*, which is written like this, you have to have some time and energy, and give the words and lines their appropriate time and energy, and space and volume, to become what they mean. Otherwise, you may get a subtle whiff of what it means and feel like you caught it somewhere back there in your mind, which feels good, but there is more to it. It is also deep and wide and powerful.

So, What is Quantity in poetry? Sri Aurobindo will basically say that it is the weight of the voice that determines the meaning of the phrase. It’s a measure based upon sound in which the weight of the sound measure captures and conveys the meaning; it carries the meaning to the hearer. It is in the hearing space, in the sound space, that you get the meaning. Therefore, to read *Savitri* it is best to read it aloud and in a continuous sweep that enables the rhythms to come forth.

Savitri Bhavan
24/9/08

Notes

1. Sri Aurobindo, *The Future Poetry*, (1997 ed.), p. 324
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid. p. 325
4. Ibid. p. 326
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid. p. 377



The Poetry of Sri Aurobindo – 3

Metre and Meaning

Let's try to apply the principles that we heard last time. The point of quantitative metre is that it is natural, not artificial. It has accent, stress, and weight. Weight means the weight of the voice on the phrase. Sometimes the weight of the voice is determined by accent, and sometimes by stress, and thirdly by the flow of the meaning - the natural weight that the voice gives to the word or phrase. We will see repeatedly that Sri Aurobindo says it is the ear that must determine the weight and the rhythm, not the eye. When the eye scans the line there are certain rules of rhythm, which we heard about last time, that the eye can find with the help of the memory of sound, but when the line of poetry is read, it is meaningful and sounds right when the ear hears the intended meaning. It is the sound which determines the rhythm and the meaning.

Let's do an experiment. Try reading the first three lines of the poem on page 376.¹ First, silently read it for the idea, and ask its question sincerely. We are familiar enough with the spiritual philosophy of Sri Aurobindo to know what he is talking about. And then read the first four phrases, including "August", which goes with the first line.

Who art thou in the heart comrade of man who sitst
August, watching his works, watching his joys and griefs,
Unmoved, careless of pain, careless of death and fate?

I would suggest that some of these phrases, like "comrade of man", in the reading of the line, don't sit easily in the interpretive framework that we normally apply to understand what we read. These four phrases, 'who are thou', 'in the heart', 'comrade of man', 'who sitst august' are actually epithets, names or characterizations of the subject. We can get the meaning of it but it seems a little irregular. The question is, why construct the line this way? If we apply the conventional scansion technique in English which looks for stress and accent, because that is all we usually look for in English poetry, or prosody, it will not tell us how this line can sound and have meaning. The typical scansion will not give us the right relationship of these four epithets. We may find that the phrase "comrade of man" in particular will not have much audible importance. The voice tends to lose it. What importance does it have? What does the word "comrade" really mean, to us, in our different cultural contexts and languages? Do we just gloss over it, with hardly any accent or meaning when we read it?

Our minds put these words and phrases in neat little categories, and then we have our understanding. We can read it with our mind and get the meaning by translating the images into concepts, and we could interpret it in various ways, but what Sri Aurobindo is aiming at is poetry that communicates fully and completely, without question, exactly what it means, without any analysis or interpretation at all: the direct transmission of the inspired vision, meaning, truth. He says that it is the secret of quantity, of the weight of the voice that conveys the meaning, which makes it possible to write and use this kind of poetry.

The question, then, is whether this poetry can, or will, convey directly and powerfully the inner sense and truth of that which is being spoken, seen, and said. If that is what it is going to do, then the meaning shouldn't lie concealed behind cultural, intellectual, and other shades of interpretation. Each of these phrases should stand, fully revealed in what we hear.

Who art thou in the heart comrade of man ...

This helpmate, this guide, is there: it can be stressed on both the first syllables, com rade, and then it is a spondee. Sri Aurobindo tells us that there is a metric foot where both syllables get equal weight, which is very important in hexameter, coming often in the middle and at the end. If this being is "August" (another word that tends to get dropped by the voice) and he puts it at the very beginning of the second line, it is an extremely powerful word. There is hardly any word more powerful than "August", he is Caesar Augustus, he is monarch. 'Comrade of man' on the one hand is this helper with us and on the other, he is king. I would suggest that it is

com rade of man

and then we have a spondee and an iamb.

Who art thou, comrade of man, who sitst August?

Who art thou in the heart, comrade of man, who sitst August?

It keeps going through subtle shades of meaning, and somewhere there is the right intonation, rhythm, and stress. Let's try the rest of the line:

.... watching his works, watching his joys and griefs,
Unmoved, careless of pain, careless of death and fate?

Unmoved, this is the key, the central word, along with "August". Unmoved carries the meaning of the three lines. This is something that Sri Aurobindo is always trying to achieve, to convey: this stillness, this marble like, immovable, self.

We heard it last time in Descent²:

Rigid, stone like, fixed like a hill or statue,

Vast my body feels and upbears the world's weight

This solidity of experience already contradicts our ordinary attitude towards poetry. We are expecting something delicate, and close to meaningless – so subtle that we don't have to change our attitude much to take it in. When we see words like Unmoved and August, we basically don't know what to make of them. We are always moving, our mind is always moving, there is nothing in our daily experience normally which is August, there hasn't been anything noble on this earth in our normal experience at least, perhaps ever, or perhaps rarely.

We don't know who it is. If we knew, these words would not seem so unusual. Sri Aurobindo intends to convey to the ear, heart, and mind a sense of this inner solidity and inner help and nobility that we normally lack in mundane life. The way this can be done, he says, is by giving to the phrases their true weight and significance. It doesn't just pop out, off the tip of the tongue. Therefore, it is important to know a little about these things. Sri Aurobindo has devoted twenty years of yogic force to writing poetry that he thought could change things, change minds and bring down god into the lives of men. It was a very serious undertaking. He has written guidelines to help us, as well as the poems. If we are going to make use of these poems, then we first of all have to do something which he said is very far from our training and conditioned abilities. No age, he says, has been farther removed from the ability to appreciate, understand, and use this kind of poetry. We should take that seriously. We have to read and to hear the poem.

Let's go back then to page 332 and walk a little more through his explanation – A theory of true quantity:

“If we are to get a true theory of quantity, the ear must find it. It cannot be determined by mental fictions or by reading with the eye.”³ Having read SA for the past forty years, I am inclined to believe that he didn't write very much that he didn't mean, and that he didn't want us to share with him. “The ear too, in listening, must exercise its own, uninfluenced, pure hearing, if it is not to go astray.” Because our ears mostly hear only what they are accustomed to hearing, and want to hear. “So listening, we shall find that intrinsic or inherent quantity and the positional sound values ... the traditional scansion is probably not accurate.” He will give us some examples. “There is a dwelling of the voice, a horizontal weight bar laid across the phrase.” This is an incredible phrase. He writes prose like this also. That's why *The Life Divine* should sometimes also be read aloud.

There are passages in *The Life Divine* where he is paraphrasing the Bhagavad-Gita and there are paragraphs and full pages of pure Upanishadic speech. If you are trying to read it line by line and para by para with your mind to figure out what he is saying, I assure you, you will miss all of it.

“There is a dwelling of the voice, a horizontal weight bar laid across the phrase, or there is its rapid passing, an absence of the weight bar.” He gives examples that we will enjoy in a moment. “That difference decides its natural length. It creates the inherent or intrinsic long or short.” The inherent or intrinsic long or short is created by the presence or absence of the voice weight. Sri Aurobindo gives a detailed explanation.

/ /
 “Lazily, ... sweetness, ...” the accent and weight are on the first syllable. Both are accented. These syllables happen to be long and they get the natural stress. But when we look at words like “heavily”, the “hea” is a short syllable; in “aridity”, the “i” is a short syllable, but it still gets the stress when we say the word. In “channel” the “a” is not a long syllable but it gets the stress. The point is that it is not a question of whether a syllable or vowel is long or short, but where the weight of the voice goes naturally in the language. Otherwise the line would be artificially constructed.

This is why he says the eye can’t tell it; the ear must tell it. If the ear is very familiar with English verse maybe it can hear it. But if we hear it, there is no doubt. We have to read the words aloud.

Again, he says, “There is a vertical ictus, weight of the voice, the hammer-stroke of stress on the syllable; that of itself makes even a short-vowel syllable metrically long, as in *hea-vi-ly*, *a-ri-di-ty*, *cha-nne-l*, *ca-na-l*; the short-vowel syllables that have not the lengthening ictus or vertical weight and have not, either, the horizontal weight of the voice upon them remain light and therefore short. In the words, narrative *na-rra-ti-ve*, man-eater *ma-neate-r*, brutality *bruta-li-ty*, contemplative *co-nte-mp-lati-ve*, incarnate *i-ncar-nate*, we see this triple power of length at work within one word,— weight-bar long syllables stressed or unstressed, hammer-stroke-weighted short vowel longs, natural unweighted short syllables.” (note: due to the limitations of typography, the diacritical marks are only partially accurate; the = indicates the stressed long syllable, and the short syllable notation follows slightly its vowel)

Narrative. Man-eater.

Man and eat are both long syllables. But man-eater gets the vertical stress on man. We have a stressed long and an unstressed long. “Brutality”, Bru is a short vowel, “a” is a short vowel. Both of them get stress and the second gets the weight.

Brutality.

Then he gives examples of natural unweighted short syllables. “Contemplative”, con is short, em is short, a is short, i is short but, in the whole scheme of the word, “contemplative”, there is a little bit more stress on the second - em, but not much difference in weight. Contemplative is a very balanced four syllable word without any particular stress. In a line this can become a couple of pyrrhics, those very insignificant, short breath, hardly stressed, unemphasised syllables. Sri Aurobindo puts these observations in the context of poetry:

/ √ // / √ /
 Contemplative Incarnate The incarnate truth, the logos.

“It is clear that there can be no true reduction of stressed or unstressed or of intrinsic long or short to a sole one-kind principle; both stress and vowel length work together to make a complex but harmonious system of quantity. But, yet again, there is a third factor of length-determination; there is consonantal weight, a lingering or retardation of the voice compelled by a load of consonants, or there is a free unencumbered light movement. This distinction creates the positionally long syllable, short by its vowel but lengthened by its consonants, *strength*, (the

short e has no length but the ght after it gives it the long echo) *swift (the short i is carried by the long consonants)...*”, then he comes back to the lines of Webster that we have seen.

“It is evident to the natural ear that stress confers in its own right, metrical length on the syllable in which it occurs; even an extreme shortness of the vowel does not take away the lengthening force given. To the ear it stands out that the feet in Webster’s line, “my~ eyes daz|zle” and “she| died you| ng,” are, quantitatively, bacchius and spondee;” ... he has marked the bacchius and spondee and he has given the pyrrhic in between.

My eyes dazzle, she died young.

“The one is not and cannot be a true anapest, as it would or can be accounted by convention in accentual scansion, the other is not and cannot be either iamb or trochee.”

Only if you are trying to give the line its full sound quantity would you make that distinction. If you were reading it with the mind, silently, you would not put any of those accents in the line, because you would get the meaning of it in another way. The question is, how much of the meaning of it would you get really? You would get that first abstract mental impression meaning if you just read it silently. If you read it poetically with a conventional line scansion then you’ll get a rhythm of some kind. But, if you read it with its full voice weight value where the weight bar lays across the line, then you get an elevated meaning. It is the elevation that we are being led towards.

If we take that notion, Sri Aurobindo has given a few lines of *Iliad* to illustrate it, on page 335.⁴ He commented a little bit on how the typical scansion, and the typical iambic and trochaic feet have been used by certain English poets to try to achieve hexameter length without any success. He suggests again that we should consult the ear and not the theorizing mind. What is its judgment on this point, if we listen to these four hexameter lines based on natural and true quantity? Then he points out how, according to conventional metric feet, these various particles of language would create length but, in fact, they don’t. First let’s read the lines aloud and listen to them. This is the introduction to the herald who announces the fall of Troy.

[One and unarmed] [in the car] [was the driver]; [grey was he], [shrunken],
Worn with his decades. To Pergama cinctured with strength cyclopean
Old and alone he arrived, insignificant, feeblest of mortals, | |
[Carrying/ Fate] [in his/ helpless/ hands] [and the/ doom] [of an/ empire].

And the doom of an empire.

Now that we have an idea where the natural longs, shorts, and stresses are, do we know where the quantities are? We can indicate in brackets some of these and we can certainly hear that doom and empire have the weight at the end. Sri Aurobindo points out that in traditional metric scansion there would (inaccurately) be more length when a group of consonants follow a vowel.

“According to the classical theory words and syllables like “and”, “of”, “in”, “the”, “he”, “ing” should be treated as long since or when two or three consonants come immediately after the vowel within the line. But this is quite false; the “dr” of “driver” does not as a matter of fact make the “the” before it long;...”

One and unarmed in the car was the driver

“The” practically disappears in sound rather than becoming longer because it is followed by consonants. “Carrying fate”, - you could elongate the ‘ing’ but it doesn’t happen naturally because there are three consonants that follow it. In fact the syllables ry and ing are short, and the syllables Car and fate are long, making the choriamb construction, so familiar in the verse of Sri Aurobindo.

Worn with his decades

“The natural shortness of ‘with’ is not abolished by the ‘h’ of the following word ‘his, or the shortness of ‘his’ by the ‘d’ of ‘decades’. ‘With’ and ‘his’ continue to be extremely short in spite of any number of consonants around them.”

Let us go, then, to where these lines come from and get the context and find out who this is. On page 387, we have an excerpt from *Ilion* called The Herald.⁵ This character is given considerable importance, a whole section is dedicated to him. We should try to listen with pure hearing and read with quantitative stress, and we should allow Sri Aurobindo to put this character in our vision.

The Coming of the Herald

Even as fleets on a chariot divine through the gold streets of ether,
Swiftly when Life fleets, invisibly changing the arc of the soul-drift,
And, with the choice that has chanced or the fate man has called and now suffers
Weighted, the moment travels driving the past towards the future,
Only its face and its feet are seen, not the burden it carries.
Weight of the event and its surface we bear, but the meaning is hidden.
Earth sees not; life’s clamour deafens the ear of the spirit:
Man knows not; least knows the messenger chosen for the summons.
Only he listens to the voice of his thoughts, his heart’s ignorant whisper,
Whistle of winds in the tree-tops of Time and the rustle of Nature.
Now too the messenger hastened driving the car of the errand:
Even while dawn was a gleam in the east, he had cried to his coursers.
Half yet awake in light’s turrets started the scouts of the morning
Hearing the jar of the wheels and the throb of the hooves’ exultation,
Hooves of the horses of Greece as they galloped to Phrygian Troya.
Proudly they trampled through Xanthus thwarting the foam of his anger,
Whinnying high as in scorn crossed Simois’ tangled currents,
Xanthus’ reed-girdled twin, the gentle and sluggard river.
One and unarmed in the car was the driver; grey was he, shrunken,
Worn with his decades. To Pergama cinctured with strength Cyclopean
Old and alone he arrived, insignificant, feeblest of mortals,
Carrying Fate in his helpless hands and the doom of an empire.
Ilion, couchant, saw him arrive from the sea and the darkness.
Heard mid the faint slow stirrings of life in the sleep of the city,
Rapid there neared a running of feet, and the cry of the summons

Beat round the doors that guarded the domes of the splendour of Priam.
“Wardens charged with the night, ye who stand in Laomedon’s gateway,
Waken the Ilian kings. Talthybius, herald of Argos,
Parleying stands at the portals of Troy in the grey of the dawning.”
High and insistent the call. In the dimness and hush of his chamber
Charioted far in his dreams amid visions of glory and terror,
Scenes of a vivider world,—though blurred and deformed in the brain-cells,
Vague and inconsequent, there full of colour and beauty and greatness,—
Suddenly drawn by the pull of the conscious thread of the earth-bond
And of the needs of Time and the travail assigned in the transience
Warned by his body, Deiphobus, reached in that splendid remoteness,
Touched through the nerve-ways of life that branch to the brain of the dreamer,
Heard the terrestrial call and slumber startled receded
Sliding like dew from the mane of a lion. ...”

This being called back from a dream of glory by this voice of warning, and having that sleep slide like dew from the mane of a lion, is extraordinary.

Savitri Bhavan
1/10/2008

Notes

1. Sri Aurobindo, *The Future Poetry*, (1997 ed.)
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.



The Poetry of Sri Aurobindo – 4

Poetry as Spiritual Practice

One of the points that I hope will penetrate everyone's understanding is that it is necessary to dwell upon these poems and listen to them very un-interpretively, non-mentally. In the last session we could see clearly that there are many levels of interpretation and the whole idea that we can hear Sri Aurobindo's poetry silently is problematic. When we hear it silently we hear it in the context of our mental framework. Although there is an interpretation of *mantra* that is valid with respect to inner hearing, that is not what we are talking about here. What we are talking about is something Sri Aurobindo did very deliberately for a reason. He wrote a book about the absolute necessity of sound in order to hear the meaning of this new poetry that applies the principles of *mantra* to poetics. He says that it is new and only the ear can hear it. He doesn't say the inner ear, or the inner hearing, or the silent hearing; in that essay he says many times that only the ear can discriminate and catch the meaning. That's a theory of poetics. We will have ample opportunity to experience what he means, because it is not just a theory. He practiced it. The only way to appreciate the theory is to read the poems.

