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The English of *Savitri*

Shraddhavan

The English of *Savitri*

Comments on the language of Sri Aurobindo's epic
Savitri – a legend and a Symbol

Book One – The Book of Beginnings

by
Shraddhavan

Savitri
B H A V A N
Auroville

Published by Savitri Bhavan
February 2015

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Savitri Bhavan is a unit of SAIER
(Sri Aurobindo International Institute
of Educational Research, Auroville)

This publication has been financed by funds received through
SAIER

Paper book ISBN: 978-93-82474-00-5

Ebook edition 2015

Printed at Auroville Press, Auroville

Publisher's Note

Publication of this book has been made possible by a generous donation from the members of the Sri Aurobindo Centre at 82 Bell Street, London NW1, in memory of Dhirubhai Shah and Marguerite Smithwhite, for which we are extremely grateful.

Offered at the Lotus Feet
of
Sri Aurobindo and The Mother
with love and gratitude

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Introduction

The contents of this book are based on transcripts of classes given by Shraddhavan at Savitri Bhavan in Auroville from August 2009 to October 2010, which have been edited for conciseness and clarity, while aiming to preserve some of the informal atmosphere of the course. Shraddhavan first started teaching English through close readings of Sri Aurobindo's revelatory epic *Savitri: a legend and a symbol* with a small group of interested adults in 1980. In August 1998 these classes were resumed at Savitri Bhavan, taking place in the early mornings three times a week in the thatched hut which was the first construction on the site of the future complex. Later, weekly classes were held there in the afternoons to accommodate a growing number of students, including young Tamil teacher-trainees from the Arul Vazhi School located in Promesse, Auroville. These classes were given the name 'The English of *Savitri*'. In May 2009 we had the joy of completing the course, as this group reached the end of the poem. A new start was made from the beginning on Thursday August 6. Thanks to the initiative of Sungheui from Korea, the new series of classes were filmed and recorded. Edited transcripts of these classes began to be published serially in the Bhavan's journal of Study Notes on *Savitri*, '*Invocation*', from issue 32 onwards, since it was felt that they may be of interest to many readers. In fact these articles found an enthusiastic response from students of Sri Aurobindo's mantric epic, and one *Savitri*-lover from Gujarat, Shri Kirit Thakkar, undertook to translate them into Gujarati. They are now being published in book form in several volumes by Yukta Prakashan publishers of Vadodara. This suggested the idea of collecting the original English articles in book form too. This is the first such volume, covering all the five cantos of

Book One of the poem, 'The Book of Beginnings'.

The aim of this course, which is still ongoing, is to assist people who wish to improve their understanding of Sri Aurobindo's revelatory epic, to enter more deeply into its atmosphere and, as a side-effect, to improve their knowledge of the English language. The Mother has mentioned:

For the opening of the psychic, for the growth of consciousness and even for the improvement of English, it is good to read one or two pages of *Savitri* each day.¹

Those who attend this course are encouraged to do homework: to read a little from *Savitri* every day, to revise what has been read and discovered in the class, such as the meanings of individual words and new phrases, and to aspire for the mantric power of *Savitri* to open the deep heart centre and widen the consciousness.

The full title of Sri Aurobindo's poem is: *Savitri – a legend and a symbol*. A 'legend' means a traditional tale, a story handed down over generations; it may relate to something that really happened, which over the course of time it has become a well-known story. The legend of Satyavan and Savitri is told in the Mahabharata in about 300 verses. It is told to the exiled Pandavas in the forest by a Rishi called Markandeya. Yudhishthira, the eldest of the five Pandava brothers, asks him, "Has there ever been any woman who has had to face such difficulties as our Draupadi?" In answer, Markandeya recounts the story of Savitri and says that just as her husband Satyavan was saved from death through the virtue of Savitri, in the same way the virtue and strength of Draupadi will carry the five brothers through all their difficulties. When the famous scholar and author Professor Manoj Das gave a talk at

¹In conversation with Norman Dowsett.

Savitri Bhavan on *The Mythological Background of Savitri* he mentioned that, significantly, Rishi Markandeya himself is one of the few people mentioned in Indian tradition as having conquered death. In the legend the saving of Satyavan is not presented as a general conquest of death for all time, but as the special case of a young man being saved from premature death by the courage, steadfastness and virtue of his wife.

The legend of Savitri and Satyavan is familiar to most people in India, either from the Mahabharata account or from traditional versions based on it. Sri Aurobindo has seen in this well-known tale a significant symbol. A symbol is a simple representation of something more complex; for example we may say that fire, even in the form of a candle flame or the glowing point on the end of an incense stick, can be a symbol of Aspiration, the will for a higher and purer state. In the legend of Satyavan and Savitri Sri Aurobindo recognised a deep symbolic meaning, related to the psychological symbolism which he had discovered in the Vedas. He chose to make this traditional tale the vehicle of his poetic masterwork, which became what the Mother has called "the supreme revelation of Sri Aurobindo's vision". That is why Savitri Bhavan exists: not so much because of the tale told in the Mahabharata, but because of what the Mother has said about the tremendous importance of Sri Aurobindo's treatment of it as a symbolic myth. As he makes clear in the title itself, the poem includes both the legendary and the symbolic aspects of the ancient tale.

In his Author's Note to the poem, Sri Aurobindo has given a key to the psychological symbolism he found in the legend:

The tale of Satyavan and Savitri is recited in the Mahabharata as a story of conjugal love conquering death.

'Conjugal love' means the love between husband and wife.

But this legend is, as shown by many features of the human tale, one of the many symbolic myths of the Vedic cycle.

Then Sri Aurobindo explains some of those 'features of the human tale' and their symbolic meanings. First, Satyavan: his name means 'The one who possesses or carries the Truth' – *satya*.

Satyavan is the soul carrying the divine truth of being within itself but descended into the grip of death and ignorance;

The part of our being which carries the Truth is our soul; but when the individual soul enters into the material world it cannot help coming into the grip of ignorance and death, for whatever is born must die. In India, 'ignorance' has always meant essentially not knowing who and what we really are, the forgetfulness of the divine Truth which is the consequence of living in this world that has emerged from the inconscience of Matter. Satyavan must die, although the soul is really immortal, because here in the material world all beings are mortal and in 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;

There are two associations of the name 'Savitri'; one is with the wife of Brahma, the Puranic god who embodies the creative aspect of the Divine. The wife of a god is his Shakti, his dynamic aspect; Brahma has two wives, or perhaps they are two names for the same power, Gayatri and Savitri; Sri Aurobindo says that Savitri is 'the Divine Word', the creative Word of command that brings the manifestation into existence. The other association of her name is with the sun. The sun is the source of everything on earth; all energies come to us from the sun, so it is an appropriate symbol for the fullness of the Divine Truth, the Consciousness and Force, the Divine Presence which is the Origin of everything. In India there are many different

names for different aspects of the sun, 'the brilliant one', 'the fosterer', etc., and for the sun at different times of the day. Savitri's name refers to the sun before it has risen above the horizon in the morning. Savitri as 'the daughter of the Sun' is the bringer of new light, new possibilities of consciousness and power, and a new creation. She is the goddess of the supreme Truth, who takes birth in the world in a human form in order to save the soul of the world called Satyavan.

