

Aurobindo and Future Poetry

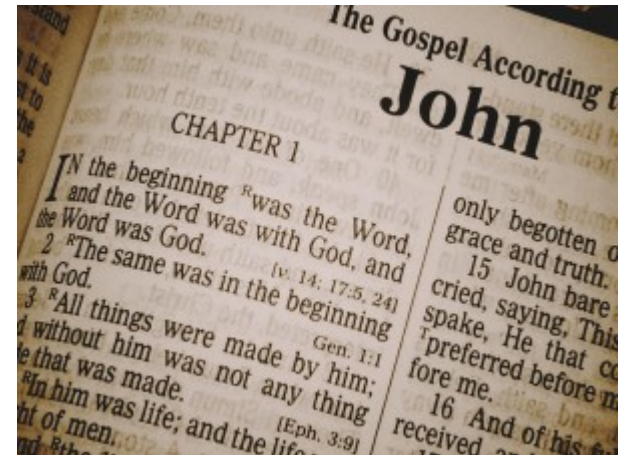
Yoga and Creativity



Savitri
Part I -
Book I
The Book of Beginnings
§ 19 The Symbol Dawn

It was the hour before the Gods awake.
Across the fathoms of the divine went,
The huge forboding aftermath of Night, alone,
Lay stretched immobile upon Silence' marge.
A mute unconscious soulless of the unknown,
Abyss of the untolded Infinite
Whose fatherless eyes occupied the world,
Cradled the cosmic dream of ignorant force
In noise, creative slowly huddling the suns,
That carries all things in its somnolent whirl.
Across the vast enormous traces of Space,
Its formless stupor without mind or life,
A shadow spinning through the endless vast,
Earth wheel'd abandoned in the hollow gulfs,
Forgetful of her spirit and her fate.
The impassive skies were neutral, empty, still.
Then a blank presence yearned towards distant change.

The power of the word



All religions extol the power of the word. For example, in the Bible, in the Book of John, we find "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God." But in Indian philosophy, especially its ancient poetic tradition, the word is exalted to a divine status. This is embodied in the Sanskrit word *mantra* and poetry was seen as the embodiment of mantras, with a power to transform the human personality. Aurobindo writes, "The Word has power - even the ordinary written word has power. If it is an inspired word it has still more power." (Aurobindo, 9.510)

The meaning of Mantra

The word *mantra* has now entered the English language and connotes something like a slogan or something one keeps repeating. However, the word has profound and mystic origins. The word is derived from two Sanskrit words, *manas* which refers to the mind, and *trayate* which means to reflect upon. It is sometimes also translated as “that which protects.” The word *manush* signifies a human being with a mental capacity, but more precisely, it refers to the reflective capacity of the mind. This is revealed by the cognate Sanskrit word *mananam* which means reflection or meditation.

Surprisingly, science has classified the human species as *Homo sapiens sapiens*. This is Latin meaning “the one who thinks and knows that one is thinking.” In other words, the first *sapiens* indicates the thinking capacity of the human being. The second *sapiens* refers to reflective consciousness. In the Buddhist tradition, this is called mindfulness.

Reflection and meditation

Sadly, we live in a world of reaction. Our system of education does not seem to foster the exercise of reflection. Instead of reacting to events, we must reflect upon them. This is the essence of being human. But what we see all around is the “impulse release” philosophy. Whatever impulses you have, you release them and others become the victims of our verbal venom. Now with our electronic gadgets, we can hurl insults at each other at the speed of light. The philosopher cautions us to pause and see this suicidal trajectory for the human race, but if we do not heed these warnings, we may face the same fate as did the dinosaurs. One philosopher put it humorously.

“Darwin’s theory that we came from monkeys is all wrong,” he said. “We are going back to being monkeys.”

Symbiosis between thought and word

The ancients knew the power of the word. They used words carefully, not carelessly, because they knew words have power over our minds and the minds of others. There is a symbiotic relationship between thought and the word. They are often inseparable. To control thought, we can control the word. Such is the power of the *mantra* that is extolled in the Vedas and the Upanishads. Vivekananda classifies the attention to our usage of words as being part of his karma yoga.