Why does Sri Aurobindo bother to write a little poem, such as the *Witness and the Wheel*¹, about this concept of the silent witness, *purusa*, which he has explained so thoroughly in all of his major works? He says in the essay that goes along with these experimental poems, *On Quantitative Metre*, that this is a new transformational mantric poetry, which conveys directly to the hearing the meaning. Here he stops being theoretical and philosophical, or teaching in the conventional sense, and he takes on the role of transmitting from the infinite hearing the sound, which changes us; the vibrational structure of the disciple is informed and altered by the sound. The only way to understand this is to practice it. With Sri Aurobindo poetry becomes practice. These poems were not written for *The Literary Review* or for mass circulation. We are here in this continuum of exposure in order to discover something that is not well known, and it is quite extraordinary.

Our aim is to enter into a process of exposure to qualities of understanding that are not mental. The same principles applied in *Ahana* were applied in *Ilion*. When you learn how to read Sri Aurobindo's poetry and then you read *Savitri*, or the long early poems, or the sonnets in between, what you can see is a change in his focus, his own consciousness is choosing slightly different levels of material for poetic expression. The art, the principle was always there. This was a gift he had, which he discovered and developed. That's why

it is difficult to critique Sri Aurobindo's poetry in the context of periods of poetry. There are some periods he fits nicely into. The early poems fit nicely into 18th/19th century romantics. I will read some Shelley later, which will sound a bit like Sri Aurobindo. Shelly also had this gift.

I think it is more a question of what kind of energy and experience is most relevant in one's development. You may dwell upon the sonnets for months, or on a Canto of *Savitri* for years, and once you see and hear what is being done, then it becomes something specific, an entity. Some of his most beautiful poems are the earlier ones, just from their music. In 'Khaled of the Sea' for example, you find the same themes that you find in *Savitri* but they are dealt with much more lightly: where the renunciate hero weds a goddess and builds an empire.

Another thing that I recommend, even though it doesn't get you where you want to be, is that it is useful as an exercise from time to time to go through a poem line by line; read aloud through it a couple of times and note the metrics, the metric structure. You will run into things that are difficult and you will not be able to figure it out. Then after a few more times it starts to shift, and finally you find the groove. This is just a demonstration that the truth of the poem, with respect to either the structure or the meaning, does not appear immediately in the consciousness, even if there is a very subtle receptivity, because the sound weight is the thing Sri Aurobindo is using. It is the tool he uses to change the vibrational structure of the being. There is a shift, you can feel the presence at one level, and ultimately you can pass into the absolute identity with what he is seeing. That is the outcome he wants. A new consciousness begins to understand something new. He doesn't want us to get the idea. Everybody can get the idea.

I would like to analyze this poem for its metric structure but, while doing it, I want us to hear the metric structure. I don't think that we would be able to do it without hearing it. I've tried and I couldn't. But the more I read it the more clear it became and everything else about the poem became clearer.

The Witness and the Wheel

Who art thou in the heart comrade of man who sitst
August, watching his works, watching his joys and griefs,
Unmoved, careless of pain, careless of death and fate?
Witness, what hast thou seen watching this great blind world
Moving helpless in Time, whirled on the Wheel in Space,
That yet thou with thy vast Will biddest toil our hearts,
Mystic,—for without thee nothing can last in Time?
We too, when from the urge ceaseless of Nature turn
Our souls, far from the breast casting her tool, desire,
Grow like thee. In the front Nature still drives in vain
The blind trail of our acts, passions and thoughts and hopes;
Unmoved, calm, we look on, careless of death and fate,
Of grief careless and joy,—signs of a surface script
Without value or sense, steps of an aimless world.
Something watches behind, Spirit or Self or Soul,

Viewing Space and its toil, waiting the end of Time.
 Witness, who then art thou, one with thee who am I,
 Nameless, watching the Wheel whirl across Time and Space?

SA's note: The metre is the little Asclepiad used by Horace in his Ode addressed to Maecenas, two choriamb between an initial spondee and a final iamb. Here modulations are admitted, trochee or iamb for the spondee, occasionally a spondee for the concluding iamb; an epitrite or ionic a minore can replace the choriamb.

I don't think it is necessary to mark the feet, because we know that a foot is either two or three syllables. It cannot be more or less. Who art thou, is the first foot. The line doesn't stop until you get to August. We are doing this exercise to better grasp meaning and quantity. I said before that it is best to wrap the first line around when we read it because "August" ends the phrase. If you stop with "who sitst", it is not the end and the next line doesn't begin with "August" as far as the meaning goes. This beginning, which is an ending, is a spondee and it is a main principle of the structure, as described by Sri Aurobindo. And it is an interrogative sentence structure. "Thou" and "comrade of man" is an appositive structure.

Who art thou in the heart comrade of man?

Whoever he is, he is our friend and he is located in the heart. But where are the weight lengths? The weight means the whole weight of the voice carrying the rhythm. "Comrade of man" is a block of weighted sound for example. If you read this poem with full meaning, you will hear where the weight really falls. This gives the quantitative metre.

| | | | | |
 [Who art/ thou] [in/ the heart/] [comrade of man] [who sitst/
 | |
 August] watching his works, watching his joys and griefs,

Unmoved, careless of pain, careless of death and fate?

There are four quantitative feet in the lines and there are six hexametetric feet. It is a hexameter that has a quantitative structure on top of the stress structure. "Two choriamb between a spondee, and an iamb." That is the main accentual pattern. He does allow for variations, however, and one is called the ionic *a minore*, and another the ionic *a majore*. And there is enjambment. The next three lines all wrap around, and we can read them with the next first word as the end, in order not to break the pattern, or else read the three lines up to the end of the sentence, in order to listen to the metres through the whole sentence. This is a perfect example of enjambment, with the words August, Unmoved, and Witness, closely associated words, at the beginning of the three lines.

And then comes another question, "What hast thou seen"?

| | |
 Witness, what hast thou seen, watching this great blind world

Moving helpless in Time, whirled on the Wheel in Space,

That yet thou with thy vast Will biddest toil our hearts,

Mystic, – for without thee nothing can last in Time?

There is a slight variation with the spondee “blind world” at the end. And then, with the second question, ending with the word Mystic – a new meaning is given to this witness; not only is he a witness, but everything that happens depends completely on him. The question is, what have you seen that makes it worthwhile for you to uphold this senseless world? He (or she) must have seen something that we don’t see. Therefore we ask the question! And it is more than a question, it is an interrogation. This has become an important distinction in critical philosophy: we must interrogate this mystery in order to become certain about something that seriously perplexes us.

Now, in this poem, Sri Aurobindo moves in the direction of the teaching we had here earlier today from the Katha Upanishad.

We too, when from the urge ceaseless of Nature turn
Our souls, far from the breast casting her tool, desire,
Grow like thee. In the front Nature still drives in vain
The blind trail of our acts, passions and thoughts and hopes;
Unmoved, calm, we look on, careless of death and fate,
Of grief careless and joy,—signs of a surface script
Without value or sense, steps of an aimless world.

We become like him, careless of everything that happens in a world without value. But, who is this something, that we too become, who watches from behind – Spirit, or Self, or Soul? After the sense mind and its objects are sacrificed, what remains? This is the spiritual question. This witness is –

Nameless, watching the Wheel whirl across Time and Space?

The interrogation point or inflection actually comes in the previous line –

...who then art thou, one with thee who am I,

And here we have a very good example of how the weight length takes over and determines the metre. We cannot put the stress on “one with” but rather on “thee”; this is the natural weight length of the foot and it overrides the choriambic pattern, becoming ionic a minore: two shorts and two longs. The two phrases merit a very distinct emphasis, where a pause is appropriate and subtle. The emphasis which follows the pause is very strong in order for the voice to capture and convey the subtle nuance of meaning. Sri Aurobindo has explained this principle of flexibility in lyrical verse like this, from the critical text:

“Even if the new forms are only an improvement on stress metre, a rhythm starting from the same swing of the language, that is no objection;”...“A free use of modulation, an avoidance of metrical rigidity by other devices natural to the flexibility of the English

tongue, a skilful employment of overlapping (*enjambment*), of caesura, of word-grouping are presupposed in any reasonable quantitative system.”² So that means that the lines of poetry do not necessarily follow a regular stress pattern. But, the regular stress pattern is there underlying, flowing according to the speech and meaning, not to the meter at all.

We can see in these lines that if we just followed the strict stress and accent metres we would not have gotten the full value of the line. It was those longer combinations of metres, those four groupings of sound that over-ride the six groupings of sounds demarcated by regular accentual feet, that very consistently determine the metre. As SA says, with respect to the standard lyrical patterns “Even where a very regular movement is necessitated or desirable, the resources of the play of sound, a subtle play of vowelisation and of consonant harmonies, rhythmic undertones and overtones ought to cure the alleged deficiency.”³

The rhythm will lead you into that moment when you get the intended meaning after reading it five or six times or so. This art of reading, when applied to the reading of *Savitri*, suddenly refocuses our consciousness and the depth of meaning starts expanding and expanding. There are six line passages which are a continuum, and you cannot understand the first two lines until you get to the sixth line. Then, like a symphony, it’s in the sound dimension, where the image resonates with its culmination.

But in this poem the question is not answered. There is another poem in this group that deals with exactly the same idea in a much different way, which we might just read through. In the last line, perhaps we find the answer.

(1) *The Silence*⁴

Into the Silence, into the Silence,
Arise, O Spirit immortal,
Away from the turning Wheel, breaking the magical Circle.
Ascend, single and deathless:
Care no more for the whispers and the shoutings in the darkness,
Pass from the sphere of the grey and the little,
Leaving the cry and the struggle,
Into the Silence for ever.

Vast and immobile, formless and marvelous,
Higher than Heaven, wider than the universe,
In a pure glory of being,
In a bright stillness of self-seeing,
Communing with a boundlessness voiceless and intimate,
Make thy knowledge too high for thought, thy joy too deep for emotion;
At rest in the unchanging Light, mute with the wordless self-vision,
Spirit, pass out of thyself; Soul, escape from the clutch of Nature.
All thou hast seen cast from thee, O Witness.
Turn to the Alone and the Absolute, turn to the Eternal:

Be only eternity, peace and silence,
O world-transcending nameless Oneness,
Spirit immortal.

(SA's note: Free quantitative verse with a predominant dactylic movement.)

If we practice Sri Aurobindo's yoga of poetry, it can be very similar to a daily or weekly visit to the Matrimandir chamber. You can take a Canto of *Savitri*, or one or two short poems dealing with a certain spiritual consciousness, and immerse yourself in those poems for half an hour or an hour and you are transported into a completely different vibrational range. It can be a practice like going to the Matrimandir occasionally to become transparent. I have no doubt that Sri Aurobindo intended that. His poems are attempts to capture a certain vibration that carries a consciousness of a reality and he has concentrated on communicating these various planes and types of experience in the poems. So, we will know at a certain moment that we have received that intention. Then you can go back to it and gradually familiarize yourself with that way of seeing. And it is very specific.

Each of these poems is closely related in substance to the one we have been studying. If you have read *The Silence* and *Beyond the Silence* a few times and perhaps have tried to analyze them in terms of poetic feet, hopefully both quantitative and accentual feet, then you have read it well. Your eyes have looked at it, and your mind has thought about it, and as Sri Aurobindo has been telling us for weeks now, quantitative metre can only be known by the ear, so when your ear has really heard the rhythm, then you can mark the quantitative feet of the lines. Understanding the rhythm of the poem means hearing the poem. If you have done that, then you are pretty familiar with these poems by now.

Let us read the first poem, *The Silence*, together (above), and try to keep in mind the way the Katha Upanishad ended this evening.⁵ Try to recall exactly those last few lines of the Upanishad. The idea of the Self of the Eternal, of the bodiless in bodies, the established in things unsettled, the AUM. Try to remember the AUM is a state of Being, which is neither the born nor the unborn.

All thou hast seen cast from thee, O Witness.
Turn to the Alone and the Absolute, turn to the Eternal:
Be only eternity, peace and silence,
O world-transcending nameless Oneness,
Spirit immortal.

Spirit immortal is the object of be. When you get to the last two words you have come to the pinnacle, not to the bottom. The voice intensity has built up to this point. It is a command. Be Spirit immortal, be oneness, be peace, be eternity. When you read this poem you need to tell that to yourself. You are instructing or receiving instruction. It is not passive. "Into the silence arise, O spirit immortal, breaking the magical circle." You cannot arise into the Silence unless you break the circle of sensation. It is a sacrifice and transformation.

That is the first movement, which should accomplish what the Katha Upanishad was trying to accomplish. You throw everything into the fire, you accept only the immortal Self, the One, the Eternal, the Immortal in everything. You concentrate completely on that aspect of reality, not on all of the ordinary aspects of reality, until you resonate with the idea of Spirit. Spirit is something concrete. It is something perceptible. It is not something outside us. You bring your consciousness to spiritual presence, to Spirit consciousness, by turning away from all of the other possible objects of consciousness. And you find yourself in the Silence. Everything is silent, even the noise. This silence is not an audible silence.

Sri Aurobindo says in the *Synthesis of Yoga*, we should know That in our Yoga, as the Silence.⁶ The key here is that Self is actually unmoving, unchanging, not capable of reacting to anything, and it is in everyone, it is a continuous type of Being, Self. When you experience that, it is in you, and me, and all of this. Self is a continuum of Stillness, of Silence. That is what he wants us to identify with. Not capable of reacting. There is a key word: Formless - immobile, absolutely motionless, not capable of reacting to anything. Anyway, **it is everything** so it has no need to react to anything. There may be some reactions in the field, but they are not reactions of the Self. This is the secret of the witness Purusha (soul): it can be separated totally from Prakriti (energy of nature), which does not mean that Prakriti falls into non-existence. Sri Aurobindo raises that question in his commentary on the Gita. According to Sankya philosophy if you remove the self from Prakriti it should collapse, cease to exist, because it doesn't have a sanction. But this is not the case. It continues. The transformation of consciousness is a movement into another vibrational plane, the plane of Stillness, the plane of Immobility and Formlessness, the plane of Spirit which is immortal. He is pushing toward that from within. The Spirit is the Silence. It is an Identity.

Let's move to poem number two. It is much more dynamic than number one. Sri Aurobindo says in his letters of 1930-32 that Overmind poetry is the product of the higher consciousness using the vital. The reason I'm saying that now is that this Silence he is talking about is not a disappearance. From the Katha Upanishad we learned that it is the I, it is the Soul, that is experiencing this bodiless in bodies. This eternally established in the changing and unsettled. It is a state of soul, Purusha, witness, awareness of an essence that is not separated from all this, but it is a different quality. When he moves beyond it, then it becomes something else, more dynamic, more positive.

(2) *Beyond the Silence*⁷

Out from the Silence, out from the Silence,
Carrying with thee the ineffable Substance,
Carrying with thee the splendour and wideness,
Ascend, O Spirit immortal.
Assigning to Time its endless meaning,
Blissful enter into the clasp of the Timeless.
Awake in the living Eternal, taken to the bosom of love of the Infinite,
Live self-found in his endless completeness,
Drowned in his joy and his sweetness,

Thy heart close to the heart of the Godhead for ever.

Vast, God-possessing, embraced by the Wonderful,
Lifted by the All-Beautiful into his infinite beauty,
Love shall envelop thee endless and fathomless,
Joy unimaginable, ecstasy illimitable,
Knowledge omnipotent, Might omniscient,
Light without darkness, Truth that is dateless.
One with the Transcendent, calm, universal,
Single and free, yet innumerably living,
All in thyself and thyself in all dwelling,
Act in the world with thy being beyond it.
Soul, exceed life's boundaries; Spirit, surpass the universe.
Outclimbing the summits of Nature,
Transcending and uplifting the soul of the finite,
Rise with the world in thy bosom,
O Word gathered into the heart of the Ineffable.
One with the Eternal, live in his infinity,
Drowned in the Absolute, found in the Godhead,
Swan of the supreme and spaceless ether wandering winged through the universe,
Spirit immortal.

The final syllable doesn't drop on any of these lines. This is a matter of equal strength given to each epithet. It is not about an ending of a line. It is about the lifting of the line into a level of equality of epithets. Love, Fathomless, and Illimitable are all equally weighted. Sri Aurobindo speaks about quantitative weight and giving the full weight to the most important full concept. When you do that then you transmit something in the word itself. Fathomless becomes Fathomlessness, it becomes Illimitableness, the word Illimitable is almost inconceivable so when you raise the vibration of the word to a level of consciousness of what Illimitability might mean then the line is carrying the meaning. It is not the mind's abstract notion of what it might mean. This is the whole difference. With the end of the sentence, "Truth that is dateless." you come to the end of what I'd call a packet of power, not a sentence, and you take a deep breath and start the next one. The next one doesn't drop, it goes up another step.

"One with the Transcendent". When you say the word 'One' allow your consciousness to encompass all of us and all of it, and everything and even beyond everything. This line, "O Word gathered into the heart of the Ineffable" is that to whom he is speaking, because there is the AUM, and this is it. In the mantra, it is known in tradition that there is a sacred syllable behind the passage of syllables. So, from the 'O Word' down to 'Spirit immortal', we need to hear the AUM vibrating behind these lines, a ring, a tone. This last sentence has to be given a position of immediate response to whoever is giving this command.