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;

In the legend, the father of Savitri is a king called Aswapati: his name means 'Lord (*pati*), of the Horse (*aswa*)'. In the symbolism of the Vedas, the Horse represents Energy, especially our life-energies; all of us have more or less powerful horses, although we are not always in control of them and our horses often run away with us; the name of Aswapati indicates that he is in full control of all his life-energies; he concentrates them, holds them together and makes them carry him on a journey of spiritual endeavour, up from the normal human level to the planes of higher consciousness and power, the immortal planes. We are shown in the poem how he is able to rise from one plane to another until at last he reaches the Supreme Divine Mother and begs her to incarnate on earth in order to make things progress more quickly and truly here, and she consents to send an emanation of herself to take birth as his daughter, who is named Savitri in her honour.

Then Sri Aurobindo speaks about the father of Satyavan, Dyumatsena. 'Dyuman' means 'the Shining One'; '*sena*' means an army or 'host'. Satyavan's father is also a king, but he has been

driven out of his kingdom because he has lost his sight, he has become blind. He is living in the forest with his wife and his son Satyavan.

Dyumatsena, Lord of the Shining Hosts, father of Satyavan, is the Divine Mind here fallen blind, losing its celestial kingdom of vision, and through that loss its kingdom of glory.

Mind in its divine form is a shining Lord commanding many powerful warriors of Light; but just as the soul in the material world is in the grip of Ignorance and Death, so the mind here is dependent on a physical brain and senses, and as a result it has become blind: it has lost its power of direct vision of the truth, of seeing things as they really are; and because it has lost its vision, it has lost its power to rule. As a result of Savitri's perfect speech, Dyumatsena regains his sight and his kingdom; at the end of the poem we see Dyumatsena leaving the forest with his queen along with Satyavan and Savitri, returning to reclaim his kingdom and start a new rule of Truth in the human world.

This is the key to the main symbolism behind the legend. Then Sri Aurobindo says:

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.

An allegory is a story where qualities such as Love or Courage, Greed or Anger, are personified and represented as characters; only an exceptional poet can make a story like that really convincing; there are some famous poetic allegories, but really good ones are

few and far between, for allegories are rarely satisfying. Sri Aurobindo tells us that the characters in his poem are not allegorical figures but real beings, representing living and conscious Forces; and this means that we can enter into concrete contact with them. We are even carrying them in ourselves: within each of us is a soul, a Satyavan, carrying the truth of being within itself, but here fallen into the grip of Ignorance and Death; all of us can call for help to Savitri, the creative bringer of new light and energy, and she will come to save us; within each of us is the possibility of controlling our life energies and turning them towards a spiritual effort that prepares the way for her to come and act in us and in the world; in all of us there is a power of Mind that has fallen blind and lost its power of right action, but through the compassion and grace of Savitri we can regain that power of vision and mastery over the conditions of life. These Powers, Sri Aurobindo says, take human forms:

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.

We are 'mortal', which means that we have to die; that is a sign of our present limitation and imperfection. These powers show us the way to move from our present mortal state to a divine consciousness and immortal life, and ultimately to a divine life on earth.

The Vedic Rishis spoke of 'the human journey'. As they saw it, we are all meant to progress as far as we can in each life, towards a diviner consciousness and immortality; by 'immortality' they did not mean everlasting life in a single material body, but gaining awareness of the innate immortality of our soul, and living in that awareness while in the mortal body. But Sri Aurobindo has told us,

and makes very clear in *Savitri*, that the ultimate goal of this evolving manifestation is a divine life here on earth: the possibility of a divine consciousness, a divine individuality, living in a material body in the material world, but free of all the limitations and imperfections that cause us so much anguish and suffering at present.

We can see that understanding something of this symbolism has given a very deep meaning to this legend, this simple traditional story that is almost a fairytale, about a Prince and a Princess meeting and falling in love, and how the Princess is able to save her husband from a premature death. Now we begin to understand why Sri Aurobindo chose this particular legend as the vehicle for what the Mother has called 'the supreme revelation of his vision'. He has written many other books to help us understand different aspects of the vast knowledge which it was his mission to share with humanity, but the Mother has said that all his other writings are the preparation, while *Savitri* is the message. That statement of hers gives this book a very special significance and value for us, and that is why we love to read it even though we find it difficult to understand. We consider it is as 'Mantra'. The Mother has said that the lines of *Savitri* are mantras which have the power to communicate the experience from which they have originated. We have been told that in the old tradition, if you wanted to study a mantra, there were four stages: the first stage was to get the sound right, because in mantra the sound-vibration carries the higher consciousness and forms a sound-body of the truth that is being expressed; that is why the correct way to pronounce the Vedic mantras has been handed down unchanged for thousands and thousands of years, because it was felt so important to preserve the right rhythm, the correct pronunciation and the right sound-vibrations of each one.

The second step was to understand as clearly as possible what each of the words mean, and the relationships between them, so as to get a first mental understanding of the meaning of each verse.

The third step is to concentrate the mind on the words and their meaning, until an explosion of deeper mental understanding is experienced and you feel that you know what the words mean.

The fourth step is to continue concentrating on the words and sounds and their meaning, until the mind falls silent; then the silent concentrated mind may be blessed to receive a revelation of the origin of the mantra, which is beyond words and thoughts and comes as a living experience.

When we study *Savitri* together at Savitri Bhavan, we focus on the first two of these four steps. First, we try to get the sound as correct as possible. Unfortunately no recording of Sri Aurobindo's voice exists, so we do not know exactly how he pronounced certain words; but he has written about how his poetry works. He based it on the natural rhythms of English speech. If we stick close to those, we shall be somewhere near the way this poetry is meant to be read; and we try to follow the Mother's advice to Champaklal, to Nirodbaran and to Huta: to read slowly and clearly, with as much consciousness as possible.

Then we try to understand the meaning of the words: what Sri Aurobindo is saying in each sentence: how the words in the sentence are linked together, how the sentences are connected, the meaning of any difficult words, and the images used. We have noticed that when we go over the lines with attention again and again, we gain more understanding of the most literal meaning of the lines, because the surface meaning of the lines and passages is linked to their context, their place in the movement of the whole poem.

In the 'English of *Savitri*' classes our aim is to try and read as correctly as we can, and to gain at least a surface understanding of what the words mean and the structure of each sentence. Then each one can do their own homework, read and re-read until a deeper understanding of the passage comes. However, we find that even without much understanding the mantric vibration of the words and lines can touch us deeply and sometimes wake up an inner knowledge or experience in a quite unexpected way: this is the action of *Savitri's* atmosphere, Savitri's grace. The hope is that the present book will help more people to come into touch with this wonderful poem, 'the supreme revelation of Sri Aurobindo's vision'.