Karma yoga and the usage of words

In his Karma Yoga lectures, he said, "There are many other aspects of this science of work. One among them is to know the relation between thought and word and what can be achieved by the power of the word. ... apart from the higher philosophic and religious value of the Word, we may see that sound symbols play a prominent part in the drama of human life. I am talking to you. I am not touching you; the pulsations of the air caused by my speaking go into your ear, they touch your nerves and produce effects in your minds. You cannot resist this. What can be more wonderful than this? One man calls another a fool, and at this the other stands up and clenches his fist and lands a blow on his nose. Look at the power of the word! There is a woman weeping and miserable; another woman comes along and speaks to her a few gentle words, the doubled up frame of the weeping woman becomes straightened at once, her sorrow is gone and she already begins to smile. Think of the power of words! They are a great force in higher philosophy as well as in common life. Day and night we manipulate this force without thought and without inquiry. To know the nature of this force and to use it well is also part of Karma yoga." (Vivekananda, 1.74)

Poetry and the usage of words

The attention to the power of the word is an essential part of Aurobindo's integral yoga. To increase this attentive power of the mind with regard to words, Aurobindo turned to poetry and taught that it can be used as a vehicle penetrating into the higher levels of the mind. "Music, painting, poetry and many other activities which are of the mind and vital can be used as part of spiritual development ... it depends on the spirit in which they are done." (Aurobindo, 356)

The layers of being

Aurobindo's use of the word "vital" requires further elaboration. In the Taittiriya Upanishad, we find a description of five layers of the human being. These are called *annamaya kosha*, *pranamaya kosha*, *manomaya kosha*, *vijnanamaya kosha* and *anandamaya kosha* corresponding to physical body, vital body, mental body, supramental body and finally the "blissful sheath" corresponding to the *ātman*. Ordinarily, we live in the physical, vital or mental bodies. But beyond the mental and supramental, Aurobindo identified the higher mind, the illumined mind, the intuitive mind, and the overmind.

His integral yoga is a means of ascent into these higher levels of the mind. But between the physical and the mental is the vital body, called the *pranamaya kosha*, and often identified as the network of nerves representing the interconnections between the physical body and the mental body. Aurobindo would often speak of "physical-vital" or the "vital mental" to refer to some of the intermediate levels. For him, poetry to be used as a vehicle for higher realisation, it had to be written from a higher level, preferably from the level of the overmind. Thus, not all poetry or literature can be said to be of a higher transformative nature. Some literature can do exactly the opposite if it is the product of the lower vital physical or the vital mental.

Art as yoga

This is very much in line with much of Indian philosophy. Every human activity can be used as a means for the spiritual ascent. If we inhabit the level of the higher reflective mind, we can verify if we are ascending or descending. One of Aurobindo's biographers, Srinivasa Iyengar, explains this as follows. "The true poetic word thus strives to catch the inward eye, to reach the inward ear, and to sink into the deeper profundities of the awakening or awakened soul. The real aim of the arts - architecture, sculpture, painting, music, poetry - is to speak to the spirit of man through meaningful images and only the media vary in their different arts, the poet's being the word that is charged with power and purpose. Most people are content to live in the outer mind and senses, but the aim of art and especially poetry is to help us to live in the soul, to enable us to see into the utter truth of things. And the poet has to find the words and the rhythm that would achieve this aim." (Iyengar, Vol. 2, 1109)

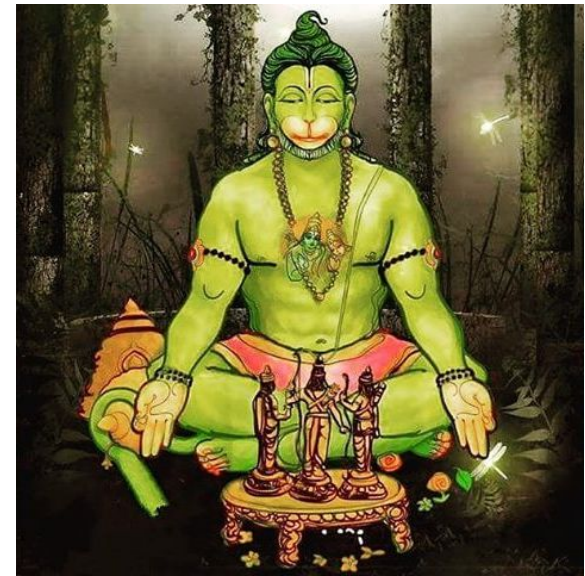


Vision is the power of the poet

Thus, not all writing that is classified as poetry is poetry in Aurobindo's use of the word. The same can be said about music. What part of our personality does it touch? If it is the vital physical or the vital mental, then it may only appeal to the ordinary mind and may not be able to take us higher. The characteristic feature that would qualify for higher poetry or higher music in Aurobindo's view, is the vision of a higher ideal. In his *Future Poetry*, he wrote "Vision is the characteristic power of the poet, as is discriminative thought the essential gift of the philosopher and analytic observation the natural genius of the scientist. The Kavi was in the idea of the ancients the seer and revealer of truth ... Therefore the greatest poets have been always those who have had a large and powerful interpretative and intuitive vision of Nature and life and man and whose poetry has arisen out of that in a supreme revelatory utterance of it." (Aurobindo, 9.29)