"O Word gathered into the heart of the Ineffable." Because the word has become gathered in this movement. Read the last lines as though they flow as one line. There is a drive in the quantitative weight distribution. This is Sri Aurobindo's style. It is not unusual for him to be insistent. It's the idea of strength, the rhythm of the poetry builds

with strength towards an enlarging of consciousness. “The Divine Uplift”, he calls it. For him it is not something abstract; the Divine Uplift is something that fills you up and lifts you out of your normal awareness of things. We have to remember that Sri Aurobindo has been practicing this Supramental Yoga for twenty years, pulling this force down into his body, and there is nothing else but that. It’s illimitable energy. He is conveying that; this is his experience. We need to be aware that Sri Aurobindo’s poetry is about energies, qualities, ideas that are beyond our normal range.

Savitri Bhavan
7/10/08

Notes

1. Sri Aurobindo, *The Future Poetry* (1997 ed.), p. 376
2. Ibid., p. 346
3. Ibid., p. 347
4. Ibid., p. 383
5. Sri Aurobindo, *The Upanishads* (1981 ed.), pp. 220-225) eg., from Katha Upanishad:
 10. I know of treasure that it is not for ever; for not by things unstable shall one attain that One which is stable; therefore I heaped the fire of Nachiketas, and by the sacrifice of transitory things I won the eternal.
 15. The seat and goal that all the Vedas glorify and which all austerities declare, for the desire of which men practice holy living, of that will I tell thee in brief compass. OM is that goal, O Nachiketas.
 20. Finer than the fine, huger than the huge the Self hides in the secret heart of the creature: when a man strips himself of will and is weaned from sorrow, then he beholds Him; purified from the mental elements he sees the greatness of the Self-being.
 22. Realising the Bodiless in bodies, the Established in things unsettled, the Great and Omnipresent Self, the wise and steadfast soul grieves no longer.
6. Sri Aurobindo, *The Synthesis of Yoga* (1970 ed.), p. 302, “...the name of That is the Silence and the Peace.”
7. Op cit., *FP*, p. 384



The Poetry of Sri Aurobindo – 5

The Form and the Spirit

In the second part of *The Future Poetry* there is a chapter titled “The Form and the Spirit”. This is one among several extraordinary chapters in which Sri Aurobindo elaborates the theory of mantric poetry, and in this chapter he speaks about the lyrical form being the basis of all poetry:

“The lyrical impulse is the original and spontaneous creator of the poetic form, song the first discovery of the possibility of a higher because a rhythmic intensity of self-expression. It wells out from the intensity of touch and the spiritualised emotion of a more delicate or a deeper and more penetrating sight and feeling in the experience, captures and sustains the inevitable cadences of its joy or its attraction, sets the subtle measure of its feeling and keeps it by the magic of its steps in sound vibrating on the inner strings and psychic fibres.”¹

It is a higher intensity of expression because it is “rhythmic”, and it “wells out from the intensity of touch”. What could that possibly mean? It is a poetry which is sensuous. It is the outpouring of a passion for music, and song, and expression. It is not a suppressed or quietistic trance-like sort of thing, although we get the impression that it may begin there. It has to create that vibrating feeling of touch in the expression which then stays in the subtler levels of the being. But first it is a dynamic form of expression through rhythmic sound. In a way you can not even pay attention to the meaning of the words. The first time you heard Bob Dylan sing did you listen closely to the words? Probably not. But you heard his passion.

“The lyric is a moment of heightened soul experience, sometimes brief in a lightness of aerial rapture, in a poignant ecstasy of pain, of joy or of mingled emotion or in a swift graver exaltation, sometimes prolonged and repeating or varying the same note, sometimes linking itself in a sustained succession to other moments that start from it or are suggested by its central motive.”²

A graver exaltation. What could that be? When the lyric becomes epic, then especially, you may have an experience of grave exaltation because power and destruction exalt while at the same time they are extremely serious.

“It is at first a music of simple melodies coming out of itself to which the spirit listens

with pleasure and makes eternal by it the charm of self-discovery or of reminiscence. And the lyrical spirit may rest satisfied with these clear spontaneities of song or else it may prefer to weight its steps with thought and turn to a meditative movement or, great-winged, assume an epic elevation.”³ This, of course, is the form preferred by Sri Aurobindo, as exemplified by *Ahana*, *Ilion*, and ultimately *Savitri*.

And with these fundamental distinctions and parameters in place, Sri Aurobindo proceeds to state what he means when he speaks about a future poetry:

“The intimate and intuitive poetry of the future will have on the one side all the inexhaustible range and profound complexities of the cosmic imagination of which it will be the interpreter and to that it must suit a hundred single and separate and combined and harmonic lyrical tones of poignantly or richly moved utterance, and on the other it will reach those bare and absolute simplicities of utter and essential sight in which thought sublimates into a translucidity of light and vision, feeling passes beyond itself into sheer spiritual ecstasy and the word rarefies into a pure voice out of the silence.”⁴

Imagine harmonizing in sound all the richness of cosmic emotion. That is Sri Aurobindo’s idea of the poetry of the future, which he was in fact to write himself. For these ideas were written in 1922, and *Savitri* was composed especially between 1930 and 1950. This is the type of mantric poetry that he is trying to achieve in the poems that we have just read, also written between 1930 and 1950. The long essay on quantitative metre that we have been studying was written in 1942, when he was already well into the writing of *Savitri*, and both are elaborations of what he had envisioned two decades earlier.

The silence becomes the background of the sonic subtleties and tonalities but, they are always there against the Silence in the background, not in the foreground. Establishing that Silence in that poem, that immobility, that touch of immortality is the background for this intuitive exploration of all the subtleties of existence. There are no reactions in that, there is only bringing to light everything that is there in existence, painful, or joyful, or beautiful or terrible.

“The sight will determine the lyrical form and discover the identities of an inevitable rhythm and no lesser standard can prevail against the purity of this spiritual principle.”⁵ The poetry of the future, for Sri Aurobindo, is therefore the poetry of spiritual vision and intuition: “The decisive revealing lyrical outburst must come when the poet has learnt to live creatively only in the inmost spiritual sight and identity of his own self with the self of his objects and images and to sing only from the deepest spiritual emotion which is the ecstasy of the feeling of that identity or at least of some extreme nearness to its sheer directness of touch and vision.”

As we have seen, each of the epithets by which he names the Witness, therefore: Spirit, Self, Soul, Witness, I, Nameless - is an identity. The names of what we are to become, as chanted in Silence: the Alone, the Absolute, the eternal, peace, silence, oneness – all become identified by the sound-vision intensity. You know that it’s an identity because of its rhythmic tonal equality of force. Each one comes up, in terms of pitch and accent, to a

level at which they are one. If you don't bring out that oneness by the rhythm then it seems they all have the equality of some meaningless monotone, but here their oneness is not at a level of monotony but of vastness, and power, of beauty and limitlessness. Each of those words carries that limitlessness. Then of course the prerequisite of this is that, "A spiritual change must come over the intention and form... It is a transition from the lyricism of life weighted by the stress of thought to the lyricism of the inmost spirit which uses but is beyond thought that has to be made."⁶

And then he says that this evolution of poetry eventually must go beyond the lyrical into the dramatic and narrative, epic forms, expressive of the "inner drama of the soul with the soul itself for the real stage". "The soul of man, a many-motioned representative of the world-spirit, subsisting and seeking for itself and its own meanings amid the laws and powers and moving forces of the universe and discovering and realizing its spiritual relations with others will be the vision and intention of a dramatic poetry fully reflective of the now growing intuitive mind of the future."⁷

The drama which he builds into most of his longer poems is the confrontation of one principle with another, of this god with that god, this leader with that follower, of this titan with that mortal. So, then there are polarities that are built up of dramatic tension coming from the sound of their voices, their dramatic speech. You can hear their opposite values and concerns getting resolved and harmonised through this interplay of emotional expression. This comes through the rhythm itself, not from a change in attitude or dramatically pretending you are some different person. It comes through the rhythm itself, as if it were the authentic self-expression of the entity.

With respect to the poems we have read, I have passed out some of Sri Aurobindo's sonnets that convey the same ideas. Here again we find the witness spirit in a sonnet that has a very regular rhyme scheme. And it has this mysterious persona 'I' to which the Katha Upanishad also referred, and the seeking soul who has successfully performed the sacrifice.

*The Witness Spirit*⁸

I dwell in the spirit's calm nothing can move
And watch the actions of thy vast world-force,
Its mighty wings that through infinity move
And the Time-galloping of the deathless Horse.

This mute stupendous energy that whirls
The stars and nebulae in its long train,
Like a huge Serpent through my being curls
With its diamond hood of joy and fangs of pain.

It rises from the dim inconscient deep
Upcoiling through the minds and hearts of men,
Then touches on some height of luminous sleep
The bliss and splendour of the eternal plane.

All this I bear in me, untouched and still
Assenting to Thy all-wise inscrutable will.

In the poem we have read before, “The Witness and the Wheel”, the questioner was asking, Who art thou who is motionless and yet somehow wills all this? Now he is in that position himself. “I dwell in the spirit’s calm nothing can move.” If you read that line to yourself affirmatively a few times you begin to identify with it. “And watch the actions of the vast world force...and the time-galloping of the deathless Horse.” The questioner has become the detached witness. If you can learn to see the vital world you live in as that deathless horse moving through everything that happens in Time, then you transform your perception of the life around you from a perception of transitory weakness to a perception of strength and stability. And at the same time you are completely aloof from it, the detached witness who somehow resides within and sanctions the wheel of time and change. You are shown a way of being both in the world and beyond it, that is both beautiful AND powerful. And then in the next sonnet an assurance is given that this witness will break out and reveal itself as “the immortal spirit in man”.

*The Hidden Plan*⁹

However long Night’s hour, I will not dream
That the small ego and the person’s mask
Are all that God reveals in our life-scheme,
The last result of Nature’s cosmic task.
A greater Presence in her bosom works;
Long it prepares its far epiphany:
Even in the stone and beast the godhead lurks,
A bright Persona of eternity.

It shall burst out from the limit traced by Mind
And make a witness of the prescient heart;
It shall reveal even in this inert blind
Nature, long veiled in each inconscient part,

Fulfilling the occult magnificent plan,
The world-wide and immortal spirit in man.

These poems convey steadfast determination, an intention to endure, and the certainty of an eventual spiritual transformation. This is not just casual poetry. It is the *sadhana* of Sri Aurobindo. But here we have it in a distilled, perfectly sculpted lyrical form. For it to have the transformative energy necessary to fulfill itself in humanity and not remain a solitary spiritual vision, a much more expansive and rhythmically powerful form was required, more proportionate to the reality of the task.

Savitri Bhavan
15/10/08

Notes

1. Sri Aurobindo, *The Future Poetry* (1997 ed.), p. 277
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid., p. 282
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid., p. 283
8. Sri Aurobindo, *Collected Poems* (1972), p. 143
9. Ibid.



The Poetry of Sri Aurobindo – 6

Meaning and Intuition

I think we have covered Sri Aurobindo's theory of Quantitative Metre, and his metrics, pretty well by now - one "M" of my presentation, Mantra, Metrics and Meaning. We have now begun to focus on the meaning that Sri Aurobindo wants to convey through his poetry. His meanings are unique, like his metrics.

Because we are not all familiar with English poetry, we are going to come down from Sri Aurobindo's plane of metrics and meaning in this session and look a little more closely at some English poetry which he uses as an example, not only of his theory of poetry but also of what he is trying to accomplish, the mantric idea of poetry which he also finds examples of in English poetry. We have now read about and discussed the principle of lyrical poetry as the origin of expression, a musical expression which comes from within. According to Sri Aurobindo that is the origin of poetry. Then he speaks about drama and the epic form as further developments of the poetic spirit. So, in order for us to raise our standard of thinking a little bit with respect to lyrics, dramatic poetry, and epic poetry, I thought I would just briefly look at a couple of more paragraphs from "Form and Spirit" before going into a closer examination of some English forms. I think that these two chapters, "Form and Spirit" and "Word and Spirit"¹ are really very nice, compact expressions and explanations of the essential ideas behind the mantric expression of intuitive mind through poetry. Sri Aurobindo writes expressly here:

"Hitherto the poetical narrative has been a simple relation or a vivid picturing or transcript of life and action varied by description of surrounding circumstance and indication of mood and feeling and character or else that with the development of an idea or a mental and moral significance at the basis with the story as its occasion or form of its presentation. (*This is the idea of the epic poetry of the past – largely story-telling.*) The change to a profounder motive will substitute a soul significance as the real substance, the action will not be there for its external surface interest but as a vital indication of the significance, the surrounding circumstance will be only such as helps to point and frame it and bring out its accessory suggestions and mood and feeling and character of its internal powers and phases."²

Circumstance becomes an expression of the mood of the inner feeling, meaning, truth. The whole thing is transmuted into a symbol. The new epic form, therefore, is no longer mainly story-telling.

“An intensive narrative, intensive in simplicity or in richness of significant shades, tones and colours, will be the more profound and subtle art of this kind in the future and its appropriate structures determined by the needs of this inner art motive. A first form of the intensive and spiritually significant poetic narrative has already been created and attempts to replace the more superficially intellectual motives, where the idea rather supervened upon the story or read into it the sense of its turns or its total movement, but here the story tends more to be the living expression of the idea and the idea itself vibrant in the speech and description and action the index of a profounder soul motive. The future poetry will follow this direction with a more and more subtle and variable inwardness and a greater fusion and living identity of soul motive, indicative idea, suggestive description and intensely significant speech and action.”³

Just think back for a moment to Talthybius, arriving at the gates of Priam and shouting for Deiphobus to wake up from his dream, carrying in his helpless hands the doom of an empire. Every action and every word conveys the inner idea of impending doom against which nothing can stand. (We read these lines from *Ilion* a couple of weeks back.) I think that when Sri Aurobindo says that a form of the future epic poetry is already being developed he is referring, at least to some extent, to his own work. And he is also referring to other modern poets while he is looking forward to *Ilion* and *Savitri*. But he is writing this around 1922. He did go back and revise it in 1950, but this appears to me to be written from the point of view of 1922, and I’ll show you why a little bit later.

“The same governing vision will be there as in lyric and drama; the method of development will alone be different according to the necessities of the more diffused, circumstanced and outwardly processive form which is proper to narrative.”⁴

So, he didn’t give up the importance of the music and the importance of the power and the transmission and the intuitive origin in writing the epic. He didn’t sacrifice those things to the story, he simply adds the dimension of story to that inspiration.

In the next chapter, I just want to read an extraordinary sentence or two from one page:

“The words which we use in our speech seem to be, if we look only at their external formation, mere physical sounds which a device of the mind has made to represent certain objects and ideas and perceptions,—a machinery nervous perhaps in origin, but developed for a constantly finer and more intricate use by the growing intelligence; but if we look at them in their inmost psychological and not solely at their more external aspect, we shall see that what constitutes speech and gives it its life and appeal and significance is a subtle conscious force which informs and is the soul of the body of sound: it is a superconscious Nature-Force raising its material out of our subconsciousness but growingly conscious in its operations in the human mind that develops itself in one fundamental way and yet variously in language. It is this Force, this Shakti to which the old Vedic thinkers gave the name of Vak, the goddess of creative Speech...”⁵ Here we may have the most important and revealing statements made by Sri Aurobindo regarding the metaphysical and linguistic basis of his theory.

Now I would like to skip to another, similarly important statement of the potential of the poetry that is being envisioned:

“The degree of word-force characteristic of prose speech avails ordinarily to distinguish

and state things to the conceptual intelligence; the word of the poet sees and presents in its body and image to a subtle visual perception in the mind awakened by an inner rhythmic audition truth of soul and thought experience and truth of sense and life, the spiritual and living actuality of idea and object.”⁶ This is a direct transmission of meaning through the sound and rhythm of the word. It doesn’t need to appeal to the conceptual intellect.

I would like to skip now to the next paragraph, the main one to start our exploration.

“This seeing speech has itself, however, different grades of its power of vision and expression of vision.”⁷

The first expressive power is limited to a clear poetic adequacy. He gives us an example from Dryden of this “clear poetic adequacy”,

“Whate’er he did was done with so much ease,
In him alone ’twas natural to please.”

Very simple, adequate poetic speech to express a human quality. I think we don’t have any doubt about what he means.

“The second power tries to go beyond this fine and perfect adequacy in its intensities, attempts a more rich or a more powerful expression, not merely sound and adequate to poetic vision, but dynamic and strongly effective.”⁸

An example from Pope,

“Atoms and systems into ruins hurled
And now a bubble burst and now a world.”

And a better one from Milton,

“Hurled headlong flaming from the ethereal sky
With hideous ruin and combustion down
To bottomless perdition.”

This is more forceful. And then the third power:

“A richer, subtler and usually a truer poetic effectivity is attained not by this rhetorical manner, but through a language succeeding by apt and vivid metaphor and simile, richness and beauty of phrase or the forceful word that makes the mind see the body of the thought with a singularly living distinctness or energy of suggestion and nearness.”⁹

Sri Aurobindo gives a poignant example from Shelley:

“When hearts have once mingled,
Love first leaves the well-built nest,
The weak one is singled
To endure what it once possessed;”

And another one,

“Its passions will rock thee,
As the storms rock the ravens on high;
Bright reason will mock thee
Like the sun from a wintry sky.”