Book One
The Book of Beginnings
Canto One: The Symbol Dawn

Section 1, lines 1 to 185

Canto One covers ten pages and has two sections. The first section describes the dawn, the beginning of a day; but, as we shall see, it is not a simple narrative account of a sunrise: rather, the approach of the new light is shown as the symbol of a psychological process. The second section introduces us to the heroine of the poem, Savitri, as she wakes up on this very special day – the day when, as she alone knows, and as we are told in the last line of the canto, her husband Satyavan must die.

People who have studied the chronology of Sri Aurobindo's composition of *Savitri* tell us that the first section of Book One, Canto One is the part of the poem that he revised more than any other. Over fifty manuscript versions of this passage are kept by the Sri Aurobindo Archives in the Ashram, and many people find it amongst the most mysterious and difficult sections of the poem to understand. Nowhere in *Savitri* is Sri Aurobindo's use of language more powerful, complex and original than in the first part of the first Canto of Book One. In this overture to the mighty symphony of his epic, he fuses multiple layers of meaning – literal, psychological, occult and spiritual – into a single flow of incomparable music.

The poem begins:

It was the hour before the Gods awake.

A single line with a powerful rhythm like a bell tolling, or a gong striking resonantly: here there are no difficult words, all of them are familiar to us, and yet the line is so mysterious: what does it mean? Amal Kiran, one of Sri Aurobindo's poet disciples, was for 13 years in the 1930s and early 40s the only person to whom Sri Aurobindo was revealing parts of his poem and allowing him to ask questions,

giving him clarifications which now help us greatly in understanding *Savitri*. Amal Kiran has written about this line in a letter. Let us have a look at what he says:

It was the hour before the Gods awake

Why does Sri Aurobindo not write “awoke”? The reason is that he is pointing not to an event which happened once but to one that constantly and repeatedly happens. ... What Sri Aurobindo posits in this line is a religio-mythic concept that has been part of India’s temple-life for millennia: the daily awakening of the Gods.

The Gods are the Powers that carry on the harmonious functions by which the universe moves on its progressive path. According to an old belief, based on a subtle knowledge of the antagonism between the Lords of Falsehood and the Lords of Truth, the period of the night interrupts the work of the Truth-Lords by its obscuration of sight and by its pulling down of the consciousness into sleep. Each day with the onset of darkness the Gods are stopped in their functions by the Demons: the Gods pass into an oblivious slumber. Each day with the advent of light they emerge into activity and continue their progress-creating career. Traditionally the moment of their awaking, termed “Brahma-muhurta”, is 4 am. Every temple in India rings its bells and clangs its cymbals at 4 am to stir the deities no less than the devotees into action. The “hour” therefore which *Savitri* depicts at its start may be taken, if we are to be literal, as 3–4 am. The termination of this hour [the awakening of the Gods], is “the divine Event” mentioned in the second line....

There is each night a small temporary Inconscience, a passing snatch of the Great Darkness that is the divinely ordained

womb of our cosmos. In this snatch we can glimpse the movement by which the Darkness grew less and less impenetrable and passed into what we may call Dimness awaiting Illumination: the phenomenon which Sri Aurobindo tersely catches in the phrase about the Inconscient being teased to wake Ignorance. The symbolisation consists in each night being the primeval Night itself in local transient miniature².

The difference of tenses used in the two halves of the line, '*It was the hour*' and '*before the Gods awake*', indicates that the poet is telling us about a particular moment in a cyclic process that is repeated over and over again. In a sense, the powers of light awaken every day; and Sri Aurobindo begins his poem in the darkest hour that comes just before the dawn, as an English proverb reminds us.

Across the path of the divine Event
The huge foreboding mind of Night, alone
In her unlit temple of eternity,
Lay stretched immobile upon Silence' marge.

Something or someone is lying '*Across the path of the divine Event*'. Amal Kiran has explained to us that this divine Event, this momentous happening, is the awakening of the Gods, the cosmic powers of light and progress. Lying across the path of that divine Event is '*The huge foreboding mind of Night*'. '*Foreboding*' means a sense that something bad is going to happen; 'fore' is familiar to us in the word 'before'; someone who is 'to the fore' is up in front, far ahead, a leader; 'foresight' is the capacity to see ahead and plan wisely for the future. The second part of the word occurs in the phrase 'this bodes no good', meaning that there are signs or omens that things may go badly wrong.

²K.D. Sethna (Amal Kiran) *The Sun and the Rainbow*, Hyderabad, 1981, p. 147-151

One of the wonderful features of the English language which makes it very flexible for poets to use, is that in poetry any word can be used as any 'part of speech', in any function in the sentence. An outstanding example of this flexibility is a line of Shakespeare from his play *Richard III*, in which one of the characters says "*But uncle ...*" and his uncle, the king, responds "*But me no buts and uncle me no uncles*". If we think in terms of 'parts of speech', the grammatical functions of words, the word 'but' is classified as a 'conjunction', a linking word which can be used to connect two parts of a sentence, as in: 'We wanted to go on a picnic but it rained so we could not go.' However in Shakespeare's line, the humble conjunction is used once as a verb in the imperative, and then as a noun in the plural; similarly the word 'uncle' is used first as a verb, and then as a plural noun. Very vividly the speaker conveys "Do not come saying 'But uncle' to me! I am the king and I do not want to hear those two words from anyone". In *Savitri* we shall find many instances where Sri Aurobindo makes full use of this freedom allowed to the poet by the English language. Here '*foreboding*', often a noun, is used as an adjective describing the mind of Night, the subject of this sentence. Night is in her temple, lying stretched out, unmoving, '*upon Silence' marge*': '*marge*' is a form of 'margin' meaning an edge or border; she is as if on the threshold of Silence. But Night is not asleep; she is conscious, and she is foreboding. She is feeling that something very bad for her is approaching: the divine Event, the coming of the Dawn and the Day, with all its Light and movement, which will mean the end of her reign. And just as the Dawn which is approaching is a Symbol Dawn, so too this is no ordinary night caused by the turning of the earth away from the Sun; this is a Symbol Night:

Almost one felt, opaque, impenetrable,
In the sombre symbol of her eyeless muse

The abyssm of the unbodied Infinite;
A fathomless zero occupied the world.

'Her eyeless muse': 'muse' can be a verb; 'to muse' means to think deeply, to meditate; here it is a noun, meaning a state of dreamy contemplation. This power of Night has a mind, but no power of vision, it is 'eyeless'; yet it has a foreboding that some dreadful change is approaching; This state is a '*sombre symbol*' of something '*opaque, impenetrable*': '*opaque*' means that we cannot see through it, it is not transparent, light cannot pass through it because it is '*impenetrable*', nothing can penetrate into it or pass through it; '*impenetrable*' also means that we cannot understand it. That eyeless muse of the mind of Night is a dark '*sombre symbol*', which makes us almost feel the opaque and impenetrable '*abyssm of the unbodied Infinite*', the infinite unmanifest, like a deep dark limitless ocean. '*Abyssm*' means a very deep place, so deep that it cannot be measured, and it is sometimes used for the deepest part of the ocean. In this hour before the dawn, it feels as if the whole world has been invaded, occupied by '*a fathomless zero*'. In a physical sense a 'fathom' is the unit used to measure how deep the sea is. It is also used in a psychological sense: when we try to fathom something, as we are doing now, we try to measure its depths, get to the bottom of it, understand it; if it is unfathomable or '*fathomless*' we cannot measure it, it is beyond our grasp. Such a deep mysterious nothingness and emptiness occupied the whole world at that dark hour. In her sketch for the *Meditations on Savitri* paintings, the Mother has imaged this moment as an eye: the mind of Night, not entirely closed, not asleep, but absorbed in its foreboding muse, dreading and resisting the coming of the light and the awakening of the gods. In the following lines, Sri Aurobindo tells us more about this resisting dark consciousness:

A power of fallen boundless self awake
Between the first and the last Nothingness,
Recalling the tenebrous womb from which it came,
Turned from the insoluble mystery of birth
And the tardy process of mortality
And longed to reach its end in vacant Nought.