Aspiration towards a higher ideal

We have noted in the earlier chapter that in Aurobindo's philosophy, there are several gradations of the mind. First is the ordinary mind, full of thoughts and emotions. This is the restless mind, sometimes called the habit mind. The Buddhists call it the monkey mind. But this monkey mind can become the monkey God (often represented as Hanuman in the Indian mythological tradition) if we can make the mind aspire to a higher ideal.



Hanuman and Advaita

Hanuman represents how devotion to a higher ideal leads one to enlightenment. So we see here the transformative power of not only the word, but also the divine symbol and how they are to be used in conjunction to rise higher. The mind thinks in images and the word is used to invoke the image. Sometimes, it is even said that the word and the corresponding image are inseparable. But if we can hold the ideal firmly in our mind, it has the power to transform us. But this transformation must come about in stages. It is again a sign of egoism when one aims for the level of the supermind without having had the psychic preparation for it. This is beautifully expressed by Hanuman in the Ramayana of Tulsidas:

shri nāthe jānaki nāthe abhede paramātmani

tathāpi mama sarvasvam rāmāḥ kamala-locana

“I know that Vishnu and Rama are manifestations of the same Supreme Being; still my devotion is to the lotus-eyed Rama.” (Prema Bhakti Chandrika, verse 29)

Mind, Overmind and Supermind

Then there is the higher mind to which we rise to when we reflect, ponder and look at ourselves objectively. This is what is often called introspection. But beyond the higher mind is the illumined mind, and then the intuitive mind and then the overmind. Finally, we reach the supermind or as Vivekananda called it, superconsciousness. Aurobindo says that it is from the level of the supermind that the sages of the Vedas and Upanishads wrote and their poetic expression is one of revelation.

Mantric poetry

In a letter written in 1936, Aurobindo explained that, “The Vedic poets regarded their poetry as Mantras, they were vehicles of their own realisations and could become vehicles of realisation for others. Naturally, these mostly would be illuminations, not the settled and permanent realisation that is the goal of Yoga - but they could be steps on the way or at least lights on the way. I have had in former times many illuminations, even initial realisations while meditating on verses of the Upanishads or the Gita. Anything that carries the Word, the Light in it, spoken or written, can light this fire within, open a sky, as it were, bring the effective vision of which the Word is the body.” (Aurobindo, 9.510)

The word “illumination”

It is interesting to note here Aurobindo's use of the word “illumination”. In his hierarchy of levels of the mind, he distinguished the illumined mind as being above the higher (reflective) mind. Here, he suggests that poetry can be an instrument that we can use to rise above the higher mind and gain some flashes of illumination. In the same letter, he wrote “In all ages spiritual seekers have expressed their aspirations or their experiences in poetry or inspired language and it has helped them and others.” (Aurobindo, 9.511)

Rhythm, form and vision

In his book “The Future Poetry”, Aurobindo elaborates, “The mantra, poetic expression of the deepest spiritual reality is only possible when three highest intensities of poetic speech meet and become indissolubly one, a highest intensity of rhythmic movement, a highest intensity of verbal form and thought substance, of style, and a highest intensity of the soul’s vision of truth.” (BG, 134)

Silence and reflection

Reflection is only the first step in the gradations leading to supermind. The practice of stillness and the practice of silence are needed to rise higher to the level of the illumined mind. In Sanskrit, the word *mauna* means silence and he who has mastered it is called a *muni*. In his *Vivekachudamani*, Shankara says the control of speech is the first step in the path of yoga.