SA says, “In this manner English poetry is especially opulent and gets from it much of its energy and power; ...”

It gets much of its energy and power from its opulence; there are many words, many phrases and images that can be combined in infinite ways to express subtleties, and there is where it gets its power.

“...but yet we feel that this is not the highest degree of which poetic speech is capable. There is a more intimate vision, a more penetrating spiritual emotion, a more intense and revealing speech, to which the soul can be more vibrantly sensible. This comes to its first self-discovery when either the adequate or the dynamically effective style is raised into a greater illumination in which the inner mind sees and feels object, emotion, idea not only clearly or richly or distinctly and powerfully, but in a flash or outbreak of transforming light which kindles the thought or image into a disclosure of new significances of a much more inner character, a more profoundly revealing vision, emotion, spiritual response. This illuminating poetic speech comes suddenly and rarely, as in Dryden’s:¹⁰

“And Paradise was opened in his face,”

Not very beautiful, but striking.

Or as in Shelley’s,

“The heart’s echoes render
No song when the spirit is mute,
No song but sad dirges
Like the wind through a ruined cell,

What do we see? Emptiness, desolation.

And Wordsworth’s,

“They flash upon the inner eye
Which is the bliss of solitude.”

Then we find a statement which specifies the range of intuitive expression which we are being prepared to expect in the future poetry:

“The genius of the poet can do work of a high beauty or of a considerable greatness in any of these degrees of poetic speech, but it is the more purely intuitive, inspired or revelatory utterance that is the most rare and difficult for the human mind to command, and it is these kinds that we peculiarly value. Their power not only moves and seizes us the most, but it admits the soul to a most spiritually profound light of seeing and ecstasy of feeling even of ordinary ideas and objects

and in its highest force to thoughts and things that surpass the manner and range and limits of depth of the normal intelligence.”¹¹

This is perhaps an expression of that more direct power of insight and speech:

“Heaven’s light forever shines, earth’s shadows fly;
Life like a dome of many-coloured glass
Stains the white radiance of eternity,
Until death tramples it to fragments.”

“The voice of poetry comes from a region above us, a plane of our being above and beyond our personal intelligence, a supermind which sees things in their innermost and largest truth by a spiritual identity and with a lustrous effulgency and rapture and its native language is a revelatory, inspired, intuitive word limpid or subtly vibrant or densely packed with the glory of this ecstasy and lustre. It is the possession of the mind by the supramental touch and the communicated impulse to seize this sight and word that creates the psychological phenomenon of poetic inspiration and it is the invasion of it by a superior power to that which it is normally able to harbour that produces the temporary excitement of brain and heart and nerve which accompanies the inrush of the influence.”¹²

In the 1930’s Sri Aurobindo wrote similar things about the inspiration which comes to motivate intuitive speech. But he didn’t call it Supermind or Supramental, he called it Overmind. He said that all poetic inspiration comes from the Overmind. So between 1922 and 1932, he came to an understanding of poetic inspiration which was a bit more detailed. He says the same thing about poetic inspiration, he just puts it in a different range. He said that poetry has on the whole very few touches of that pure Overmind inspiration, although all poetic inspiration comes from that plane and gets translated by different levels of mind. He says that his aim was to transmit as purely as possible from that direct plane of Overmind inspiration. But meanwhile, the Supramental plane has withdrawn to an even more inaccessible distance from the mortal range.

I’d like to jump forward again to *On Quantitative Metre*, on page 349, to give a few more examples from English poetry that he uses. Actually here he is speaking about an unconsciously quantitative free-verse, and remember we have learned that it is quantitative metre in English which he says carries most originally and directly this intuitive inspiration.

“An unconsciously quantitative free verse may be said to exist already in the writings of Whitman and contemporary modernist poets. In modern free verse the underlying impulse is to get away from the fixed limitations of accentual metre, its set forms and its traditional “poetic” language, and to create forms and a diction more kin to the natural rhythm and turns of language which we find in common speech and in prose. ... In Whitman the attempt at perfection of rhythm is often present and, when he does his best as a rhythmist, it rises to a high-strung acuteness which gives a great beauty of movement to his finest lines; but what he arrives at is a true quantitative free verse.

Come, | lovely and | soothing | death, |
Undulate | round the world, | serenely | arriving, | arriving, |

In the day, | in the night, | to all, | to each |
 Sooner or | later, | delicate | death, |...
 Approach, strong deliveress,
 When it is so, when thou hast taken them I joyously sing the dead,
 Lost in the loving floating ocean of thee,
 Laved in the flood of thy bliss, O death,
 And the sights of the open landscape and the high spread sky are fitting
 And life and the fields and the huge and thoughtful night.”¹³

Think back over the lines we have read this evening, and recall that phrase of Sri Aurobindo when he said that one of the qualities of that most highly inspired mantric poetry is *grave exaltation*. And we discussed briefly how “exaltation” and “grave” may go together, this profound joy of sadness, this ubiquity and omnipresence of death. In *Savitri* too the theme is death. *Savitri* is about death. Many of these lines that Sri Aurobindo referred to are about this transition from something which is upheld and made beautiful and glorious and is then trampled to fragments. So here we see a couple of things. We see the form, something about the form, and something about the spirit, of inspired and intuitive poetry, which carries home to us profound truths of existence.

I would like read to you some lines from a poem of Shelley that we are told, by the scholars of the “SA Archives”, Sri Aurobindo read often as a young man. It is a poem I have also read a number of times over the years and I find in it a possible source of much of Sri Aurobindo’s early poetry. And it exemplifies many of the principles that we have been hearing about. It also uses the same basic rhythmic structure as *Savitri*. It is called “The Revolt of Islam”, written in 1817.¹⁴ It is about the spirit of the French Revolution: the poem begins with an air-borne battle between the Eagle and Serpent, the forces of Evil and the forces of Good. This is perhaps a kind of seed of that new epic form, referred to by SA. It is a very long poem; it has twelve cantos and is about a hundred pages long, similar in length and in thematic content to *Iliad*, and Shelley consciously identified the theme with classical Greece. Here I will reproduce only nine of the first twenty-five stanzas, in which we can appreciate the beauty and power of this poetry. One might also read in this light, SA’s ‘Khaled of the Sea’, which is similarly lyrical, romantic, and mystical, but much shorter in length. SA had planned for it to have 10 cantos, but only one was written. It is very beautiful and melodious, and tells a story whose circumstances and images, like Shelley’s, are essentially symbolic.

The Revolt of Islam

XVI

There was a Woman, beautiful as morning,
 Sitting beneath the rocks upon the sand
 Of the waste sea--fair as one flower adorning
 An icy wilderness; each delicate hand
 Lay crossed upon her bosom, and the band
 Of her dark hair had fall'n, and so she sate
 Looking upon the waves; on the bare strand
 Upon the sea-mark a small boat did wait,
 Fair as herself, like Love by Hope left desolate.

XVII

It seemed that this fair Shape had looked upon
That unimaginable fight, and now
That her sweet eyes were weary of the sun,
As brightly it illustrated her woe;
For in the tears, which silently to flow
Paused not, its lustre hung: she, watching aye
The foam-wreaths which the faint tide wove below
Upon the spangled sands, groaned heavily,
And after every groan looked up over the sea.

XVIII

And when she saw the wounded Serpent make
His path between the waves, her lips grew pale,
Parted and quivered; the tears ceased to break
From her immovable eyes; no voice of wail
Escaped her; but she rose, and on the gale
Loosening her star-bright robe and shadowy hair,
Poured forth her voice; the caverns of the vale
That opened to the ocean, caught it there,
And filled with silver sounds the overflowing air.

XIX

She spake in language whose strange melody
Might not belong to earth. I heard alone
What made its music more melodious be,
The pity and the love of every tone;
But to the Snake those accents sweet were known
His native tongue and hers; nor did he beat
The hoar spray idly then, but winding on
Through the green shadows of the waves that meet
Near to the shore, did pause beside her snowy feet.

XX

Then on the sands the Woman sate again,
And wept and clasped her hands, and, all between,
Renewed the unintelligible strain
Of her melodious voice and eloquent mien;
And she unveiled her bosom, and the green
And glancing shadows of the sea did play
O'er its marmoreal depth--one moment seen,
For ere the next, the Serpent did obey
Her voice, and, coiled in rest, in her embrace it lay.

XXI

Then she arose, and smiled on me with eyes
Serene yet sorrowing, like that planet fair,
While yet the daylight lingereth in the skies,
Which cleaves with arrowy beams the dark-red air,
And said: 'To grieve is wise, but the despair
Was weak and vain which led thee here from sleep.
This shalt thou know, and more, if thou dost dare
With me and with this Serpent, o'er the deep,
A voyage divine and strange, companionship to keep.'

XXII

Her voice was like the wildest, saddest tone,
Yet sweet, of some loved voice heard long ago.
I wept. 'Shall this fair woman all alone
Over the sea with that fierce Serpent go?
His head is on her heart, and who can know
How soon he may devour his feeble prey?--'
Such were my thoughts, when the tide 'gan to flow;
And that strange boat like the moon's shade did sway
Amid reflected stars that in the waters lay.

XXIII

A boat of rare device, which had no sail
But its own curvèd prow of thin moonstone,
Wrought like a web of texture fine and frail,
To catch those gentlest winds which are not known
To breathe, but by the steady speed alone
With which it cleaves the sparkling sea; and now
We are embarked--the mountains hang and frown
Over the starry deep that gleams below
A vast and dim expanse, as o'er the waves we go.

XXIV

And as we sailed, a strange and awful tale
That Woman told, like such mysterious dream
As makes the slumberer's cheek with wonder pale!
'T was midnight, and around, a shoreless stream,
Wide ocean rolled, when that majestic theme
Shrined in her heart found utterance, and she bent
Her looks on mine; those eyes a kindling beam
Of love divine into my spirit sent,
And, ere her lips could move, made the air eloquent.

XXV

'Speak not to me, but hear! much shalt thou learn,
Much must remain unthought, and more untold,
In the dark Future's ever-flowing urn.
Know then that from the depth of ages old
Two Powers o'er mortal things dominion hold,
Ruling the world with a divided lot,
Immortal, all-pervading, manifold,
Twin Genii, equal Gods--when life and thought
Sprang forth, they burst the womb of inessential Nought.

Savitri Bhavan
23/10/08

Notes

1. Sri Aurobindo, *The Future Poetry* (1997 ed.), p. 276-301
2. *Ibid.*, p. 285

3. Ibid., p. 285-286
4. Ibid., p. 286
5. Ibid., p. 289
6. Ibid., p. 290
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid., p. 291
9. Ibid., p. 292
10. Ibid., p. 292
11. Ibid., p. 295
12. Ibid. p. 298
13. Ibid., p. 348-349
14. The Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley (1970), p. 40;
<http://www.bartleby.com/139/shel11321.html>



The Poetry of Sri Aurobindo – 7

The Inner Journey

I just want to remind you about the epic form and spirit from last week's observations. Primarily from now on we will be exploring the epics *Savitri* and *Iliad*. This is what Sri Aurobindo primarily put his poetic genius into. Sometime in the mid forties he wrote a letter in which he said he regretted not having more time to finish *Iliad*. But of course he continued working on *Savitri* and more or less finished it by the end of 1950. What we have read so far from *The Future Poetry* shows clearly that he felt the epic form was going to be the one best suited to the vision of the higher mind and Overmind vision.

It seems that from his lyrical poetry, we learned enough to know what the basic poetic movement is. If you read a poem like "Khaled of the Sea"¹ just to enjoy the rhythm and the images, it shows you the richness and the beauty and lyricality of that form and style. But more than that, it also gives one of the first indications of the theme of sacrifice that will become the essential movement of the epic poem *Savitri*.

If you read the sonnets, then you know that Sri Aurobindo could put into a very compressed, very formal, sixteen lines or fourteen lines, the whole vision, the vision of the Purusha, or the vision of the experience of transformation, or those types of experiences that were somehow special to his *sadhana*. He could use the sonnet form to encapsulate them. If you read those poems as a practice, in order to put your consciousness closer to his, to allow him to inform you of where he was, what he saw, what he did, then the sonnet works for you like that. As poetry it is perhaps not very special. The sonnet form has been used by many, and there are innumerable beautiful sonnets that exist in poetry, and probably better ones in Italian. At any rate, he used that form and we know that he mastered it and that he had a special objective in mind. He was transmitting something essential through that form. If we appreciate the early lyrics to any extent at all, they also give us, indirectly, a familiarity with the range of English poetry, of which there is a vast amount. The poetry of Shelley, which is very mystical and philosophical, romantic and beautiful, is like the poetry of "Khaled of the Sea". Sometimes it reaches a height and power of another order. He breaks through into unusual heights of vision and qualities of experience that he can communicate very effectively through his poetry. So we know that those possibilities are there, and they have been evolving through literature for a long time.

Beyond those ranges of poetic achievement, Sri Aurobindo used his creative genius and vast knowledge of poetry to deliberately further the transformation of consciousness. He

used it as the spiritual master uses *mantra*. So it may be a very long time before typical literary knowledge and appreciation finds out what Sri Aurobindo was up to. You can find out what he was up to because you want to know, spiritually, what it was. So you have already invested it with a value that is sufficient for you to become interested in reading it. You will read *Savitri* because he wrote it. But we also know, from what we have read so far here, that he cultivated a type of poetry which he felt went far beyond the usual forms of *sutra* and *mantra*, and beyond the range of spiritual teaching, and even far beyond the range of epic poetry. He attempted to manifest new forces of consciousness through a powerful kind of word-music and inspired speech. And he developed a whole psychology to explain it. If you read the letters from the thirties on poetic inspiration, he is speaking about the ability of Overmind inspiration to descend through other planes of mind and elevate consciousness.

When he says that Savitri can bring down God into the lives of men, he is not just speaking metaphorically. Savitri is an entity, a vibrational being who is invoked through sound and rhythm and image to manifest extraordinary states of stillness, peace, power, beauty, - physically. This is not going to be something that is appreciated widely in the literary world anytime soon. It is not what people are looking for. People are also not looking for quantitative metre. Sri Aurobindo found that quantitative metre could be utilized in English to achieve his objectives. Now we are trying to understand what that means. We have had some hints, but whether we can apply them to our own understanding and our own reading is a matter of experiential learning.

One of the clues he gave us was showing us accentual metres in poetry and then showing us how quantitative metres override the principle of accentual metre. Quantitative metre comes from the meaning. So just a slight change in emphasis changes the meaning; the poet who has a particular meaning in mind uses accentual metre as a basic form but within that basic form there are several different ways to arrange the accents. He could have designed the same line five different ways. He designed it the particular way he did because that carried the meaning best. So when you speak that meaning, yes it has an accentual metre underlying it but, as he says repeatedly, by scanning the line in terms of the accentual metre you won't discover how it is supposed to sound and what it is supposed to mean. That comes from somewhere else – from a plane of consciousness. In order to catch that, sometimes you need to negate completely the accentual pattern. You have to break it. If you read “Khaled of the Sea” it is very easy to fall into this ‘dadadadadadada’ and two or three pages down the way you fall asleep. Then you know you didn't get it. Then you have to try and read it in a manner that is closer to speech. But closer to speech doesn't mean you give up rhythm and balance and regularity. And, it must be heard.

Savitri is the very best example of the mantric combination of quantitative metre, and accent and stress metre, and also of a meaning that is so far from what we ordinarily understand, that either you are going to get it or you are not. Either it is going to be almost meaningless, because we know there is not much story there, - he has told us the new epic poem is not about a story, so you can forget it if you are trying to find a story there, - that is not what it is about. And, if you are trying to find a regular accentual

rhythm that sounds nice to read solemnly like a Sanskrit mantra that is just droning on and on and on, then you will fall asleep. These are the things that it isn't.

The question is, what is it? If we look back at the principle of form and spirit we may recall that Sri Aurobindo said, "The future poetry will follow this direction of intensive and spiritually significant poetic form with a more and more subtle and variable inwardness and a greater fusion and living identity of soul motive." It is not about the story or the circumstances or the ideas, which are what epic poetry has been about, but now it will be about soul motives, suggestive descriptions, and intensely significant speech and action.