The Mother has explained these lines like this:

Even in the darkest Unconsciousness, there was something like the remembrance of the Divine Origin, and it had an urge to wake up to existence. But all the habit of the Inconscient was so strong that it had a natural tendency to go back to Nothingness. ... This is like the first attempt of waking up in the Nothingness by something that was a faint expression of consciousness – but ‘Recalling’, as Sri Aurobindo says, ‘the tenebrous womb from which it came’ this had a tendency of going back to Unconsciousness. It is like the origin of Death³.

This ‘*power of fallen boundless self*’ is the mind of Night: a divine power, but cut off from its origin by a fall into unconsciousness; it has emerged from the inconscient, ‘*the tenebrous womb from which it came*’. ‘*Tenebrous*’ means dark, shadowy. It remembers the darkness of inconscience from which it has come, and like many of us when first waking up in the morning, it wants to go back into that state, to go back to sleep. Life and the ongoing slow cycle of emerging into consciousness through birth and death and rebirth seem too difficult for it, an ‘*insoluble mystery*’ and a ‘*tardy process*’ which is lasting far too long. That foreboding mind of Night longs to reach its end, to fall asleep again forever in total unconsciousness, ‘*vacant Nought*’.

³*About Savitri*, Part One, 2nd edition, Havyavahana Trust, 2015

We could say that the struggle between two powers, the dark foreboding mind of Night which longs for everything to dissolve again into nothingness and emptiness, and the power of the Dawn, Savitri, who brings the new Light and the eventual triumph of a higher light that can transform even the mind of Night, is the underlying theme of the whole of this marvellous poem, which begins with the mind of Night resisting the coming of the divine Event, the adventure of Consciousness and Joy, and which ends with Night transformed, as we read in the last lines of the poem :

Lost in the halo of her musing brows
Night, splendid with the moon dreaming in heaven
In silver peace, possessed her luminous reign.
She brooded through her stillness on a thought
Deep-guarded by her mystic folds of light,
And in her bosom nursed a greater dawn.⁴

Let us see how the opening passage continues:

As in a dark beginning of all things,
A mute featureless semblance of the Unknown
Repeating for ever the unconscious act,
Prolonging for ever the unseeing will,
Cradled the cosmic drowse of ignorant Force
Whose moved creative slumber kindles the suns
And carries our lives in its somnambulist whirl.

Sri Aurobindo says that the darkness before the dawn which he is describing is something like the darkness of the very beginning of our material universe, when the vast inconscient emptiness was a '*mute featureless semblance of the Unknown*'. '*Mute*' means silent, dumb, with no voice or means of expression. It is also '*featureless*', it

⁴Savitri, CWSA volumes 33 and 34, p. 724

has no features or signs to express what it is or what it means; it is a 'semblance', an appearance or likeness of the Unknown, even the Unknowable. This mute featureless semblance of the Unknown reminds us of a passage from *The Life Divine*:

The Inconscience is an inverse reproduction of the supreme superconscience: it has the same absoluteness of being and automatic action, but in a vast involved trance; it is Being lost in itself, plunged in its own abyss of infinity. Instead of a luminous absorption in self-existence there is a tenebrous involution in it, the darkness veiled within darkness of the Rig Veda, *tamasit tamasa gudham*, which makes it look like Non-Existence; instead of a luminous inherent self-awareness there is a consciousness plunged into an abyss of self-oblivion, inherent in being but not awake in being. Yet is this involved consciousness still a concealed knowledge by identity; it carries in it the awareness of all the truths of existence hidden in its dark infinite and, when it acts and creates,— but it acts first as Energy and not as Consciousness, — everything is arranged with the precision and perfection of an intrinsic knowledge. In all material things reside a mute and involved Real-Idea, a substantial and self-effective intuition, an eyeless exact perception, an automatic intelligence working out its unexpressed and unthought conceptions, a blindly seeing sureness of sight, a dumb infallible sureness of suppressed feeling coated in insensibility, which effectuate all that has to be effected. All this state and action of the Inconscient corresponds very evidently with the same state and action of the pure Superconscience, but translated into terms of self-darkness in

place of the original self-light.⁵

Sri Aurobindo tells us that the original inconscience is a projection of the supreme superconscience: all the qualities that are in the superconscience – infinite and absolute Being, Conscious-Force and Bliss – are there in the Inconscience, but in darkness, not in light. Our universe starts from that ‘darkness veiled within darkness’. Within this dark beginning there is a repetitive action, an ‘*unconscious act*’, a cyclic action; that semblance of the Unknown is ‘*prolonging*’, keeping going, an ‘*unseeing will*’. That dark semblance of the Unknown is cradling, holding to itself in the way that a mother holds a child in her arms and rocks it, ‘*the cosmic drowse of ignorant Force*’: the Force of Nature that gives rise to the material universe is as if asleep, drowsing, cradled in the arms of that ‘*mute featureless semblance of the Unknown*’ which has unconsciously willed the manifestation. But even the sleep, the ‘*slumber*’, of material Nature is ‘*creative*’: it has set alight all the myriad suns, and in its ever-circling movement our lives too are carried along, on our little globe in a tiny corner of that vast movement. It is a ‘*whirl*’, a circular movement, and Sri Aurobindo uses the word ‘*somnambulist*’, a person who walks in their sleep. When a person is in that state their waking mind is asleep, but there is some consciousness within which guides them. We are told that it is very dangerous to wake someone who is sleep-walking, for if we bring them back to their waking mind and cut the contact with the guiding consciousness, they may fall and hurt themselves. Involved in that unconscious ‘*somnambulist whirl*’ of the material universe, there is a total knowledge that keeps everything in its place, a much deeper and wiser consciousness than our limited mental awareness. Sri Aurobindo says that it acts at first as Energy, not as Consciousness.

⁵*The Life Divine*, SABCL volumes 18 and 19 p. 550

That tremendous Energy or Force of Nature is cradled in the arms of a vast dark Mother, that '*mute featureless semblance of the Unknown*' who is holding it, protecting it, and nourishing it.

Athwart the vain enormous trance of Space,
Its formless stupor without mind or life,
A shadow spinning through a soulless Void,
Thrown back once more into unthinking dreams,
Earth wheeled abandoned in the hollow gulfs
Forgetful of her spirit and her fate.