Thus, poetry in the true sense of the word must come from the inner depths of a higher realization and not from the superficial mind. Aurobindo sees poetry and more generally, all artistic work in this spiritual context. “All art worth the name must go beyond the visible, must reveal, must show us something that is hidden, and in its total effect not reproduce but create.” (BG, 126)

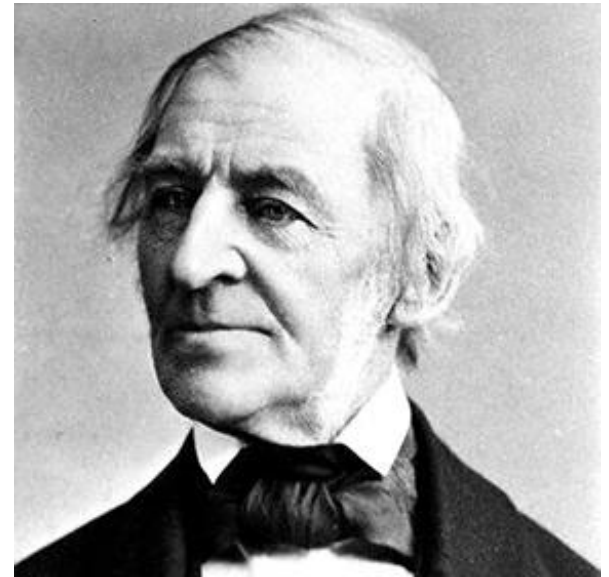
In the Bhagavad Gita, God is described as the Ancient Poet, *kavim purānām*. The universe itself is considered the poem of God. Such was the experience of epiphany of the ancient sages.

Reading from a higher level

If the writing of poetry must emanate from a higher level, so must the reading of it. We must try to feel the thought conveyed in the poem. First, one must feel the sound and the sense of words. As one does, a certain delight arises. One cannot read poetry from the level of the ordinary mind. If one does, all they would experience is a jingling of words and perhaps not feel the meaning. Aurobindo explains. "Ordinary speech uses language mostly for a limited practical utility of communication; it uses it for life and for the expression of ideas and feelings necessary or useful to life. In doing so, we treat words as conventional signs for ideas with nothing but a perfunctory attention to their natural force, much as we use any kind of common machine or simple implement; we treat them as if, though useful for life, they were themselves without life." (BG, 131)

Emerson

- “Cut these words and they would bleed.
- They are vascular and alive.”
- -Ralph Waldo Emerson



But even in ordinary speech, we are parenthetically aware that to put more life into the word, we sometimes stress some syllable, modulate our voice so that we can bring more vitality into our speech. If we go back to the origins of human speech, Aurobindo writes, “words had not only a real and vivid life of their own, but the speaker was more conscious of it than we can possibly be with our mechanised and sophisticated intellects.” (BG, 131)

Bhava or higher emotion

The act of reading (or studying) must again be a creative act. We must re-create the emotion or *bhāva* as it is called in Sanskrit, that the author tried to encapsulate in the writing. In his essay on “Quotation and Originality”, Emerson emphasizes this as follows. “The profit of books is according to the sensibility of the reader. The profoundest thought or passion sleeps as in a mine until an equal mind and heart finds and publishes it.” (Emerson, 296)

Emerson may have been talking about how ideas circulate from age to age through the medium of writing. However, the core message of the passage is that the mind and heart must feel the idea and this is at the essence of reading (or writing) poetry.

The idea of *rasa*

Here we find the idea of *rasa* in poetry. The original meaning of the word is the sap or juice of a plant but in the Indian aesthetic tradition “came to mean both *flavor* and *essence* early on, two meanings curiously merged in its aesthetic use.” (BG, xix) The application of the word is similar to our usage of the English word *taste* which has a wide spectrum of meanings ranging from the sensory organ to its aesthetic dimension. We speak of literary taste, musical taste, artistic taste. But less known is the aesthetic dimension in science, and especially mathematics. There one often speaks of mathematical taste and this is clearly conveyed in phrases like “an elegant proof” or a “beautiful equation”. But one must be trained to perceive this aesthetic dimension in whatever province of study. So, one can say that the poetic character is a feature of everything, only we are not usually aware of it. To bring about this awareness is the purpose of poetry.

Future poetry as Mantric poetry

Central in the reading of poetry is to capture the *rasa* of the words. This requires an imaginative process of the mind and thus, the reading of poetry is also seen as educating the imagination, a primary function of the humanities, though it is not limited to it but also is a feature of scientific discovery.