The same governing vision will be there as in lyric and drama; the method of development will alone be different according to the necessities of the more diffused, circumstanced and outwardly processive form which is proper to narrative. The epic is only the narrative presentation on its largest canvas and at its highest elevation, greatness and amplitude of spirit and speech and movement.²

So if you can imagine the highest amplitude of spirit and speech and movement, and think about how that would be expressed, you get the intuitively inspired epic form. He says,

It is sometimes asserted that the epic is solely proper to primitive ages when the freshness of life made a story of large and simple action of supreme interest to the youthful mind of humanity, the literary epic an artificial prolongation by an intellectual age and a genuine epic poetry no longer possible now or in the future.³

Homer, Virgil, and Milton did it, but those epics were about mythical times and religious motives and heroes. Those ways of thinking and understanding are no longer relevant, therefore the epic form is no longer relevant. That is the conventional view. Sri Aurobindo says,

This is to mistake form and circumstance for the central reality. The epic, a great poetic story of man or world or the gods, need not necessarily be a vigorous presentation of external action: the divinely appointed creation of Rome, the struggle of the principles of good and evil as presented in the great Indian poems, the pageant of the centuries or the journey of the seer through the three worlds beyond us are as fit themes as primitive war and adventure for the imagination of the epic creator. The epics of the soul most inwardly seen as they will be by an intuitive poetry, are his greatest possible subject, and it is this supreme kind that we shall expect from some profound and mighty voice of the future. His indeed may be the song of greatest flight that will reveal from the highest pinnacle and with the largest field of vision the destiny of the human spirit and the presence and ways and purpose of the Divinity in man and the universe.⁴

I believe these are the most important and revealing statements in this book. The epics of the soul, the great movements, the great battles, the great defeats, the great struggles of the soul, the great heights and discoveries of the soul: these are the epics, the movements, and the actions he is speaking about and that he was to write about in his epic poetry of the spirit. So, as we heard last time, there are many levels of poetic form that can be used

for this purpose and one of them that he mentioned, which we saw an example of in Shelley's poem "The Revolt of Islam" was one in which, as he said,

A richer, subtler and usually a truer poetic effectivity is attained... through a language succeeding by apt and vivid metaphor and simile, richness and beauty of phrase or the forceful word that makes the mind see the body of the thought with a singularly living distinctness or energy of suggestion and nearness,⁵

The poetry shows you a vision through metaphor and simile of something like we saw in Shelley's description of the battle of good and evil: first there was the storm roiling around and then there was a calmness in the middle of the storm and then there came the two symbolic creatures fighting in the air until finally one falls into the sea and swims into the bosom of the soul herself sitting on a rock at the water's edge. We have a powerful metaphor of this battle of good and evil raging around us, especially at that time when the French Revolution was going on, being observed from above and from within by the poet. So in *Savitri* also, we find line after line, page after page, utilizing exactly this form and expressing this kind of spiritual view of things. Shelley wasn't telling us about the French Revolution; he was telling us about the Eagle and the Snake, about the universal forces of Evil and Good, and especially about his deep inner vision and feeling of those things.

Another thing that Sri Aurobindo does in his poetry, that is often done in epics, is to utilize the metaphor of the journey. Odysseus journeyed, and at each point along the way of his journey he had very significant experiences, and eventually he arrived, and there was a completion or fulfillment of the heroic spirit. Beowulf went on a long journey to destroy the monster, as did Gilgamesh. (In the extraordinary case of Gilgamesh, after slaying the monster, with the help of his friend – symbolic of his own lower nature, the friend dies of wounds and Gilgamesh, distraught, journeys into the netherworld to discover the mystery of death. There he receives the robe of immortality. Like Nachiketas in the Katha Upanishad, and like Savitri, it is from death that he receives the secret of life.) This is the old idea of the epic. In *Savitri* we have another kind of journey. We have the journey of the self to find its soul, and passing through an inner death on the way. There are a few other familiar themes that Sri Aurobindo uses, such as self-sacrifice and salvation, but this theme of the journey is present throughout. For example, - this is Aswapati's journey in the book titled "The Traveler of the Worlds," - he is journeying through the worlds or planes of consciousness; he is not journeying through any worlds that we know about.

AS ONE who between dim receding walls
Towards the far gleam of a tunnel's mouth,
Hoping for light, walks now with freer pace
And feels approach a breath of wider air,
So he escaped from that grey anarchy.⁶

We know that in the previous Canto he had had an experience of grayness and anarchy and now he is walking through a narrow pathway and feeling a breath of air and he is

ready to undertake a new stage of his journey. And then, here is another example of the inner journey from the previous page,

Adventuring once more in the natal mist
Across the dangerous haze, the pregnant stir,
He through the astral chaos shore a way
Mid the grey faces of its demon gods,
Questioned by whispers of its flickering ghosts,
Besieged by sorceries of its fluent force.
As one who walks unguided through strange fields
Tending he knows not where nor with what hope,
He trod a soil that failed beneath his feet
And journeyed in stone strength to a fugitive end.
His trail behind him was a vanishing line
Of glimmering points in a vague immensity;⁷

This is just the flow of the journey. It doesn't have any particular story content. So what is it? I'm going to move forward here to Savitri's journey, just to give you another example of this metaphor. In Book Seven, "The Book of Yoga", one of the Cantos is called "The Parable of the Search for the Soul". Here she is moving inwardly to discover her soul and realizes she has to refocus herself in order to search deeply for it.

Then journeying forward through the self's wide hush
She came into a brilliant ordered Space.
There Life dwelt parked in an armed tranquillity;
A chain was on her strong insurgent heart.
Tamed to the modesty of a measured pace,
She kept no more her vehement stride and rush;
She had lost the careless majesty of her muse
And the ample grandeur of her regal force;
Curbed were her mighty pomps, her splendid waste,
Sobered the revels of her bacchant play,
Cut down were her squanderings in desire's bazaar,
Coerced her despot will, her fancy's dance,
A cold stolidity bound the riot of sense.⁸

So we know that she has toned down, somewhat, her adventurous spirit. She is searching for her soul, which is other than her normal self-experience. In order to do that it is necessary to do these things: to enter into a tranquility of mind and heart and cut down the wasteful squanderings of one's energies. This is a "soul motive" of audibly intense significance. A few pages along, we read:

Here was a quiet country of fixed mind,
Here life no more was all nor passion's voice;
The cry of sense had sunk into a hush.
Soul was not there nor spirit but mind alone;⁹

| | / | |
Soul was not there | [nor Spir/it] [but mind] [alone]
(a choriamb, an iamb, an anapaest, and an iamb)

Here you can hear how quantitative metre overrides the accentual and makes of it more or less normal speech. It is normal speech with a strong or grave content; a strong inner movement is taking place. The difference between this and normal speech is that everything here is weighted with meaning. What you have to be sure that you hear when you read it is that particular meaning. It is nonsense if you try to read it in any kind of artificial or predetermined way. That is perhaps an exaggeration, but if you understand that he is saying something that is real, and that you can experience it right now as you read it - if we are making an inner effort to find our soul right now, which should always be the case when reading Savitri - then the message will be heard. Mental quietude is a prerequisite of this journey.

Here was a quiet country of fixed mind,
Here life no more was all nor passion's voice;
The cry of sense had sunk into a hush.

When you read those lines please allow time for the cry of sense to sink into a hush: no feeling, no sensation, no sound, no voices, no passions.

Into a firm and settled space she came
Where all was still and all things kept their place.

And all things kept their place.

I am going to move ahead now on our metaphor of journey, to....

So she fared on across her silent self.

We have to be willing to undertake this journey if this is going to mean anything. If we do take it, then everything that is described will be there for us. It will not be anything abstract or invented or merely poetic.

To a road she came thronged with an ardent crowd
Who sped brilliant, fire-footed, sunlight-eyed,
Pressing to reach the world's mysterious wall,
And pass through masked doorways into outer mind
Where the Light comes not nor the mystic voice,
Messengers from our subliminal greatnesses,
Guests from the cavern of the secret soul.¹⁰

These messengers are approaching this outer world of sensation and thought, from somewhere else deep inside; so she comes to this road where they are seen. Now we are on this road, in this silent mind, and we start to hear messages from our deep inner soul.

Into dim spiritual somnolence they break

So in that state of almost sleep, deadness of sense, these brilliant messengers try to come through into this outer wall of existence. This happens to her at the end of the Canto which is called “The Entry into the Inner Countries” for a very good reason. It is necessary to come here on the way to find the soul. One of these messages is given to us in the form of a voice that Sri Aurobindo referred to in “the form and the spirit” of the future poetry, as “speech, action, circumstance that convey soul qualities”. This messenger speaks to her:

“O Savitri, from thy hidden soul we come.
We are the messengers, the occult gods
Who help men’s drab and heavy ignorant lives
To wake to beauty and the wonder of things
Touching them with glory and divinity;
In evil we light the deathless flame of good
And hold the torch of knowledge on ignorant roads;
We are thy will and all men’s will towards Light.
O human copy and disguise of God
Who seekst the deity thou keepest hid
And livest by the Truth thou hast not known,
Follow the world’s winding highway to its source.
There in the silence few have ever reached,
Thou shalt see the Fire burning on the bare stone
And the deep cavern of thy secret soul.”¹¹

This is the journey that Sri Aurobindo narrates in this Canto. It is clearly not a physical journey to distant lands nor a geologist’s explorations into the earth’s caverns. And where has anyone seen a fire burning on a bare stone? Only in our deepest depths of self-reflection, under the burning compulsion of the will to discover in ourselves a knowledge and a love greater than anything we find outside in the world of illusions, can we imagine such a thing: an inner fire that needs no material fuel to burn.

Then Savitri following the great winding road
Came where it dwindled into a narrow path
Trod only by rare wounded pilgrim feet.¹²

When you read these lines of narrative, if you are not one of those rare individuals seeking your soul, with wounded feet from a long and difficult search, you will gloss over this as if it was just poetry, which is fine. People gloss over it as if it was only poetry all the time. But, at some point it will grab you, and you will be on the path.

The first section of a following Canto of *Savitri*, now firmly on the path to find her soul, titled “The Triple Soul Forces”, is only five pages long, quite self contained, and it tells a story with which we are familiar. And at the same time it is apparent that the story it tells, in very plain, straight forward language, is all metaphor and symbol; it is not a story at all. For example, in the first part Savitri, seeking her soul and listening to her inner

voices, hears and sees a form of herself, an inner soul identity whose appearance and circumstance express a double aspect of herself and the world – sorrow and pity.

HERE from a low and prone and listless ground
The passion of the first ascent began;
A moon-bright face in a sombre cloud of hair,
A Woman sat in a pale lustrous robe.
A rugged and ragged soil was her bare seat,
Beneath her feet a sharp and wounding stone.
A divine pity on the peaks of the world,
A spirit touched by the grief of all that lives,
She looked out far and saw from inner mind
This questionable world of outward things,
Of false appearances and plausible shapes,
This dubious cosmos stretched in the ignorant Void,
The pangs of earth, the toil and speed of the stars
And the difficult birth and dolorous end of life.
Accepting the universe as her body of woe,
The Mother of the seven sorrows bore
The seven stabs that pierced her bleeding heart:
The beauty of sadness lingered on her face,
Her eyes were dim with the ancient stain of tears.
Her heart was riven with the world's agony
And burdened with the sorrow and struggle in Time,
An anguished music trailed in her rapt voice.
Absorbed in a deep compassion's ecstasy,
Lifting the mild ray of her patient gaze,
In soft sweet training words slowly she spoke:
"O Savitri, I am thy secret soul.
To share the suffering of the world I came,
I draw my children's pangs into my breast.
I am the nurse of the dolour beneath the stars;
I am the soul of all who wailing writhe
Under the ruthless harrow of the Gods.
I am woman, nurse and slave and beaten beast;
I tend the hands that gave me cruel blows.
The hearts that spurned my love and zeal I serve;
I am the courted queen, the pampered doll,
I am the giver of the bowl of rice,
I am the worshipped Angel of the House.
I am in all that suffers and that cries.
Mine is the prayer that climbs in vain from earth,
I am traversed by my creatures' agonies,
I am the spirit in a world of pain.
The scream of tortured flesh and tortured hearts
Fall'n back on heart and flesh unheard by Heaven
Has rent with helpless grief and wrath my soul.
I have seen the peasant burning in his hut,

I have seen the slashed corpse of the slaughtered child,
Heard woman's cry ravished and stripped and haled
Amid the bayings of the hell-hound mob,
I have looked on, I had no power to save.
I have brought no arm of strength to aid or slay;
God gave me love, he gave me not his force.¹³

As Sri Aurobindo said that the new epic poetry must do, these lines “ensoul the mind” with the stark realities of suffering and helplessness. But, as far as “story” goes, there is only a recalling and naming, a bringing to consciousness of certain intensities of reality; there is no peasant burning or child being murdered or woman being raped. There is a dramatically moving characterization of the essence of womanhood. There is a disturbing characterization of the essence of brutality. And there is a shocking revelation of the impotence of a certain spirituality to change this nature of events. These are sounds that carry to us images with which we can identify subjectively; their sole purpose is to awaken in us a deeper inner focus and point of view, and a profound and vivid awareness.

And on the next page, just to illustrate how this form works: after her soul expresses/realizes the spirit of love and pity and helplessness, there comes another voice, a more somber sound, this one is the voice of the man of sorrow, and we take on his fallen human perspective.

“I am the Man of Sorrows, I am he
Who is nailed on the wide cross of the universe;
To enjoy my agony God built the earth,
My passion he has made his drama's theme.
He has sent me naked into his bitter world
And beaten me with his rods of grief and pain
That I might cry and grovel at his feet
And offer him worship with my blood and tears.
I am Prometheus under the vulture's beak,
Man the discoverer of the undying fire,
In the flame he kindled burning like a moth;
I am the seeker who can never find,
I am the fighter who can never win,
I am the runner who never touched his goal:¹⁴

So, not only are we exposed to divine pity, we are exposed to human suffering, in just two short pages of this journey. We are brought close to the soul of pity and the soul of suffering, in ourselves, because we need to remember these things, we need to expand our ordinary, superficial, outward view, our mundane daily passions and personal lives, and to come to terms with existence, its heights, and its depths. This spiritual journey soars and falls and soars and falls, again and again, because that is necessary to awaken our consciousness.

Savitri too will speak, after she hears these two voices within: and her words will bring forcefully home to us the whole background of these feelings, as well as the additional

urge of the divine within us to bring about another reality of experience – an urge to definitively change the nature of this reality itself. Could we have envisioned such an almost unimaginable possibility without being brought into touch with this powerful spiritual context through poetry?

And Savitri heard the voice, the echo heard
And turning to her being of pity spoke:
“Madonna of suffering, Mother of grief divine,
Thou art a portion of my soul put forth
To bear the unbearable sorrow of the world.
Because thou art, men yield not to their doom,
But ask for happiness and strive with fate;
Because thou art, the wretched still can hope.
But thine is the power to solace, not to save.
One day I will return, a bringer of strength,
And make thee drink from the Eternal’s cup;
His streams of force shall triumph in thy limbs
And Wisdom’s calm control thy passionate heart.
Thy love shall be the bond of humankind,
Compassion the bright key of Nature’s acts:
Misery shall pass abolished from the earth;
The world shall be freed from the anger of the Beast,
From the cruelty of the Titan and his pain.
There shall be peace and joy for ever more.”¹⁵

This is inspired, visionary speech. It is the music of poetry that reveals the meaning of our ability to feel compassion. It is the voice of the soul on its epic journey of self-discovery *in us*, but with a new enthusiasm, a new determination, a dynamism of spirit imparted to us by the poet of transformation. Savitri’s mission, her soul’s sensibility - deeper than pity - is not only to embrace, to console and to give hope, but to bring a force into the pity, and a wisdom that changes the nature of the human situation. The new soul force doesn’t just give solace. It transforms pity into the power to save. This is an epic journey of the Soul and the Spirit into new realms of possibility.

So, we shall explore a little bit more some of the overriding metaphors that Sri Aurobindo uses to inform us of our own being, the soul’s journey being one, ascent to the heights of spiritual consciousness being another, descent into hell another; there are many metaphors and tones of our being to be discovered. In traditional epics the apocalyptic vision is a common theme which we will also find here. And by this exploration, we can get a sampling of some of the different movements. This particular movement is quite strange and unique in the whole scope of *Savitri*; it is especially in this one Canto and only another short section or two dwell upon the theme of human suffering like this.

But here it is possible to see how the metaphor of the wounding stone, the circumstance of helpless confrontation with suffering, and the speech of dialogue with noble representatives of life’s anguish, all of these conventional forms of drama and epic are used here in a way that is not at all conventional. What is being looked at are subjective,

inner values, something that only the human soul is capable of: no other creature on earth is capable of understanding grief and suffering, - not of merely experiencing it, but understanding it and confronting it, as a principle, with its opposite. This is uniquely and profoundly human. So this journey and this meeting, these personifications of love and pity, and of pain and suffering, personified in these three voices, are revealed in their depth and power. I think this is what Sri Aurobindo means when he says that the epic and the narrative, the standard form, can be used to convey this new spiritual vision. And then it is not circumstance at all that is being narrated; it's a largeness of human experience, and divine experience, and superhuman experience, – all of a subjective quality that the poetry intensifies in us.

Savitri Bhavan
30/10/08

Notes

1. Sri Aurobindo, *Collected Poems* (1972 ed.), p. 261
2. Sri Aurobindo, *The Future Poetry* (1997 ed.), p. 286
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid. p. 292
6. Sri Aurobindo, *Savitri* (1993 ed.), p. 173
7. Ibid. p. 172
8. Ibid., p. 495
9. Ibid., p. 498
10. Ibid., p. 500
11. Ibid., p. 501
12. Ibid., p. 502
13. Ibid., p. 503-504
14. Ibid., p. 505
15. Ibid., p. 507



The Poetry of Sri Aurobindo – 8

The Music of Sacrifice: Yoga Mantra

We are on the track of the meaning of Sri Aurobindo's poetry. I think we need to acknowledge that there is something that we might identify as the Mind of Sri Aurobindo. His poetry is an expression of something quite particular and unique both in its form and its content.

We have mentioned this a few times, for example in the poems about the Silent Witness - we have read two or three poems about that perspective or experience which he is keen to have us understand. He has written many poems about it and there are many passages in *Savitri* about that point of view and that experience. What we find as we read *Savitri* again and again is that there are a few major themes, experiences, movements of consciousness that he dwells upon. There aren't many, there are only a few.