The word '*athwart*' is unusual; it is used by sailors to mean 'sideways', or 'across', but it also has the suggestion of 'awkwardly' or 'at the wrong angle', 'not as it should be'. The earth is spinning like a shadow through Space, which is in a '*vain enormous trance*', huge but without purpose, in a '*formless stupor*', a stunned sleepy state without any form or life or mind, a soulless emptiness. Through these hollow gulfs, these empty spaces, Earth wheels round and round in a state of '*unthinking dreams*', '*forgetful of her spirit and her fate*', in a state of unconsciousness. Sri Aurobindo says that the Earth is '*thrown back once more*' into this state, and it is as if she has been '*abandoned*'. This reminds us that the process is cyclic: this state happens when the gods are sleeping, when there are no conscious powers of light to take care of the Earth in her course. There is no sense of any higher power taking care of her, it is as if she has been abandoned, forsaken, and has forgotten '*her spirit and her fate*'.

The impassive skies were neutral, empty, still.

'*Impassive*' means 'unresponsive', 'showing no reaction'. The skies are empty; they are still, unmoving, because the gods are sleeping. About this whole passage, Sri Aurobindo wrote in one of his letters to Amal Kiran:

I am selecting certain ideas and impressions to form a symbol of a partial and temporary darkness of the soul and Nature, which seems to a temporary feeling of that which is caught in the Night as if it were universal and eternal. One who is lost in that Night does not think of the other half of the earth as full of light; to him all is Night and the earth a forsaken wanderer in an enduring darkness.

Sri Aurobindo is describing the darkness before dawn on a particular day, the day when Satyavan must die; but at the same time he is describing that darkness as a symbol and an evocation of all the other forms of darkness that we can experience in mind, heart, soul, spirit; also the darkness that can overtake whole periods of history or the collective life of humanity. If we were making a film of *Savitri* – sometimes we can see the succession of Sri Aurobindo's images as a kind of film before our inner eye – it would have to start in total darkness; we have still almost a page to read before the first faint pre-dawn light appears. But '*the divine Event*', the coming of the Dawn, is on its way in the slow unfolding of Time. That is heralded in the next line:

Then something in the inscrutable darkness stirred;

In that '*inscrutable*', unreadable, impenetrable darkness, a change comes, something moves. It is just a movement, a small movement, a stir. I believe that this does often happen physically as we move towards the dawn. Before any light comes, there is often a small stir in the air, a breath, a breeze that heralds the first light. Again Sri Aurobindo immediately gives a psychological dimension to this movement:

A nameless movement, an unthought Idea
Insistent, dissatisfied, without an aim,
Something that wished but knew not how to be,

Teased the Inconscient to wake Ignorance

Of this passage, the Mother says:

This is the description – a very wonderful description – of the beginning of Aspiration: how in the Nothingness, in the Inconscient, stirred the first movement of Aspiration. There was no mind, so it did not think. Even the vital was not organised, so it did not know how to be. But it stirred slowly to wake up the Inconscient towards something – without knowing what it was. This is the first vibration which preceded even form, the first beginning of Aspiration towards the possibility of knowing.⁶

There is no form yet, only a movement in the darkness, a small movement to which no name can be given; it seems to express an 'Idea', but there is no mind to think that Idea, it is 'unthought'; yet the Idea is there, and it is 'insistent', like a child who wants something from its mother but cannot express what it wants; it goes on tugging at her, insisting, it will not give up – it is 'dissatisfied'. It wants something, it wants to be, to become, but it does not know how. This is a movement in the void, in the blackness of the Inconscient. That 'unthought Idea' *'Teased the Inconscient to wake Ignorance'*. Children tease each other, they go on doing or saying something just to trouble the others; and sometimes we tease children: we offer them something and then take it back, perhaps; or we tickle them; we play with them to get some reaction, we want them to respond to us. This small movement is irritating, troubling, tickling the Inconscient to get some reaction: and it wakes up 'Ignorance'. Ignorance happens when we begin to become conscious, when we become aware that there is something we do not know, that we should know. In the total Inconscience there is nothing like that, it is

⁶*About Savitri*, Part One, 2nd edition, Havyavahana Trust, 2015

in a stupor; but now this little movement is waking something up – as the Mother says, the first beginning of Aspiration.

A throe that came and left a quivering trace,
Gave room for an old tired want unfilled,
At peace in its subconscious moonless cave
To raise its head and look for absent light,
Straining closed eyes of vanished memory,
Like one who searches for a bygone self
And only meets the corpse of his desire.

The word '*throe*' indicates a brief spasm or convulsion, a sudden movement which comes for a moment and then is gone. That is the '*nameless movement*' which Sri Aurobindo spoke of in the previous sentence. It only lasts for a moment, but it leaves a '*trace*': after the movement is over, something continues quivering behind it. When an animal or a person moves through the forest or the desert, it leaves a trace; an experienced hunter or tracker will find the trace and be able to tell what sort of animal or person passed there. The movement and its trace make room for '*an old tired want*' to wake up: an old dissatisfaction, some ancient need, has been there for a very long time; it has been lying there '*at peace*': it was asleep '*in its subconscious moonless cave*', deep in the subconscious, where there was no moon, no light of any kind. The moon is a symbol of mind, which has no light of its own but only reflects light from a higher consciousness. Now, with that '*throe*', that little movement which, as the Mother says, is like the very beginning of something that can become an aspiration, that '*old tired want*' raises its head and wonders: where is the light? The eyes of memory are still closed, Sri Aurobindo says; it is trying to remember something, but cannot recall what it is; there is a faculty of remembering, but no content: the memory has '*vanished*', disappeared. It is like somebody who is

searching for a past self, something that it has been in the past: '*a bygone self*'. Sometimes we say 'Let bygones be bygones', meaning 'Let us forget about things that have happened in the past and move on to the future'. There are bygone selves that we have been in previous lives; even if we strain to remember those past selves we cannot recall them. In the same way, here is someone who cannot remember: '*he only meets the corpse of his desire*', the dead remains of whatever that old tired unsatisfied want or need was.

It was as though even in this Nought's profound,
Even in this ultimate dissolution's core,
There lurked an unremembering entity,
Survivor of a slain and buried past
Condemned to resume the effort and the pang,
Reviving in another frustrate world.

The word '*profound*' is normally used as an adjective meaning 'deep': one may have profound thoughts; but here Sri Aurobindo has used it as a noun, meaning 'depth', 'depths'. Even in the depths of this Nothingness, even in the '*core*', the very centre, the heart of this '*ultimate dissolution*' when all the elements have decayed and disappeared so that there is no form, no life, no mind, still something is lying hidden in the darkness: an '*unremembering entity*'. Something has survived from a past that is dead and gone long ago; and now that '*unremembering entity*' has to wake up again. It was at peace there, asleep, but now it has to wake up again. It is '*condemned*', it has no choice in the matter: whether it wants to or not, it has to take up the effort and pain of waking up, of reviving, coming alive again, '*in another frustrate world*'. By using the words '*condemned*', '*frustrate*', Sri Aurobindo lets us know how that entity is feeling: it is reluctant, it feels 'I am being condemned to do this', like a prisoner who has no choice; and it feels that all this effort and

pain of living is just useless, it is being forced to live '*in another frustrate world*', one that will be without result, without success, without fulfilment just like the previous one. Yet there was that little movement of aspiration, that stirring of something like the very beginning of an aspiration, as the Mother told us.