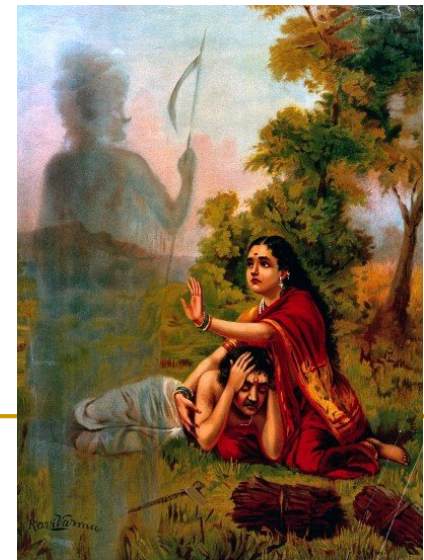
Though mantric poetry is written from a higher level of consciousness, Aurobindo also suggests that the attempt to write poetry can help the individual to raise his level of consciousness. One must make a deliberate effort in this direction. In 1934, he wrote, "The poet lives still in the mind and is not yet a spiritual seer, but he represents to the human intellect the highest point of mental seership where the imagination tries to figure and embody in words its intuition of things, though that stands far below the vision of things that can be grasped only by spiritual experience." (Aurobindo, 9.517)

Savitri and its philosophical meaning

The story of Savitri is from the Mahabharata. The legendary Vyasa is said to be the creator of this ideal character who is viewed in the Indian psyche as a symbol of conjugal love. Her story is seen as an embodiment of the spiritual message that "love conquers death." Briefly, the story is this. King Aswapati, (literally "lord of the horse") performs penance for eighteen years after which the goddess Savitri appears in the sacrificial fire and promises to be born as his daughter. As she matured, princes and kings dared not approach his daughter as they were overwhelmed by her divine nature. Her father, observing this, asks her to seek out her own husband. One day, while on a hunt in the forest, she finds Satyavan, who is the faithful son of the blind king Dyumatsena, who along with his queen, were exiled from their kingdom. There, in their forest hermitage, Satyavan dutifully carries out his daily chores and takes loving care of his disabled parents. Savitri falls instantly in love with Satyavan and communicates her desire to marry him to her father. When the king consults the sage Narada about her wish, Narada warns that though Satyavan is noble in character, he is destined to die within a year.

Savitri meets Yama, the Lord of Death

Savitri's parents try to discourage her and tell her of the fateful prediction of the sage Narada. But Savitri doesn't relent. So the marriage is performed and Savitri goes to live with Satyavan and his parents in the forest. Only Savitri is aware of the fateful day predicted by Narada and as that day approaches, she fasts and prays to prepare herself for the calamity. That day, as was his daily habit, Satyavan goes into the forest to chop wood and Savitri follows him there. After a few moments, Satyavan faints and Savitri rushes towards him and places his head on her lap. Just then Yama, the Lord of Death, appears to take Satyavan away. But Savitri follows Yama as he takes away the soul of Satyavan. Yama tells her that her time for death has not arrived and she should not follow him. But Savitri persists. Finally, Yama seeing her remarkable devotion relents and returns the soul of Satyavan.



History of the story rooted in the conquest of death

This story is of great antiquity. In the Mahabharata, it is told by Rishi Markandeya to the Pandava King, Yudhishtira in the period of exile of the Pandavas. From the ocean of stories found in the Mahabharata, Aurobindo chose this one for its symbolic significance and universal message. In Baroda, he had mastered Sanskrit and studied both the Ramayana and the Mahabharata of Valmiki and Vyasa. Often, these two epics are viewed as “philosophy for the masses” in story form. It is common understanding that the deep philosopher would dedicate one’s life to the study of the Upanishads and Vedānta, and somehow, the “lesser minds” would read the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. Aurobindo’s view of these epic poems was exactly opposite. The Ramayana with its 25,000 verses and the Mahabharata with its 100,000 verses are the oldest poetic works known to the human race and in Aurobindo’s view, were composed from the level of the Overmind. The reading and study of these works leads the mind naturally to higher levels of consciousness. But these works, being in Sanskrit, are not accessible to all. — So, he wrote Savitri in English so as to convey the same spiritual power.