The last time we heard one Canto in Book Seven that dwells upon three forces of the soul of Savitri. The part we read was the Madonna of Love and Pity, and in that Canto there are two others, Madonna of Power, and Madonna of Knowledge. Madonna of Power has different dimensions: creation and destruction and work, from the vast to the narrow. In that Canto she is the goddess of work, and human achievement. Then, the Madonna of Knowledge is also the Madonna of joy, peace, light, and the life of the mind. If we step back from that trilogy, we see the three principles of the Integral Yoga: Love and Devotion, *bhakti yoga*, Work and Sacrifice and the power of *tapasaya*, *karma yoga*, and Knowledge, Wisdom, Truth, *jnana yoga*.

In that Canto, Savitri has a dialogue with each of these soul powers and visualizes a transformation of each of them. A little bit further along in that same book, Savitri enters into the inner countries and on her journey to find the soul she explores the plane of matter, the plane of life, and the plane of mind, in consecutive sections of the Canto, before she finds her true soul. We can see this structure of *Savitri* also in "The Book of the Traveler of the Worlds", where there is a major section in which the traveler of the worlds (Aswapati) explores the physical creation, and the vital creation, and then the mental creation. There are thirteen cantos in that book which explore these and other planes. So this is one of the predominant themes and structural elements of *Savitri*. Sri Aurobindo speaks about the universe, creation, and life in terms of planes of existence. For him the physical, vital, and mental planes encompass the three-fold world of manifestation, and he wants us to learn to interpret life, and all existence, in terms of

universal forces. He wants to teach the mind to shift from the sensory world and the idea world to the intuitive or higher mind world-view that sees and interprets everything in terms of universal principles. This has a depersonalizing or impersonalising effect, psychologically, if we can do it. Then our experience of the world is not fragmented and judgmental. It encompasses our physical, multifarious existence, and our vital and mental existence, not as individuals but as parts of a totality that includes all individuals and everything that we see, know, and do in the world. Everything is done and seen in a field of universal physical, vital, and mental forces.

One of the purposes of *Savitri*, its didactic purpose, is to guide us toward that way of perceiving. Another structure that we find, and another theme that we find repeatedly, is the theme of sacrifice, which we covered last time - the journey theme, the epic of the search for the soul, and the epic of the transformation toward the highest regions of consciousness. This journey theme is there throughout. But, then there is added to the journey a heroic element: the journey is done for a purpose; the sacrifice, the search is done for the sake of an end. And that end is no less than the salvation of humanity, the salvation of the suffering world, the transformation of the world of ignorance into a world of truth and light. This journey is taken, not for the sake of the individual soul's liberation; it is taken for the sake of the liberation and transformation of the whole.

I'm going to read a few examples of that very specific, very definite recurring theme in this session. The third theme that I want to examine, if I get to it, is the process, - what this search entails. How is it accomplished? What is the inner movement of sacrifice really, how do we do it, how does Aswapati do it, how does Savitri do it, how is it to be done? That takes us into the discovery of the soul and the opening to the higher planes through the absolute stillness of the being. This is the method.

We will explore these ideas in a number of passages so that we are clear about these intentions, these movements, these ways of understanding that are Sri Aurobindo's - what he really has to say: what the meaning of *Savitri* really is. There is a great danger in doing this, however, because we might think that as the result of such a review, we might *understand* something about *Savitri*. And I don't want us to make that mistake. There are many speakers on the subject of *Savitri* who lead you happily right into that box and close the door. I'm hoping that by reading some of the passages that convey these ideas, we will remember that it is Savitri who is the goddess of illumination, it is Savitri that is the creation, it is Savitri that has to be known, it is not these categories that I just outlined. They are virtually meaningless. But there is a structural aspect of things, and as we started out with the most elemental structural aspect: the form, the rhythm, the metre, the way poetry works, now we are moving through an attempt to explore the meaning of it, and eventually we should aim to come to Savitri herself, the mantra, the music; toward understanding something that is beyond understanding.

For the moment, then, I am going to concentrate on a few passages that deal with "that for which" - the aim of the sacrifice. In this passage from the second Canto, right in the beginning almost, we get an introduction to the nature of the sacrifice of Savitri. Throughout, it always entails the principle and idea of sacrifice, and the music, the

purpose of sacrifice always entails counterpoint. We are sacrificing for the purpose of changing something which exists in a form that is untenable. The method Sri Aurobindo uses in almost every Canto is to pose that which has to change with the counter position of that which has to be realized. And by juxtaposing these two, a tension is created that we feel. And then we can perform the surrender with a full knowledge of its purpose.

This is something that I often speak about as the Vedic Sacrifice. There is a call for the gods to descend and illumine the darkness. When that call is made with the full intention of the being and absolute sincerity of the being then an emptiness is created, the flame has burned. Into that emptiness there descends the response. Sri Aurobindo explains this structure at length in *The Secret of the Veda*. We generate this Agni, this energy of sacrifice, and we formulate this opposition. We call and then we surrender. And then there is the descent and there is the affirmation. Then the speech of the Rishi becomes immense, luminous, and joyful. We find this pattern repeated again and again in *Savitri*, as in the hymns of the Rig Veda, and so I refer to this as the underlying Vedic structure, which actually makes it work spiritually, and not just be poetry. If you read these selections, which I'm going to show you now, in a casual way to find out that there is an image and a structure there, it is quite meaningless. You can flip through a few pages and read a few lines, and say 'yes, this structure of sacrifice is there'. But this is not at all what I'm hoping to leave with you. This can reduce *Savitri* to the most meaningless, almost comical, level of understanding.

We begin, then, with what Sri Aurobindo calls "The Issue":

CANTO II: *The Issue*¹

There is a darkness in terrestrial things
That will not suffer long too glad a note.
On her too closed the inescapable Hand:
The armed Immortal bore the snare of Time.
One dealt with her who meets the burdened great.
Assigner of the ordeal and the path
Who chooses in this holocaust of the soul
Death, fall and sorrow as the spirit's goads,
The dubious godhead with his torch of pain
Lit up the chasm of the unfinished world
And called her to fill with her vast self the abyss.
August and pitiless in his calm outlook,
Heightening the Eternal's dreadful strategy,
He measured the difficulty with the might
And dug more deep the gulf that all must cross.
Assailing her divinest elements,
He made her heart kin to the striving human heart
And forced her strength to its appointed road.
For this she had accepted mortal breath;
To wrestle with the Shadow she had come
And must confront the riddle of man's birth
And life's brief struggle in dumb Matter's night.

Whether to bear with Ignorance and death
Or hew the ways of Immortality,
To win or lose the godlike game for man,
Was her soul's issue thrown with Destiny's dice.

I'm going to switch now to the Canto titled "The Vision and the Boon", where the mission of Aswapati is formulated very precisely, after he has traveled on his journey through the worlds and discovered what he has to know in order to do what he has to do. Here, in "The Book of the Divine Mother", he confronts her; he discovers in himself the Divine Mother. As you will see, "In him the Earth-Mother sees draw near the change," and She speaks to him. Here we get another version of the nature of the sacrifice that Sri Aurobindo evokes, enacts, and communicates through *Savitri*. This is the Mother of All speaking to Aswapati about sacrifice.

Adept of the self-born unfailing line,
Leave not the light to die the ages bore,
Help still humanity's blind and suffering life:
Obey thy spirit's wide omnipotent urge.
A witness to God's parley with the Night,
It leaned compassionate from immortal calm
And housed desire, the troubled seed of things.

The subject is his spirit. It leaned down to do this:

Obey thy spirit's wide omnipotent urge.
A witness to God's parley with the Night,
It leaned compassionate from immortal calm
And housed desire, the troubled seed of things.
Assent to thy high self, create, endure.
Cease not from knowledge, let thy toil be vast.
No more can earthly limits pen thy force;
Equal thy work with long unending Time's.
Traveller upon the bare eternal heights,
Tread still the difficult and dateless path
Joining the cycles with its austere curve
Measured for man by the initiate Gods.
My light shall be in thee, my strength thy force.
Let not the impatient Titan drive thy heart,
Ask not the imperfect fruit, the partial prize.
Only one boon, to greaten thy spirit, demand;
Only one joy, to raise thy kind, desire.
Above blind fate and the antagonist powers
Moveless there stands a high unchanging Will;
To its omnipotence leave thy work's result.
All things shall change in God's transfiguring hour."²

So, at the height of his realization, and as the fruit of his sacrifice, Aswapati gets unlimited power to raise his kind, but only within the constraints prescribed by the divine

will and plan. He shouldn't demand a partial or quick solution. In this framework of sacrifice for the heroic purpose of humanity's salvation, we recognize from time to time a kind of Christian imagery. This idea of sacrifice for the sake of the salvation of the world is a Christian idea. The whole meaning of the Christ is exactly this. No wonder Sri Aurobindo takes this image and explores it quite thoroughly. For example, in this Canto from "The Book of Fate", moving a hundred pages forward to another example, we find a very clear expression of this idea in its well known form, beginning with these lines:

He who would save himself lives bare and calm;
He who would save the race must share its pain:

There is an interesting juxtaposition here of the Vedic idea and the Christian idea. We will explore this much further, along with the Buddhistic idea, because it occurs frequently in *Savitri*. For example:

This he shall know who obeys that grandiose urge.
The Great who came to save this suffering world
And rescue out of Time's shadow and the Law,
Must pass beneath the yoke of grief and pain;
They are caught by the Wheel that they had hoped to break,
On their shoulders they must bear man's load of fate.
Heaven's riches they bring, their sufferings count the price
Or they pay the gift of knowledge with their lives.
The Son of God born as the Son of man
Has drunk the bitter cup, owned Godhead's debt,
The debt the Eternal owes to the fallen kind
His will has bound to death and struggling life
That yearns in vain for rest and endless peace.
Now is the debt paid, wiped off the original score.
The Eternal suffers in a human form,
He has signed salvation's testament with his blood:
He has opened the doors of his undying peace.
The Deity compensates the creature's claim,
The Creator bears the law of pain and death;
A retribution smites the incarnate God.
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.³

Just above this passage there are a few lines that express the essential idea: the meaning of existence, in this ancient and heroic view, is this:

Men die that man may live and God be born.

Moving to one other example of this structure, in the yoga of Savitri, here we get a juxtaposition of that which one does to save himself (the Buddhistic idea) and that which one does to save the world (the Christian idea). Both are obviously necessary.

A stark hushed emptiness became her self:
Her mind unvisited by the voice of thought
Stared at a void deep's dumb infinity. ...

Then a Voice spoke that dwelt on secret heights:
"For man thou seekst, not for thyself alone.
Only if God assumes the human mind
And puts on mortal ignorance for his cloak
And makes himself the Dwarf with triple stride,
Can he help man to grow into the God.
As man disguised the cosmic Greatness works
And finds the mystic inaccessible gate
And opens the Immortal's golden door.
Man, human, follows in God's human steps.
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."⁴

The way that this is done according to this teaching, the method in which we are being instructed by Sri Aurobindo, is explored in great depth through many Canto's, but the movement is the same each time. This movement is the one that Sri Aurobindo wants to convey to us if we expect these aims to be achieved. It is his movement, his teaching - and he has not written this poem for entertainment. We will read a couple of passages that are very explicit, the most explicit that I know of. This is from Canto Five of Book One. In my opinion this is the best summary of the whole movement of yoga; I'm convinced you could spend ten years working on this Canto and it would be very fruitful.

He shore the cord of mind that ties the earth-heart
And cast away the yoke of Matter's law.
The body's rules bound not the spirit's powers:
When life had stopped its beats, death broke not in;
He dared to live when breath and thought were still.
Thus could he step into that magic place
Which few can even glimpse with hurried glance
Lifted for a moment from mind's laboured works
And the poverty of Nature's earthly sight.⁵

This idea of rejection and emptiness is reinforced by another passage nearby:

His soul retired from all that he had done.
Hushed was the futile din of human toil,
Forsaken wheeled the circle of the days;
In distance sank the crowded tramp of life.
The Silence was his sole companion left.
Impassive he lived immune from earthly hopes,
A figure in the ineffable Witness' shrine
Pacing the vast cathedral of his thoughts
Under its arches dim with infinity
And heavenward brooding of invisible wings.
A call was on him from intangible heights;
Indifferent to the little outpost Mind,
He dwelt in the wideness of the Eternal's reign. ...

All the deep cosmic murmur falling still,
He lives in the hush before the world was born,
His soul left naked to the timeless One.
Far from compulsion of created things
Thought and its shadowy idols disappear,
The moulds of form and person are undone:
The ineffable Wideness knows him for its own. ...

His spirit mingles with eternity's heart
And bears the silence of the Infinite.⁶

Savitri, the silence and the word, has the power to create an atmosphere in which that experience can flow if one is willing to give it the space – in oneself.

Notes on *Savitri*, mantric poetry and sacrifice (extracts from the original sessions 9 and 10 omitted here)⁷

What is being transmitted by *Savitri* is not fundamentally information for the mind. If your mind gathers information from the hearing, or from this summary, that is the part you play in the process. Your mind captures something and fits it into your framework. You can then identify with it in terms of your understanding of things. But Sri Aurobindo is doing something else. He is trying to transmit from the highest levels of attainable consciousness the force of truth. It is a transformational mantra.

At some point in our progressive development we realize that we have limits, - as Sri Aurobindo said, a new kind of poetry requires a new kind of hearing - but the purpose is to push those limits and break them down, and ultimately to transmit truth directly to the soul. In order for this to happen, one's aspiration has to meet his aspiration on the path. And then you are in communication with 'consciousness' – then you are not interpreting anything, it's just the powerful reality that the word brings into being. That word is

Savitri, she is the goddess of illumined and illuminating speech. At some point she is invoked and becomes present and fills you – not only with understanding – but with the force itself. You not only see the meaning: you become identified with it. Then Sri Aurobindo is doing his work.

The Vedic Sacrifice results in the descent of the divine and manifestation of the divine. Sri Aurobindo has brought the energy to us through mantric speech, and then one works with that energy for a lifetime and it becomes a reality. In that process consciousness is transformed. It is no longer a journey through the planes of consciousness, but *being* the planes of consciousness. Savitri is that path and that force and that goal. All of the different movements and speeches and experiences that are narrated are of that spirit, of that experience, and for that purpose. The poem is a living embodiment of the path of yoga. It is not a sutra in the traditional sense that tells you these things which it tells you. Rather, it transmits the spirit and truth of these things; it transmits the movement itself. For example the principle of sacrifice is transmitted and you become that sacrifice. Then you are in a position to be a real human being.

Savitri repeats everything that Aswapati did. We hear it in the yoga of Aswapati and we hear it again in the yoga of Savitri. It's important to dwell for some time on the depth and importance and necessity of this movement: whenever there is a dwelling in the emptiness, it is followed by a descent and a realization. This pattern is repeated throughout *Savitri*. But what would it mean to live in that state of emptiness? The process of annihilating the sense mind is arduous. Here is where the path of emptiness, Nirvana, and the path of sacrifice, suffering and crucifixion converge. Each time that there is a luminous response to the call, it affirms the utility of the emptiness. Here the path of Buddha and the path of Christ meet, and then a third possibility is discovered.

You annihilate yourself, and then God can become present as you. "The cry of the abyss drew heaven's reply." ...The emptiness becomes a channel and receptacle for the divine force.

"Banish all thought from thee and be God's Void." Sri Aurobindo has identified the "void of the supreme", God's emptiness, as the path of transformation. There is a power of emptiness which is everything. Consciousness of the All is only possible with an absolute of stillness and energy in some incomprehensible balance, so that the nature of the divine is the Void, but it is a luminous divine void that holds everything. Sri Aurobindo communicates this experience in a tangible way. The power of mantra is the power to communicate that experience. That is how mantra has been used in the Hindu and Buddhist traditions. "An impersonal emptiness walked and spoke in her, / ... A zero circle of being's totality. / It used her speech and acted in her acts, / ... The original mystery wore her human face./ ... Impassive the body claimed not its own voice, / But let the luminous greatness through it pass. / A dual Power at being's occult poles / Still acted, nameless and invisible: / Her divine emptiness was their instrument."⁸

This is the mystery, and the method, of the Vedic Sacrifice.

Savitri Bhavan

6-11-08

Notes

1. Sri Aurobindo, *Savitri* (1993 ed.), p. 17
2. Ibid., p. 340
3. Ibid., p. 444-445
4. Ibid., p. 488
5. Ibid., p. 75
6. Ibid., p. 78
7. Lectures 9 (13/11/2008) and 10 (19/11/2008), omitted here, may be heard on the University of Human Unity website:
http://www.universityofhumanunity.org/lecture_9_poetry_sri_aurobindo_rod
http://www.universityofhumanunity.org/lecture_10_poetry_sri_aurobindo_rod
8. Op. cit., p. 552



The Poetry of Sri Aurobindo – 9

Savitri as Yoga Mantra

I would like to approach the understanding of Savitri in a way that is different from either metrics, meaning, or music. It is difficult to do that, to make that step while at the same time being immersed in *Savitri*. As soon as we get immersed in *Savitri* we are not *understanding*: we are seeing and hearing.