An unshaped consciousness desired light
And a blank prescience yearned towards distant change.
As if a childlike finger laid on a cheek
Reminded of the endless need in things
The heedless Mother of the universe,
An infant longing clutched the sombre Vast.

In the darkness there is '*an unshaped consciousness*', without form, without life or mind, and yet somehow conscious, which '*desired light*' and '*a blank prescience*' is there, a foreknowledge. '*Prescience*' means 'knowing in advance': 'science' means 'knowledge', 'knowing', and the prefix 'pre' means 'before', 'ahead'. In that consciousness there is something that looks ahead and feels that change must come; but it is '*blank*', empty, it does not know what will come; and yet it '*yearns*': it longs for that change to come, although it seems very far away, '*distant*'. That desire, that yearning for change, for the coming of light, Sri Aurobindo says, is like a child laying its finger on its mother's cheek. The Mother of the universe has not been paying attention, she was '*heedless*'; but now this small blind movement of consciousness reminds her of the endless unsatisfied need in things. The '*sombre Vast*', the huge darkness that is occupying the universe, feels the clutch of '*an infant longing*', a small, helpless longing, that has just been born; but the clutch, the grasp of a small baby can be surprisingly strong: you must have experienced with what strength a tiny baby will clutch your finger.

That small movement came from below, from the darkness, and that is very significant. Sri Aurobindo tells us that two movements are needed to bring about the great change: an aspiration that calls from below, and the Divine Grace from above that answers. Here, if we remember what Mother told us, in that tremendous, all-encompassing blackness, all that resistance, there is a tiny little movement of something like aspiration; and a response comes from above. It starts imperceptibly, '*insensibly*', but as we shall see it becomes something very big and significant compared with the first tiny movement; yet at first the change is very small and slight:

Insensibly somewhere a breach began:
A long lone line of hesitating hue
Like a vague smile tempting a desert heart
Troubled the far rim of life's obscure sleep.

Here at last is a first sign of light. If we wanted to make a film of *Savitri* – and I hope that in the future some great artist will do that – up to this point we would be in total darkness; but in response to that first movement of aspiration, in response to that childlike reminder to the Mother of the universe, there comes an opening in the thick veil of darkness. The word '*breach*' is used of an opening in a defence of some sort: a breach in a dam, through which water can pour out; a breach in the defensive line of an army, where the enemy can break through; a breach in a fence, where goats and cattle can get into the cornfield or the vegetable patch. Here there is an opening in the resistance of that deep darkness. It begins '*insensibly*', in such a subtle way that no-one could say where and how it starts. The breach grows and the first pale light appears in the form of a faint line on the horizon: '*A long lone line of hesitating hue*'. '*Hue*' means colour; but the hue of this light is '*hesitating*', as if it is shy to creep into all that darkness. It is very pale and delicate,

so that one can hardly say what colour it is. If we are on a sea-shore or a hill-top, watching for the dawn, we cannot really tell when or how it begins, our senses cannot tell us exactly when that breach begins, that opening in the darkness. The Night is lying there foreboding and resisting the coming of the divine event, but a breach begins, light begins to penetrate her defences, her resistance. Sri Aurobindo says that this line of pale light is like a slight smile, a vague smile. That faint smile is '*tempting a desert heart*', a heart that is empty of life and feeling, desolate. When that faint smile comes, the heart begins to wake up. In a way, that is troubling: life is in a deep dark sleep and it does not want to wake up, it is disturbed by that faint movement, that tempting smile, on the far-off edge of its awareness, which '*troubled the far rim of life's obscure sleep*', the deep sleep of the whole of nature.

Then there is a new development: sometimes when the dawn light begins to break through clouds on the horizon, it takes the form of an eye. Now Sri Aurobindo tells us that an eye started peering through the darkness. It is an '*eye of deity*', a divine eye, which has come from very far away:

Arrived from the other side of boundlessness
An eye of deity peered through the dumb deeps;
A scout in a reconnaissance from the sun,
It seemed amid a heavy cosmic rest,
The torpor of a sick and weary world,
To seek for a spirit sole and desolate
Too fallen to recollect forgotten bliss.

That eye has come from another plane, '*from the other side of boundlessness*'. 'Boundless' means 'without boundaries, without limits'. This eye is looking for something; it is '*a scout*', one who has been sent out to explore unfamiliar territory or to look for

something. 'A scout' will carry out 'a reconnaissance' to find out what lies ahead. It is as if the sun of divine Consciousness has sent this eye of light to look into the darkness in response to that tiny stir of movement, that first stirring of aspiration, and now the eye is looking for the soul from which that movement came: that poor spirit, lost, alone in the midst of a sick and weary world, so fallen that it cannot even remember the bliss from which it has come. That spirit is all alone, and '*desolate*': it has no happiness in it, almost no feeling, no life at all, it is hopeless, sad, despairing, and does not even know why it is like that, what it has lost, what it is missing. The eye '*peered*' through '*the dumb deeps*', the '*heavy cosmic rest*', for the entire universe is in a heavy deep sleep. 'To peer' means to look, to see with difficulty, to strain, make an effort to see. And this sleep is not just an ordinary sleep; Sri Aurobindo says that it is '*the torpor of a sick and weary world*'. If you fall sick, you might get into a very heavy unconscious state in which the consciousness is as if drugged or dimmed by fever, so that it is numb, insensitive, unfeeling. Somewhere in the midst of all the heavy sleepy unconsciousness is that poor lost spirit; it has come from a world of bliss, but it has fallen into this sick and weary world and lost all sensitivity, all capacity to feel or know.

Intervening in a mindless universe,
Its message crept through the reluctant hush
Calling the adventure of consciousness and joy
And, conquering Nature's disillusioned breast,
Compelled renewed consent to see and feel.

That eye of deity, that ray of light, that scout, is bringing a message into this '*mindless universe*'. That message '*intervenes*', it interferes with the fixed process of things and changes the way things have been going on. The first stir of unconscious aspiration was a small

movement, a tiny hopeless movement in the blackness, but when the response comes from above things move surprisingly quickly, not just a gradual change; that is how the Divine Grace acts in response to our small movements of aspiration.

The message from the Sun '*crept through the reluctant hush*', the silence of the sleeping world that did not want to wake up. It is announcing '*the adventure of consciousness and joy*'. When we are reluctant to wake up and face the day, the thought of something interesting ahead may be enough to get us out of bed. Similarly here, that message, that call, overcomes the resistance, the reluctance in Nature: '*conquering Nature's disillusioned breast*'. Nature is '*disillusioned*': she has felt enthusiastic in the past and been disappointed; now she feels that all effort is useless, in vain, everything is taking far too long in '*the tardy process of mortality*'. But that message from the sun, that awakening light, overcomes her resistance, compels her to agree, to consent, to accept yet again to see and to feel, to wake up and live. It is interesting that if you are in a very dark place even the tiniest little light compels you to see.