Savitri as a spiritual autobiography

In 1936, he later wrote to one of his assistants, Nirod, "I used *Savitri* as a means of ascension. I began with it on a certain mental level, each time I could reach higher level, I rewrote from that level ... In fact, *Savitri* has not been regarded by me as a poem to be written and finished, but as a field of experimentation to see how far poetry could be written from one's own Yogic consciousness and how that could be made creative." (Aurobindo, 29.727))



Nirodbaran (1903-2006)

Savitri: A legend and a symbol

His epic poem consisting of 24,000 lines begins with this story but interprets it from a symbolic and philosophical perspective. In fact, Aurobindo's subtitle for the poem is "A legend and a symbol." But Aurobindo did not merely translate the original Sanskrit into English. He kept the legend intact but clearly saw the spiritual symbolism in the story. So in writing his two-volume tome on Savitri, he had a dual purpose. The first was to reveal in poetic form the essence of his philosophy and the second was to record a form of spiritual autobiography. He himself stated, "Satyavan is the soul carrying the divine truth of being within itself but descended into the grip of death and ignorance; Savitri is the Divine Word, daughter of the Sun, goddess of the supreme Truth who comes down and is born to save; Aswapati, the Lord of the Horse, her human father, is the Lord of Tapasya, the concentrated energy of spiritual endeavour that helps us to rise from the mortal to the immortal planes. Dyumatsena, the Lord of the Shining Hosts, father of Satyavan, is the Divine Mind, here fallen blind, losing its celestial kingdom of vision, and through that loss its kingdom of glory. Still, this is not a mere allegory, the characters are not personified qualities, but incarnations or emanations of living and conscious Forces with whom we can enter into concrete touch, and they take human bodies in order to help man and show him the way from his mortal state to a divine consciousness and immortal life." (Iyengar, Vol. 2, 1206)

The Aurobindo Upanishad

Many have called the two-volume epic poem the “Aurobindo Upanishad” and some have said that reading it is a form of tapasya. In my view, Sri Aurobindo attempted to put it on par with the spiritual classics of Valmiki and Vyasa who wrote the Ramayana and the Mahabharata respectively. In this endeavour, he succeeded spectacularly. Truly, it has the power of the Upanishads in its poetic and spiritual power. Earlier, many seekers and scholars who gathered around him felt his writings were of a very high quality. In 1943, he was nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature for his two-volume work, *The Life Divine*. In 1950, he was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. Of course, he didn’t receive the prize nor is it clear that he knew he was nominated. One needs a spokesman for these committees. In the case of Rabindranath Tagore who got the prize for literature in 1913, it was William Butler Yeats and in the case of Aurobindo, there was no one. But fortunately, our world doesn’t revolve around recognition which is just one more shackle for the ego. Both the *Life Divine* in the field of spiritual prose, and *Savitri*, in the field of spiritual poetry are two-volume works that survive and are now there for all to study. The Nobel nominations only demonstrate that there were many who felt that the writing was of a very high order.

How to read a poem?

How does one study a poem? How should we meditate on its meaning? How should we savour it? Perhaps we can begin by looking at its structure and the titles of the cantos. The work has twelve “books” and each book consists of several cantos not all uniform in length. “The Book of Beginnings”, “The Book of the Traveller of the Worlds”, “The Book of the Divine Mother”, “The Book of Birth and Quest”, “The Book of Love”, “The Book of Fate”, “The Book of Yoga” are some of the titles of the “Books”. Since the entire work is too big to study in a short span of time, I have selected the canto “The Secret Knowledge” in the “The Book of Beginnings” by way of illustrating the depth of the poem. This may give us a hint at Overmind poetry that Aurobindo speaks about.

The Secret Knowledge

Referring to King Aswapati, a master of *tapasya*, Aurobindo begins his canto thus:

*On a height he stood that looked towards greater heights,
Our early approaches to the Infinite
Are sunrise splendours on a marvellous verge
While lingers yet unseen the glorious sun.
What now we see is a shadow of what must come.*



How to analyze the verse

In reading a poem, we must be tuned to the stream of images conveyed by the words. In this case, the imagery is one of climbing a mountain. Just imagine when we climb a range of mountains, we ascend to a certain peak and can survey the range from this new height, only to find that there are greater heights. But the view from the height we have attained is already quite spectacular. They are “sunrise splendours on a marvellous verge.” What does ‘verge’ mean? We find in the dictionary that it means “an edge or border”. A second meaning is “an extreme limit beyond which something happens like ‘on the verge of tears.’” Sometimes delight does give rise to a stream of tears, as in ‘tears of joy’. The view is one of a ‘sunrise splendour’. We all have experienced the exhilaration of seeing the sunrise in the early morning. Each one is spectacular and we never tire of it. There is a freshness, a newness, each time we experience it.