We now have an idea about Sri Aurobindo's form and structure, his theory of poetics and application of theory to creating a powerful, beautiful, meaningful poetry. We know something about the meaning that is conveyed - particularly the meaning of a spiritual vision of existence, and the meaning of sacrifice: the meaning of emptiness, and the meaning of cosmic consciousness. These are the meanings conveyed through Sri Aurobindo's application of the poetics of inspired inner vision. These meanings get conveyed *mantrically* to us. That gives us some knowledge of how the epic form has been used by him to reveal the path of yoga. He has shown the experience of transformation and the path of yoga through mantric epic verse.

Now we have the option to enter into yoga with Savitri as a guide. This means to begin to understand Savitri as a living power that works in us and through us to take us along a path of transformation of consciousness, our own. At this point *Savitri* ceases to be an epic poem, and it becomes no longer possible to look at *Savitri* as an epic poem. We must look at *Savitri* as a being, radiating from a higher plane of consciousness into a lower plane of consciousness, with us as the intermediary.

When we get to "The Book of Everlasting Day", which is one long Canto, we find an interplay of all the movements of the epic journey of the soul again, and several times over again. It is possible to take three or four hour-long sessions to fully explore this teaching, which is the culmination of the previous teachings and a recapitulation of all of the teachings and all of the movements of the journey. Here he recreates the sacrifice, the call, the descent, and the dwelling in luminous emptiness. There is a re-sacrificing, and the re-confronting, once again, all of the things previously confronted and surpassed on the road to transformation, a re-sacrificing and re-calling, and again receiving and affirming. This movement of Savitri that we learn, is shown to us throughout the progression of Canto's and Books, and is again shown throughout the progression of this particular and ultimate Canto.

We can see this very clearly here in a fragment from “The Book of Everlasting Day” where once again that same offering made by Aswapati to the Divine Mother, that same call and that same instruction to not precipitate too quickly the change on Earth, and the assurance that it will come in its own time, is given to Savitri. And again there is the reaffirmation of the stillness, the surrender, which we heard again in “The Book of Yoga”: the same instruction to withhold the power, to hide behind the realization, and to dwell in the emptiness. Here again, for the third time or for the nth time, we confront exactly the same movement. The Emptiness, the Void, in which both Aswapati and Savitri dwell for a cyclic hour, or for years of there being no change, and then even after she has the realization of the Divine Mother in her, again she dwells in the emptiness. Only is cosmic consciousness possible to Savitri after dwelling in the emptiness. And even after the descent of the Divine Mother in her there is nothing there, there is no person left.

In all of these movements there is the repetition of the rejection of thought, the rejection of life-force, the rejection of sensation, the dwelling in the absolute oneness, the absolute silence of everything. What we have is an opportunity to approach an understanding of this movement by dwelling in the repetition of this cycle as we read and as we re-commit to that process of reading, hearing, feeling, sacrificing, allowing that emptiness to follow those words in us until we take a stand in the consciousness of Savitri, and then our understanding is real. And that is the only point of the whole thing. At this point, at the end of the epic, the ultimate stillness and rejection is death. So she dwells in a state of death, and continues to call. In all of those other stages of the yoga of Aswapati and the yoga of Savitri they dwell in a state of death in life, - yoga it is called. This is dwelling in yoga. It is being conscious but not identifying with nature while being in nature, absolute detachment. But, at the same time there is the opportunity to channel life-force and nourish the body and radiate cosmic power - so this is where we have been, the journey we have taken already.

In this last movement, Satyavan has died long ago and Savitri has been dwelling with death for many Cantos. It requires a lot of practice of yoga while being alive, in order to be able to dwell with death after the body decides to stop functioning. If we learn to dwell with death in the living body comfortably, then we can dwell with death after the body ceases to function. This is yoga. There is no break in consciousness as a result of death. The Mother is fully conscious without the body and active in our transformation without the body. This is the point of yoga. There can be no transformation of life until there are transformed consciousness's that are able to move from life to life without a break. This is the ultimate teaching. In “The Book of Everlasting Day”, after death has been unmasked and we are shown that death is a veil of the divine only, and behind the veil stands revealed supreme love, Savitri, dwelling in death, is united with the absolute divine love, and she is still calling for a decree to return to life without death, to transform life, to have the will, power, grace, and the command to return now from this conscious death into immortal life. That is her mission.

At this point, all has been achieved and still she is dwelling with unmasked luminous divine death, in the absolute stillness of death, which she learned to do in yoga with Satyavan alive, and she lived through his death experience without any change whatsoever in her state. That is looking back at the myth – the story, but we need to be finished with the myth and dwell in the understanding of the movement of yoga. We refer back to the myth because it is a kind of story. But, we also know that it is not a story: it's the epic of the transformation of consciousness that is given to us in a somewhat storyfied form, but not much, because Sri Aurobindo has said from the start that using the epic as a mantric form is not about storytelling. It is about conveying directly the experiences of the soul, especially spiritual experiences. So if we are really going to learn and understand something from Savitri, we need to get beyond the idea that *Savitri*, the poem, is a story about something. Now in these lines, we will see a recapitulation of the call and the instruction, and of the dwelling in the stillness. The supreme is now revealed to her and is speaking to her.

O living power of the incarnate Word,

Listen carefully to each of these words: living, power, incarnate, Word. This is Savitri.

O living power of the incarnate Word,
All that the Spirit has dreamed thou canst create:

What you have just heard **is** Savitri, not what is written on the screen or page there, projected from this book which we see with our eyes and tells us a story about something. That **sound** you just heard **is Savitri**, and it has a meaning. The meaning is that this goddess-force embodied in speech has this power to create a new consciousness in us. It only requires a voice - which we all have. The timber doesn't matter, each voice has a different timber, but it is the call, the expressed intention, and the surrender.

Thou art the force by which I made the worlds,
Thou art my vision and my will and voice.

Sri Aurobindo has done a yoga of transformation which was based upon the principle that the Overmind could become a channel for a supramental descent and manifestation, and the Overmind is the world of the gods, of divine forces and especially, in this case, divine transformative speech. So it is possible for him to say that this Word is the force with which I created the worlds. He is speaking from that plane, sending, projecting, identifying, making real and transmitting from that plane through these words and this truth - now at this moment. Savitri is now.

“O living power of the incarnate Word,
All that the Spirit has dreamed thou canst create:
Thou art the force by which I made the worlds,
Thou art my vision and my will and voice.
But knowledge too is thine, the world-plan thou knowest
And the tardy process of the pace of Time.
In the impetuous drive of thy heart of flame,

In thy passion to deliver man and earth,
Indignant at the impediments of Time
And the slow evolution's sluggard steps,
Lead not the spirit in an ignorant world
To dare too soon the adventure of the Light,
Pushing the bound and slumbering god in man
Awakened mid the ineffable silences
Into endless vistas of the unknown and unseen,
Across the last confines of the limiting Mind
And the Superconscient's perilous border line
Into the danger of the Infinite.¹

So do we know, now, why this transformation doesn't go faster than it does? Because she is commanded to take care of these fragile humans.

BOOK XI: *The Book of Everlasting Day*

But if thou wilt not wait for Time and God,
Do then thy work and force thy will on Fate.
As I have taken from thee my load of night
And taken from thee my twilight's doubts and dreams,
So now I take my light of utter Day.
These are my symbol kingdoms but not here
Can the great choice be made that fixes fate
Or uttered the sanction of the Voice supreme.
Arise upon a ladder of greater worlds
To the infinity where no world can be.
But not in the wide air where a greater Life
Uplifts its mystery and its miracle,
And not on the luminous peaks of summit Mind,
Or in the hold where subtle Matter's spirit
Hides in its light of shimmering secrecies,
Can there be heard the Eternal's firm command
That joins the head of destiny to its base.
These only are the mediating links;
Not theirs is the originating sight
Nor the fulfilling act or last support
That bears perpetually the cosmic pile.
Two are the Powers that hold the ends of Time;
Spirit foresees, Matter unfolds its thought,
The dumb executor of God's decrees,
Omitting no iota and no dot,
Agent unquestioning, inconscient, stark,
Evolving inevitably a charged content,
Intention of his force in Time and Space,
In animate beings and inanimate things;
Immutably it fulfils its ordered task,
It cancels not a tittle of things done;
Unswerving from the oracular command

It alters not the steps of the Unseen.
If thou must indeed deliver man and earth
On the spiritual heights look down on life,
Discover the truth of God and man and world;
Then do thy task knowing and seeing all.
Ascend, O soul, into thy timeless self;
Choose destiny's curve and stamp thy will on Time.”
He ended and upon the falling sound
A power went forth that shook the founded spheres
And loosed the stakes that hold the tents of form.²

Do you see what happened? An opening was given, a possibility won, at last. And then, yet again there is the silence.

Then in its rounds the enormous fiat paused,
Silence gave back to the Unknowable
All it had given. Still was her listening thought.
The form of things had ceased within her soul.
Invisible that perfect godhead now.
Around her some tremendous spirit lived,
Mysterious flame around a melting pearl,
And in the phantom of abolished Space
There was a voice unheard by ears that cried:
“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.
In a happy vast sublime cessation know,—
An immense extinction in eternity,
A point that disappears in the infinite,—
Felicity of the extinguished flame,
Last sinking of a wave in a boundless sea,
End of the trouble of thy wandering thoughts,
Close of the journeying of thy pilgrim soul.
Accept, O music, weariness of thy notes,
O stream, wide breaking of thy channel banks.”
The moments fell into eternity.³

The moments fell into eternity. That is what we mean by dwelling in the emptiness. The emptiness which is Being. There is nothing else. This world of thought and sensation is an illusion. And as long as we don't know that we don't know yoga, we are not in yoga. Yoga is being in Being, period. But this being in Being manifests the worlds, and is All that it manifests. The question is, does it continue to manifest worlds of ignorance, or can it manifest another way of being? So, she is offered once again, for the zillionth time, the ultimate liberation in absolute divine bliss. She has been offered it repeatedly, she has stood in it, been it, seen it, known it, and so shall we. It will appear to be the ultimate option of existence. But always there is the call.

But someone yearned within a bosom unknown

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."
Limitless like ocean round a lonely isle
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."
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."
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."

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 give to me for earth and men."⁴

Well, that is why Aswapati brought her to birth in the first place. And so she lived and lives and pulsates and speaks - to bring a power of divine sweetness to earth and men. When Sri Aurobindo began this epic journey in the early chapters of *The Future Poetry*, that mystical and philosophical and prophetic sight and speech were not, properly speaking, the substance of poetry. The substance of poetry he said was power, beauty, and delight. And the origin of all poetry was the Overmind whose inspiration gets diluted by all the planes of mind and life and so on. But, by entering into the yoga of transformation and having established himself in this Overmind consciousness, he began to use that power of poetic speech to convey mystical knowledge and experience and philosophy and prophesy. All of the lower planes of mental activity: inspired mind, and philosophic mind, and occult vision were raised by this Overmind power to the level of inspired mantric expression. Then poetry became the vehicle for revelation, instruction, wisdom, transformational practice. And finally, around 1947, he wrote a long letter about, - not about the Overmind as something toward which to aspire and from which to receive, but about the Overmind as the body of consciousness itself. Everything seen, and known, and said was from that plane only. From there, he said, his task was to bring down the Supermind, which is a power that is being shown here in a distant way to this Overmind Being – Savitri – whose job is then to bring it down here. This luminous divine speech, and all that it represents and all that it brings into play becomes the creation of that plane of consciousness which becomes completely accessible to us. That vibration has been created with such substance that it is completely accessible to us, and it can create in us a vehicle for that higher manifestation, which even at that time was distant for that person doing this yoga, as he narrates the process, but it was possible to build a vehicle of its power and light and beauty and knowledge, - an immortal being of revelatory word-music. It will always be here. Savitri will always be here as a force of linkage with that world of origin, the Overmind, until it becomes the norm of experience. She is the guide, she is the teacher, the force itself. She is the consciousness which can manifest wherever there is a willing instrument.

O Savitri, thou art my spirit's Power,
The revealing voice of my immortal Word,
The face of Truth upon the roads of Time
Pointing to the souls of men the routes to God.⁵

This is a transmission of knowledge about soul-experience and spiritual experience. The soul has only to confront this divine emptiness and wait there until there is a sufficient channel for the divine force to flow through it. She can teach us that; her being can teach that waiting and that preparation and that aspiring and show to the soul that being of power: the possibility of infinite bliss and of transforming material time and space. Savitri is “about” going to that place and seeing that possibility. Until we do that, it can't happen. She is able to move our will out of its normal channels into her will, and to teach our will to abdicate itself and adopt her will. But it is nothing that ever happened, that is being told about, like a story: why did she do this and how did he do that; that is not *Savitri*. The question is only between the soul and the spirit, and as the two become familiar, we see what happens, we hear what happens, and then we begin to experience what happens. So, it is the happening, and ultimately entering into the dialogue with

death. The entering into the process of transforming life, the experiencing of the infinite and eternal emptiness and bliss and the dwelling there, and the call and the response, and at some point – according to this example, the soul is ready to receive that power. Until it is ready, and prepared by the journey, that power cannot descend.

Savitri Bhavan

3-12-08

Notes

1. Sri Aurobindo, *Savitri* (1993 ed.), p. 693
2. *Ibid.*, p. 694
3. *Ibid.*, p. 695-696
4. *Ibid.*, p. 696-697
5. *Ibid.*, p. 703



The Poetry of Sri Aurobindo – 10

The Epic Form, Mantra, and Overmind Truth

I'd like to end this series of presentations of Sri Aurobindo's poetry by going back to the beginning, in a way, where we learned that for him there was the possibility of a new poetry that would build on the lyrical movement of the poet, the basic movement of poetry, but it would add a depth of intuition and a breadth of vision that would make it possible to communicate realities that come from the highest planes of consciousness, Overmind truths.

In those early days when he wrote about the theory of poetry, he emphasized power and beauty as the primary objects of poetry: to express power and beauty and delight. The type of poetry which traditionally is the most powerful and the most beautiful is the epic form of poetry. So he suggested using the structure of the epic with story and narrative and the metre of the classical epic, quantitative metre, to express these worlds of inner reality that had not been expressed through poetry. His road, his journey from that time of writing, around 1920, through the twenties and thirties and forties, was an exploration of this possibility - to use all of the fine creative tools of language that had been developed through centuries, to express realities that were not being expressed. The element, the surprising element in this development of structure is that these traditional forms of English poetry, and classical Greek and Sanskrit poetry, can undergo a transformation of power and beauty through the force of mantra: the original creative speech of the Rishi, the seer. The seer of these realities previously used the mantric form to communicate the spiritual vision of existence. Sri Aurobindo stated the goal of including all of existence in the scope of this mantric poetry, whose goal is to express inner realities, but not only of the spiritual plane - all of reality, and to bring all of reality to the hearer, to the seer through mantric speech. The Vedas, as we've been hearing, and the Upanishads primarily communicate spiritual powers and spiritual goals and *Savitri* does that too. But, in *Savitri* there is an inclusiveness of the world as the place of the soul's journey of transcendence.

Traditionally in epic poetry, power is about conquest. It is brute force. It is vital power and physical power, and it is also mental power and spiritual power. This is distinct from beauty and delight. It is also distinct from truth. If we take these four goddesses – truth, beauty, power, and delight - and visualize them as creators of planes of existence, creators of all aspects of existence, everything that is beautiful embodies to some extent the divine coefficient of beauty, and everything from the crawling of the snail to the conquest of Troy is an expression of power. Every bit of science and philosophy is an

expression of truth. Every morsel of food that is swallowed by every bird, and every glass of wine and every sensation of breeze, is an expression of delight. The life-world embodies Truth, Beauty, Power, and Delight. The physical world embodies them, the mental world embodies them, the Overmental world creates them. And in the Divine they are the pure thing itself without any expression.

The divine, we can conceive of, as truth of being, delight of being, beauty of being, power of being, and this is the eternal and the absolute. Sri Aurobindo had a vision of creating a poetry that communicates from the Overmind degree of reality, plane of reality, forms of Truth, Power, Beauty, and Delight through all the levels of manifestation. A transformation of consciousness means that we become conscious of what ordinarily seems to be, as he says, null and void, but actually is an expression of those divine degrees of absolute reality. It is our problem that we don't perceive in every iota divine power, divine beauty, and delight. That is the problem of the transitional being, the evolutionary consciousness: we perceive existence in a very mundane and buffered manner. That doesn't mean that what we perceive is what the reality is. The purpose of transformation of consciousness is to see the divine reality in everything.

Sri Aurobindo's idea was that a highest power of inspired speech might connect the human consciousness with the innermost truth, and beauty, and power, and delight in everything on every plane. It can uplift everything, so that the most brutal event can be perceived to be divine, because there is nothing else. *Savitri*, which we have been reading and hearing for a few weeks, is an amalgamation of this theory for the purpose of conveying to us the yoga of transformation. At the same time that he was formulating these ideas on the basis of his extraordinary genius and spiritual inspiration, he wrote another epic called *Iliad*. What is its purpose? Is it different from *Savitri*? Can we understand this theory of Sri Aurobindo any better or any differently through this creation?