A thought was sown in the unsounded Void,
A sense was born within the darkness' depths,
A memory quivered in the heart of Time
As if a soul long dead were moved to live:
But the oblivion that succeeds the fall,
Had blotted the crowded tablets of the past,
And all that was destroyed must be rebuilt
And old experience laboured out once more.

When Nature consents to wake up and see and feel, the first thought comes in: '*A thought was sown in the unsounded Void*', a thought was planted like a seed in the bottomless emptiness. '*Unsounded*': in the past, when sailors were passing through

unfamiliar waters, they would take 'soundings' to find out how deep the water was, to see whether it was safe for their ship to pass. They would fix a weight on a rope marked with measurements, probably by knots tied at regular intervals; those intervals were called 'fathoms', the measurement used for the depth of water; so '*unsounded*' is similar in meaning to '*fathomless*'. The first thought was thrown like a seed into the '*unsounded Void*', the measureless emptiness, and it will sprout and grow. The first expression of consciousness in matter is through '*sense*': '*A sense was born within the darkness depths*'. Sense is our way of feeling, of relating to things that are outside our own bodies. Even the most primitive life-forms show '*sense*', the capacity to feel what is around them and react to it. Nature has accepted to '*see and feel*' and even a memory '*quivers*', gives a little movement, a little sign of awareness, of life; and with memory comes a sense of time, of being surrounded by Time, of being '*in the heart of Time*'.

It is as if these things are the expression of a soul that has been dead a long time but has now decided or accepted to take birth again, to live again. But at the very moment of accepting to live again, there is some vague memory of what has been, and the feeling that so much has been lost, and will have to be built up again. The Mother has spoken about what happens when the soul succumbs to unconsciousness like that. She says that when it comes into the physical birth, it is as if it falls from a great height and lands on its head: it is completely stunned, knocked out, and it takes time to recover. Here Sri Aurobindo mentions '*the oblivion that succeeds the fall*': '*oblivion*' means forgetfulness; here, the forgetfulness that follows as a result of the soul's fall from the subtle worlds into the material universe. That forgetfulness '*had blotted the crowded tablets of the past*'. In ancient times people used tablets for writing on, tablets of clay, or wooden tablets holding a layer of wax. They used

a pointed stick, a stylus, for writing on the damp clay or on the wax. If what was written there was very important, they would bake the clay tablets and keep them. Archaeologists find these clay tablets, for example in Iraq, and read what those ancient people had written. But once the message had been read, if it was not important enough to keep, the tablet could be wiped clean and used again. There is a Latin expression, *tabula rasa*, a razed tablet, a tablet that had been written on and then wiped clean; it is similar in meaning to our phrase 'making a clean slate', or 'turning over a new page', meaning to make a fresh start, to let the past go and start again. In a lifetime, a soul, an individual consciousness, can accumulate a lot of information, knowledge, experience; but when the soul leaves the body, most of what has been accumulated in a lifetime gets dissolved; the ancient Greeks used to say that the soul would cross the river of forgetfulness, Lethe. Here, as this soul is waking up, being moved to live again, it feels that everything that was experienced, whatever had been achieved, has been wiped out, forgotten; so it will all have to be '*laboured out once more*': all that was dissolved will have to be built up again; here too Sri Aurobindo conveys a feeling of weariness and reluctance: 'Oh, now I am beginning to wake up again, but it is such an effort, there is so much to be done.'

All can be done if the god-touch is there.

A hope stole in that hardly dared to be

Amid the Night's forlorn indifference.

In response to that feeling of difficulty, even impossibility, comes this wonderful line of assurance and promise: '*All can be done if the god-touch is there*'. An eye of deity has come looking for that lost and fallen entity, and surely it is going to help; as a result, '*a hope stole in*', imperceptibly, like the dawn-light itself. In several significant

places in *Savitri* Sri Aurobindo uses this verb, 'to steal in', meaning to enter very silently and inconspicuously, without being noticed. This hope almost does not have the courage to exist in the midst of all the hopelessness and '*forlorn indifference*' of the Night. '*Indifference*' is a state of not caring; it is not responding to the message of hope that the scout from the sun is bringing. '*Forlorn*' means feeling lost, abandoned, sad at being alone, unhelped. That is how we feel when we lose touch with the Light; even if the Light comes looking for us, we may not notice it at first, in our despair and hopelessness. Nevertheless, the hope has come, something is going to change.

Q: Please say something more about the line, 'All can be done if the god-touch is there'.

There was the sense of difficulty at having to start labouring out once more all the old experience of the past which has to be built up again; it seems so difficult, impossible, too much even to attempt. It harks back to the first page, where the Mind of Night turns away from '*the insoluble mystery of birth and the tardy process of mortality*': it is just too difficult. It is like the way we feel sometimes, waking up in the morning: we wish we could go back to sleep, because the day ahead seems too much effort to face. But then Sri Aurobindo reminds us that, even though it all feels so impossibly difficult, '*All can be done if the god-touch is there*'. The god-touch has come, that eye of deity has come looking for the poor lost spirit that has forgotten everything; because of that, hope steals in, like the dawn light just beginning to brighten.

As if solicited in an alien world
With timid and hazardous instinctive grace,
Orphaned and driven out to seek a home,

An errant marvel with no place to live,
Into a far-off nook of heaven there came
A slow miraculous gesture's dim appeal.

This is a rather difficult sentence. Fortunately Sri Aurobindo has written a letter which explains it.⁷ The subject of this sentence is '*An errant marvel*'; '*Errant*' means 'wandering', even 'lost'; this '*marvel*' has no place to live because it is '*orphaned*': it has lost its parents and its native place, it has been driven out to look for a home. The picture is almost like a little beggar girl who is appealing for help; 'to solicit' means to ask for something. She is in an '*alien world*'; our world is a strange place to her. She is '*timid*', shy and fearful, she feels hesitant to ask for anything. Sri Aurobindo uses the word '*hazardous*' which suggests danger, as if that lovely lost being is in danger, running some kind of risk, and yet has to appeal for help. In the gesture that she makes there is an '*instinctive grace*', an inborn, natural, spontaneous gracefulness which children have sometimes, or small animals that are lost: they know just how to touch your feelings. This picture is an image for the way that the first dawn-light is coming in, very timid and hesitating, but full of grace and loveliness; it comes faintly '*into a far-off nook of heaven*'. A '*nook*' is a corner: the light comes like '*a slow miraculous gesture*' appearing in a faraway corner of the sky, like some lovely lost being appealing for help. The appeal is '*dim*', very faint and unobtrusive, there is not a lot of light; and yet it is '*persistent*', it will not go away. What makes this sentence difficult to understand is that the word '*solicited*' comes at the beginning of the sentence; it could be a past participle used as an adjective, so we wonder who is being solicited, who is being called, appealed to; we may not notice at first reading that it is an active verb, because its subject, the one who is doing the

⁷Letters on Poetry and Art, CWSA volume 27, p. 280

soliciting, is mentioned only a few lines down. But if we are attentive, we will notice the word '*appeal*' at the end of the sentence, and then we can begin to unravel the unusual structure of the sentence and grasp the image that Sri Aurobindo is showing us, of the first faint light of dawn appearing in the darkness, shyly asking, with a graceful gesture, to be allowed to remain, to be received and appreciated and responded to.