Early approaches to the Infinite

But these are “early approaches to the Infinite.” That is, we must not stop here. We got here because we are seeking Infinity. Observe that Aswapati is also called the Lord of Tapasya, and it is instructive to examine the word *tapas* a bit more closely. This is a recurrent word in Indian philosophy and it means discipline and its literal meaning is ‘to heat’. To raise the mind from a lower level to a higher level, one needs *tapas*. Observe the fire imagery here and how one has to “heat up” the mind to raise it to a higher level of consciousness.

Tapas according to Radhakrishnan

Radhakrishnan expands this understanding. “*Tapas*, the energizing of conscious force, austere thinking, the inward travail of the spirit is the brooding which is responsible for creative work. *Tapas* is the force by which some mighty force possibility is actualized.” (Radhakrishnan, *East and West*, 75) Embodied in the word is the essence of creativity. In poetry, we must hold on to an image, hover over it, look at it from various angles so that its meaning and fragrance are experienced. Radhakrishnan amplifies. “We must concentrate or hold on to an idea ... we can write it down, visualize it, paint or draw it, until it sinks into the unconscious and recreates us ... Brooding is creative energy.” (Radhakrishnan, *East and West*, 97-98)

In the verse above, Aurobindo invokes an image common to all human beings. We all have had our moments of inspiration, of exhilaration, not of a sensual delight, but some form of spiritual experience, even when it is the common experience of seeing Nature’s beauty. The vastness of Nature always suggests of the Infinite all around. But the verse cautions that we have not yet seen ‘the glorious sun’ and only represents a ‘shadow of what must come.’

Intimations of immortality

When the mind ascends to the level of the higher mind, the level of reflective consciousness, it has 'intimations of immortality' as the poet Wordsworth would say. These are just the beginnings of the spiritual journey. Spirituality does not consist in merely having a good mood and doing a bit of social service. It is a higher calling requiring tremendous energy and fortitude. But the journey is worth it. And this is what is often called 'the promised Land' in Biblical terminology.

The meaning of Savitri

The word *Savitri* is derived from the Sanskrit *Savitr* meaning the creative Sun. We have previously alluded to the Sun symbolism as a representation of *Brahman* and manifold nature of this image. *Savitri* is the daughter of the Sun, representing the Divine Word. The worship of the sun has an ancient history that is prevalent in many civilizations. In India, there is the famous Sun temple at Konark which is an architectural monument embodying this idea. The poet thus invokes such images as the musician invokes sound vibrations to take the mind to 'greater heights'.



The next verse

Here are the next few lines:

*The earth's uplook to a remote unknown
Is a preface only of the epic climb
Of human soul from its flat earthly state
To the discovery of a greater self
And the far gleam of an eternal Light.*

The image invoked here is the earth looking up, as if the earth is living and wondering about the infinity that surrounds it. We speak of 'Mother Earth' and only now are we realising that it is a living force that sustains us and if we trample on Her recklessly, we may invoke her wrath and bring about our own destruction. We see this awareness emerging in the scientific field with our latest understanding of climate change. We identify the earth with matter and it symbolises our attachments to materialism. The image here is one of the earth gazing longingly and apprehensively at the vast cosmos it finds herself in and wondering what all this means. But this upward gaze is the beginning, a preface, to a greater journey that is described as being 'epic'. We often think of a 'preface' as an introduction to a book which gives us some idea of what the book is about, what inspired the author to write it. It stimulates us to go further.

The flat earth and ignorance

Thus, the human soul rises from its 'flat earthly state'. We are reminded of how the ancients thought the earth was flat and only through thought and exploration did they realise that it is spherical. Instead of saying 'earthly state' Aurobindo writes 'flat earthly state' to awaken the image of our past ignorance from which we want to rise. The stellar images continue. We attune to the 'discovery of a greater self', not the biological matter that we are enclosed in, but 'a greater self'. This realisation is a 'far gleam', a distant sparkle of an 'eternal Light'.

The study of poetry

Thus, by pondering verse by verse, line by line, word by word, and being aware of the images, the sense and the sounds that are awakened, we journey inward. This is at the heart of the study of poetry. Ordinarily, we use language to transmit information to others. This is our practical, everyday use of language. But literature is used to convey experience and to widen it. This is the literary use of language. Aurobindo emphasizes that one can use language as a means for a spiritual journey, a voyage into the inner self, provided that what we study is 'mantric poetry' or poetry written from the level of the Overmind, or supramental consciousness. Poetry does not widen the quantity of our thoughts, but rather their quality. Just as one needs to be trained to read scientific papers, one also needs training in the reading of poetry. This could be a life long practice.