It certainly has had less publicity. We know that in the forties he was still very interested in it. Around 1944 or 1945 he commented about that, and he wrote his essay on quantitative metre during that time, in the forties. He was still developing "the poetry of the future" and this poem *Iliad* was still a field of his exploration. In one of his late letters, around 1946, he says that all true poetry is exploration, it's discovery. In this poem *Iliad*, from which we heard a little bit in the beginning of the course just to illustrate the power of quantitative hexameter, we saw that the hexametric line is longer and much weightier than the pentametric line. It even takes up more of the page; it spreads across the whole page. It requires, as he has commented, an extraordinary degree of creative power to sustain the inspiration and expression in this form. Those who know Greek and who have understood Sri Aurobindo's close affinity to the Greek poets – Amal Kiran being one of those, – have recognized that Sri Aurobindo was equally a master of Greek and Latin as he was of Sanskrit and English.

When you study *Iliad* you find out all about the gods of the Greeks, in great detail. Sri Aurobindo was unbelievably closely attuned to that realm of beings, those realities. He commented somewhere that reading Homer in the original was literally to bring the gods

down from Mount Olympus, to make them live. He did it. He reincarnated the whole pantheon of Greek gods and goddesses in this book called *Ilion*. It is amazing, it is extraordinary. It raises another question for me that is closely aligned with the later chapters of *The Life Divine* and our evolutionary exploration, where at one point Sri Aurobindo goes into a very elaborate and totally incomprehensible description of the planes of existence above the physical, the vital, and the mental. He learned to see, and he teaches us to see, our lives as a universal physical, universal vital and mental existence. If we truly achieve cosmic consciousness, and impersonality and detachment, then we perceive everything in terms of those universal principles of life and mind. Then he says that the life plane, and the mind plane and other planes have a scope, a range far beyond anything that is manifested. They reach into the divine vital, the range of the divine mind, the higher vital and the higher mind, and touch the Overmind where the gods and goddesses that create everything that exists dwell eternally. The idea is that through a transformation of consciousness we can see the reality of our world in those terms. When we ask the question, What is Time for an Overmind being who is a power of divine creation in the universe? I'm sure our answer is going to be different than what we say about "time" with respect to our schedules. Which is the reality?

The only way we can really understand what *time* is, is through a transformation of consciousness which allows us to attune ourselves to these Overmind deities. Then we have a chance to understand, really, the answer to that question. From the course on evolution we know that human beings have discovered cyclically, time and time again, and once again in the twentieth century, that there is a possibility to evolve a higher intuition that amounts primarily to breaking through our narrow concept of time. The intuitional consciousness is a different way of perceiving time, primarily. Bergson says there are no moments in time, they are all products of our artificial limitations that we impose on events. And so things, realities, have a duration, and an intensity, and you don't really know the reality of a thing unless you perceive this. Because you don't have "time" to get to know its duration, you tack a label on it. One of the things that is possible through a mantric epic overmind poetry is a glimpse of the meaning of time, the reality itself, a glimpse of the reality of power itself, a glimpse of the reality of beauty itself. (These are more interesting than time we suppose.) A glimpse of the reality of love itself.

I would suggest that one of the reasons why Sri Aurobindo was preoccupied with *Ilion* is exactly this. He was interested in communicating these realities. His whole experiment with poetry was to create a language that makes it possible to do that. Now, as we also learned in the early stages of this course, this is a poetry of sound. You absolutely cannot hear the meaning of *Ilion* by reading the page. The big question then is, how does it sound? Not, what does it mean? What is the sound of the meaning of time? If it is possible to know the answer to that question, then this poem *Ilion* says it. So it is important. And it belongs to Sri Aurobindo's very particular, special art and theory of poetry. We at least should have a grasp of it in our bank of stored impressions, which fade surprisingly quickly. And then, fortunately it also exists on the page, so we can recover it from time to time.

In the Hindu tradition, there are *kavi*'s who sit in temples and recite the entire Mahabharata from memory. You can imagine that this would enable you to reconnect with its truths and powers and subtleties of meaning, in a way that you are not likely to do in your busy schedules. We don't have *kavi*'s sitting around reading *Savitri* and *Iliad* very often these days, but it is not impossible that they could at some point arrive.

I'd like to read a few passages just to see if we can catch something surprising, with respect to these embodiments of truth and beauty, seen by Sri Aurobindo and conveyed through his technique. The first character who we will see and hear is a person known as Laocoon. He is a Trojan prophet. Troy is about to fall to the Greek invaders. Let's keep in mind that this is a phenomenon that has happened repeatedly throughout human history. The fall of a civilization to a conqueror for the sake of beauty, because of the immortality of beauty, Helen, Helena; or for the sake of wealth, Lakshmi; or for the sake of truth, Sophia. These are not unknown phenomena. In the divine scheme of things, if these realities of Divine power, beauty, and truth are evolving on earth through human forms, then each occurrence of the rise and fall of civilization, or of a hero, or a romance, has a divine purpose. If we look at them that way, they aren't disasters. They are moments of temporal transition. So, here comes Laocoon. The people are tired of fighting, they are depressed. Troy is falling.

... Then as the shouting
Tired of itself at last disappeared in the bosom of sacrifice,
Once more he started erect and his voice o'er the hearts of his hearers
Swept like Ocean's impatient cry when it calls from its surges,
Ocean loud with a thought sublime in its measureless marching.
Each man felt his heart like foam in the rushing of waters.
 "Iliad is vanquished then! She abases her grandiose spirit
Mortal found in the end to the gods and the Greeks and Antenor,
And when a barbarous chieftain's menace and insolent mercy
Bring here their pride to insult the columned spirit of Ilus,
Trojans have sat and feared! For a man has arisen and spoken,
One whom the gods in their anger have hired. Since the Argive prevailed not,
Armed, with his strength and his numbers, in Troya they sought for her slayer,
Gathered their wiles in a voice and they chose a man famous and honoured,
Summoned Ate to aid and corrupted the heart of Antenor.¹

Antenor is an ageing and corrupted Trojan leader who has spoken about their plight against the Greeks and called for their surrender. Do we recall a time in our lives when a trusted leader has betrayed us through doubting our own abilities and promise, due to his own impotence? This voice of cowardice and corruption is characteristic of a certain mortal weakness known by everyone to some extent, at one time or another, which recurs as if eternally in human societies and political relations, and which Sri Aurobindo brings home to us with an extraordinary poignancy in these few lines. Has such behavior been planted in us by the immortals?

Flute of the breath of the Hell-witch, always he scatters among you
Doubts, affliction and weakness chilling the hearts of the fighters,
Always his voice with its cadenced and subtle possession for evil

Breaks the constant will and maims the impulse heroic.
 Therefore while yet her heroes fight and her arms are unconquered,
 Troy in your hearts is defeated! The souls of your Fathers have heard you
 Dallying, shamefast, with vileness, lured by the call of dishonour.
 Such is the power Zeus gave to the winged words of a mortal!
 Foiled in his will, disowned by the years that stride on forever,
 Yet in the frenzy cold of his greed and his fallen ambition
 Doom from heaven he calls down on his countrymen, Trojan abuses
 Troy, his country, extolling her enemies, blessing her slayers.
 Such are the gods Antenor has made in his heart's own image
 That if one evil man have not way for his greed and his longing
 Cities are doomed and kings must be slain and a nation must perish!
 But from the mind of the free and the brave I will answer thy bodings,
 Gold-hungry raven of Troy who croakst from thy nest at her princes.
 Only one doom irreparable treads down the soul of a nation,
 Only one downfall endures; 'tis the ruin of greatness and virtue,
 Mourning when Freedom departs from the life and the heart of a people,
 Into her room comes creeping the mind of the slave and it poisons
 Manhood and joy and the voice to lying is trained and subjection
 Easy feels to the neck of a man who is next to the godheads.
 Not of the fire am I terrified, not of the sword and its slaying;
 Vileness of men appals me, baseness I fear and its voices.²

With this voice of warning, and this mind of truth – this cutting clarity of critical thought – Laocoon succeeds in waking up his fellow Trojans to their destiny. How important is it for us to remember the power of honesty, especially in the face of its opposite? And then, there is beauty, and love. Have you every thought about Paris and Helen? It is difficult for us, perhaps, to imagine how a great nation could go to war for the beauty of a woman, but it did. That beauty must have been something extraordinary. Let us listen for a minute or two, to Sri Aurobindo's voiced manifestation of the truth of Paris and Helen. Here he reminds us of positive values and virtues which, like dishonesty and evil, we are likely to have forgotten – until some shocking circumstance, or some inspired voice, reminds us.

Here in a chamber of luminous privacy Paris was arming.
 Near him moved Helen, a whiteness divine and intent on her labour
 Fastened his cuirass, bound the greaves and settled the hauberk,
 Thrilling his limbs with her touch that was heaven to the yearning of mortals,
 She with her hands of delight caressing the senseless metal
 Pressed her lips to his brilliant armour; she bowed down, she whispered:
 "Cuirass, allowed by the gods, protect the beauty of Paris:
 Keep for me that for which country was lost and my child and my brothers."
 Yearning she bent to his feet, to the sandal strings of her lover;
 Then as she gazed up, changed grew her mood; for the Daemon within her
 Rose that had banded Greece and was burning Troy into ashes.
 Slowly a smile that was perfect and perilous over her beauty
 Dawned like the sunlight on Paradise; strangely she looked on her lover.
 So might a goddess have gazed as she played with the love of a mortal
 Passing an hour on earth ere she rose up white to Olympus.
 "So art thou winner, Paris, yet and thy spirit ascendant
 Leads this Troy where thou wilt, O thou mighty one veiled in thy beauty

First in the dance and the revel, first in the joy of the mellay;
 Who would not leave for thy sake and repent it not country and homestead?
 Winning thou reignest still over Troy, over fate, over Helen.
 Always so canst thou win? Has death no claim on thy beauty,
 Fate no scourge for thy sins? How the years have passed by in a glory,
 Years of this heaven of the gods, O ravisher, since from my hearthstone
 Seizing thou borest me compelled to thy ships and my joy on the waters.
 Troy is enringed with the spears, her children fall and her glories,
 Mighty souls of heroes have gone down prone to the darkness;
 Thou and I abide! The mothers wail for our pleasure.
 Wilt thou then keep me forever, O son of Priam, in Troya?
 Fate was my mother, they say, and Zeus for this hour begot me.
 Art thou a god too, O hero, disguised in this robe of the mortal,
 Brilliant, careless of death and of sin as if sure of thy rapture?
 What then if Fate today were to lay her hand on thee, Paris?"
 Calmly he looked on the face of which Greece was enamoured, the body
 For whose desire great Troy was a sacrifice, tranquil regarded
 Lovely and dire on the lips he loved that smile of a goddess,
 Saw the daughter of Zeus in the woman, yet was not shaken.³

And the yogic reply:

... "All things yield to a man and Zeus himself is his accomplice
 When like a god he wills without remorse or longing."

What do we see and what do we hear in these lines, from what he called "The Book of Partings"? Is there anything tangible there that we can feel, and say that we know? Or isn't it rather the transmission of pure values, ideals, embodiments of soul-force and spirit-force? Have we ever before felt in this well-known story such vivid qualities – of ourselves? And then there is the book called "The Book of the Gods", where, as Sri Aurobindo predicted in *The Future Poetry*, we can hear the gods themselves speaking: Zeus and Hera, Aphrodite and Ares and Athena. It is remarkable. And where do they dwell? And are they different when they enter our realm, or when we meet them in our higher regions?

Even those natural vestures of puissance they leave when they enter
 Mind's more subtle fields and agree with its limitless regions
 Peopled by creatures of bliss and forms more true than earth's shadows,
 Mind that pure from this density, throned in her splendours immortal
 Looks up at Light and suffers bliss from ineffable kingdoms
 Where beyond Mind and its rays is the gleam of a glory supernal:
 There our suns cannot shine and our moon has no place for her lusters,
 There our lightnings flash not, nor fire of these spaces is suffered.⁴

Here is an exemplary exchange between Zeus and Aphrodite, with the baser and more violent Hera, Ares, and Athene present nearby. Zeus:

"Children of Immortality, gods who are joyous forever,

Rapture is ours and eternity measures our lives by his aeons.
For we desireless toil who have joy in the fall as the triumph,
Knowledge eternal possessing we work for an end that is destined
Long already beyond by the Will of which Time is the courser.
Therefore death cannot alter our lives nor pain our enjoyment.
But in the world of mortals twilight is lord of its creatures.
Nothing they perfectly see, but all things seek and imagine,
Out of the clod who have come and would climb from their mire to our heavens
Blindly mistaking the throb of their mortal desires for our guidance. ...

Let not one nation resist by its glory the good of the ages.
Twilight thickens over man and he moves to his winter of darkness.
Troy that displaced with her force and her arms the luminous ancients
Sinks in her turn by the ruder strength of the half-savage Achaians.
They to the Hellene shall yield and the Hellene fall by the Roman.
Rome too shall not endure, but by the strengths ill-shaped shall be broken,
Nations formed in the ice and mist, confused and crude-hearted.
So shall the darker and ruder always prevail over the brilliant
Till in its turn to a ruder and darker it falls and is shattered.
So shall mankind make speed to destroy what 'twas mighty creating.
Ever since knowledge failed and the ancient ecstasy slackened,
Light has been helper to death and darkness increases the victor.
So shall it last till the fallen ages return to their greatness.
For if the twilight be helped not, night o'er the world cannot darken;
Night forbidden how shall a greater dawn be effected?"⁵

Aphrodite:

Then with her starry eyes and bosom of bliss from the Immortals
Glowing and rosy-limbed cried the wonderful white Aphrodite,
Drawing her fingers like flowers through the flowing gold of her tresses,
Calm, discontented, her perfect mouth a rose of resistance
Chidingly budded 'gainst Fate, a charm to their senses enamoured: ...

"I am the womb of the world and the cause of this teeming of creatures,
And if discouraged I ceased, God's world would lose heart and perish.
How will you do then without me your works of wisdom and greatness,
Hera, queen of heaven, and thou, O my sister Athene?
Yes, I shall reign and endure though the pride of my workings be conquered.
What though no second Helen find a second Paris,
Lost though the glories of form to the earth, though their confident gladness
Pass from a race misled and forgetting the sap that it sprang from,
They are eternal in man in the worship of beauty and rapture.
Ever while earth is embraced by the sun and hot with his kisses
And while a Will supernal works through the passions of Nature,
Me shall men seek with my light or their darkness, sweetly or crudely,
Cold on the ice of the north or warm with the heats of the southland,
Slowly enduring my touch or with violence rapidly burning.
I am the sweetness of living, I am the touch of the Master.
Love shall die bound to my stake like a victim adorned as for bridal,
Life shall be bathed in my flames and be purified gold or be ashes.

I, Aphrodite, shall move the world for ever and ever.
Yet now since most to me, Father of all, the ages arriving,
Hostile, rebuke my heart and turn from my joy and my sweetness,
I will resist and not yield, nor care what I do, so I conquer.”⁶

The divine degree of bliss, power, joy, beauty, and anger conceived here, is ungraspable by the Roman spirit, which is also the spirit of our age. Even if it conquers the Ionian, even if the Ionian was able to grasp some degree of its truth and power, it was nothing compared to the immortal potencies of rapture. Is it possible to evolve a being capable of such bliss? *Truth born too soon might break the imperfect earth*, was the warning given to Aswapati by the Divine Mother. Sri Aurobindo speaks about Overmind poetry as a vehicle to raise the consciousness of humans. But he does not speak of it as human poetry. He says very clearly that true poetry straight from the Overmind is not human. Therefore it can be a lever to raise human consciousness. Therefore, spend the time and effort to create it. But who will hear it? And anyway, we must ask, are these real things, or only the dreams of a poet?

It is going to require ages of quality-time to restore a sense of the divine, if we take these prophetic chants of the gods even a little to heart, unless there is a sudden fiat of heaven that touches us in a way that is significantly different from our normal physical, vital, and mental energies. Maybe the fiat of Savitri is great enough to allow in those influences of creativity and beauty and power, sooner rather than later. And maybe it will require more ages of loosening the tent poles towards that end. There is a certain kind of effort, it says in the final pages of *Savitri*, which we heard last time, that does loosen the tent poles of form. *A power went forth that shook the founded spheres / And loosed the stakes that hold the tents of form*. And there is a certain sense in which this has already been accomplished by Sri Aurobindo.

But are we willing to have them loosened, those stakes whose canvas shelters, and stifles?

Savitri Bhavan
10-12-08

Notes

1. Sri Aurobindo, *Collected Poems* (1972 ed.), p. 424-425
2. *Ibid.*
3. *Ibid.*, p. 448-449
4. *Ibid.*, p. 496
5. *Ibid.*, p. 497
6. *Ibid.*, p. 501

On-line Resources

Rod Hemsell, *The Poetry of Sri Aurobindo*, Lecture Series 2008, audio-files
http://www.universityofhumanunity.org/lecture_1_poetry_sri_aurobindo_rod
http://www.universityofhumanunity.org/lecture_2_poetry_sri_aurobindo_rod
http://www.universityofhumanunity.org/lecture_3_poetry_sri_aurobindo_rod
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http://www.universityofhumanunity.org/lecture_12_poetry_sri_aurobindo_rod

P.B. Shelley, *The Revolt of Islam*
<http://www.bartleby.com/139/shell11321.html>

Sri Aurobindo, *Savitri*, *The Future Poetry*, and other selected works on-line
<http://www.sriurobindoashram.org/ashram/sriuro/writings.php>

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