The meaning of sadhana

The word *sādhana* is used to denote the practice of yoga. It is derived from the Sanskrit word *siddhi* which means perfection or fulfilment. Sometimes it refers to “occult powers” described in rāja yoga. But as Aurobindo stressed many times, the word “occult” really means “hidden” though in common usage, it may mean supernatural or magical. Indeed, the mystery is really the mystery of ourselves. The mind is a manifold mystery. It is occult and many of its processes can be brought to the foreground by means of yoga. This is the *sādhana* of Aurobindo. We can do this by invoking the power of the word, the power of language, and by the use of poetry.

Tagore and poetry

Just as poetry can be classified according to the mental levels of consciousness from which it was composed, one can extend this to music as well. In the tradition of bhakti yoga, or the yoga of devotion, we find the fusion of poetry and music. India has had an ancient tradition of the sage musician extending far back in time. In recent years, Tagore initiated new experiments in music and made it part of his sādhana. This is now called Rabindra Sangeet.

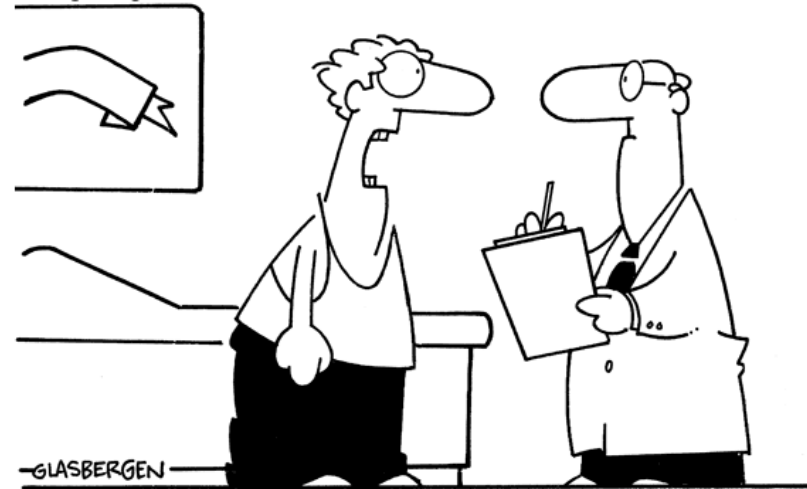


Yoga and creativity

But Aurobindo's essential contribution, in my view, is his fusion of creativity and yoga. Creativity, poetic inspiration, is not the whimsical bird that we often imagine it to be. Rather, it can be perfected like a siddhi, and as we do, we ascend in our spiritual journey. In one of his letters, Aurobindo wrote, "Inspiration is always a very uncertain thing; it comes when it chooses, stops suddenly before it has finished its work, refuses to descend when it is called. This is a well-known affliction, perhaps of all artists, but certainly of poets. There are some who can command it at will; those who, I think, are more full of an abundant poetic energy than careful for perfection." (Aurobindo, 26.227)

The danger of perfectionism

The last phrase 'careful for perfection' is extremely important. Often, we expect to have the perfect work on our first trial. This attachment to perfectionism can stifle creativity. One must be willing to make mistakes, experiment with ideas and strategies. We must be willing to revise our earlier drafts, and we must also learn the process of incubation with respect to ideas. New ideas will come if only we make the effort. Effort is movement of the will.



**"I'm learning how to relax, doctor —
but I want to relax *better and faster!*
*I want to be on the cutting edge of relaxation!"***

The problem of inspiration

The problem of inspiration is not limited to the artistic fields. It is a common problem in all disciplines including the sciences, and especially mathematics with its technical symbolism and exclusive jargon. Having identified the problem common to all, Aurobindo offers a solution. This is the habit of regularity in sādhana. How can we invite the Muse? “There are some who try to give it a habit of coming by always writing at the same time; Virgil with his nine lines first written, then perfected every morning, Milton with his fifty epic lines a day, are said to have succeeded in regularising their inspiration. It is, I suppose, the same principle which makes Gurus in India prescribe for their disciples a meditation at the same fixed hour every day.” (Aurobindo, 26.227)

The legacy of Aurobindo

In my view, the life of Sri Aurobindo is a perfect case study of sādhana in action. His biography, his literary works, his letters, are all a testament to what heights we can reach. Truly one can say that he has opened up for all an adventure in higher consciousness. He has “looked towards greater heights” and journeyed to celestial worlds.