The persistent thrill of a transfiguring touch
Persuaded the inert black quietude
And beauty and wonder disturbed the fields of God.

The '*god-touch*' is '*transfiguring*'; when something is '*transfigured*' it is revealed in its truest, most glorious form, quite different from its ordinary everyday appearance; the '*transfiguring touch*' produces a thrill which persists, which does not stop or withdraw; it has the effect of persuading '*the inert black quietude*', the resisting, unresponsive stillness and silence. As a result, '*beauty and wonder disturbed the fields of God*'. '*The fields of God*' is a beautiful poetic expression for the skies. They have been dark and silent, but now '*beauty and wonder*' have come in, disturbing that black silence: something new and wonderful is going to happen. You have to get up very early in the morning to possibly catch a glimpse of this gesture, and the slow imperceptible creeping in of the beauty and wonder of the pre-dawn light.

A wandering hand of pale enchanted light
That glowed along a fading moment's brink,
Fixed with gold panel and opalescent hinge
A gate of dreams ajar on mystery's verge.

Here is another image: it is as if a hand of light is opening a gate, a window, onto hidden worlds. The hand moves, it is made of pale magical light, and it glows, he says, '*along a fading moment's brink*'.

'Brink' is one of the many words we find in the poem that indicate an edge or a borderline: 'rim', 'edge', 'marge', 'verge', 'brink' and more: so many suggestive words! We speak about the brink of the ocean or the brink of a cliff: if we take one more step, we shall be over the edge. The glowing hand of light is seen just for a moment as it fixes '*A gate of dreams ajar on mystery's verge*'. '*Ajar*' is a word we use for a window or a door which is just slightly open, still touching the door-frame. If someone leaves the door ajar and there is a breeze, a little wind, we will hear the door banging against the frame, 'jarring'; but if a door is ajar, it is not locked; if we want to go through, we can open it: it is almost an invitation to open the door and see what is on the other side. The '*panel*', the main part of the gate, is gold, and the '*hinge*', the part that allows the gate to swing on its frame, is '*opalescent*', another very beautiful suggestive word. An opal is a beautiful gemstone from Australia. If you look into an opal it is opaque, not transparent, and in it are beautiful colours, which move as you move the stone. Some opals have deep intense colours, blue and green and red, but others have pastel tones, milky whites and pinks and pale blues and greens, perhaps with a hint of fiery orange somewhere in the depths, all mingling together; '*opalescent*' means 'glowing like an opal', with the beautiful mingling colours we may see in the dawn sky.

One lucent corner windowing hidden things
Forced the world's blind immensity to sight.

The '*gate of dreams*' is a part of the sky that is full of light. '*Lucent*' means 'full of light'. That corner of the sky is like a window onto the invisible worlds, allowing their magic light to enter our world. That little glow of light in a far-off nook of heaven '*Forced the world's blind immensity to sight*'. Now that the gate of dreams has been opened, even though it is only '*ajar*', only a little bit open, the light can pour

through, and that is enough to force all the huge blackness of the sleeping world to see. If everything is completely dark, we cannot see anything, however much we strain our eyes and peer into the shadows to make out something; but as soon as there is a little light, we cannot avoid seeing, whether we want to or not. By using the word '*forced*' Sri Aurobindo again gives a hint of the reluctance of the dark side of Nature that would prefer to remain blind and asleep and unconscious.

The darkness failed and slipped like a falling cloak
From the reclining body of a god.

Then another beautiful image: a '*cloak*' is a big garment that we can wrap around us if it is cold or raining. The darkness falls away like a cloak and reveals the body of a god '*reclining*', lying down. This is an image from the Vedas, where it is said that the darkness falls away and reveals the beautiful limbs of Usha, the goddess of the Dawn.⁸

Then through the pallid rift that seemed at first
Hardly enough for a trickle from the suns,
Outpoured the revelation and the flame.
The brief perpetual sign recurred above.

A '*rift*' is a break or even a tear; so we can think of the fabric of the dark cloak being torn; at first that tear seems very small and pale: '*pallid*' means pale. That small pale rift in the darkness seems hardly big enough to allow even '*a trickle*', a small thin stream, to pass through from all the suns that are hidden behind. But, surprisingly, much more than a trickle comes: '*the revelation and the flame*' pour out and the Dawn appears.

The brief perpetual sign recurred above.

⁸See Professor Subbian's article in *Invocation* 11:11-12 and 33:53-54

'Above', in the sky, a '*sign recurred*', came again, as it does every morning, with every dawn. That sign does not stay long, it is '*brief*', shortlived; and yet it is '*perpetual*', it is repeated again and again, as if for ever: the ever-returning light of dawn, which is a symbol, a sign.

A glamour from unreach'd transcendences
Iridescent with the glory of the Unseen,
A message from the unknown immortal Light
Ablaze upon creation's quivering edge,
Dawn built her aura of magnificent hues
And buried its seed of grandeur in the hours.

'Glamour' is a quality of magical attraction. This '*glamour*' of the dawn light comes '*from unreach'd transcendences*'. What is '*transcendent*' is beyond everything that we know or can know, beyond the whole creation. This light of the symbol dawn comes not just from the other side of the earth or the solar system or the universe, but from other dimensions that we know nothing about. It is '*iridescent*'. This word is similar in its suggestion to '*opalescent*', it means 'shining with all the colours of the rainbow'. Iridescent colours may be more vivid and intense than opalescent ones, which are milky and pale. The '*glamour*' which comes with the dawn is '*Iridescent with the glory of the Unseen*', the Unseen with a capital U, suggesting the ultimate unseen existence beyond all the forms of the manifestation. It is a message, '*A message from the unknown immortal Light*', which comes to express something from the undying Light that is '*Ablaze upon creation's quivering edge*', on the very edge of creation, where the manifest and the unmanifest, the transcendent existence beyond, are very close together. Dawn brings that message of new light every day. That is where this light of the symbol dawn has come from, and arriving here, in our world, the

Dawn goddess builds up her '*aura*', her beautiful atmosphere of glorious colours, '*magnificent hues*'. She buries a seed of that glory, that grandeur, of all that wonderful Light, '*in the hours*', in our time. If we bury a seed in the ground it may lie there dormant for a long time, but when its time comes, it will sprout and grow. The Dawn is bringing a seed of '*the unknown immortal Light*' and planting it in the soil of human time; when the moment is right, it will emerge and blossom here in the material world. That is the promise implied in the message that the symbol Dawn brings.

An instant's visitor the godhead shone.
On life's thin border awhile the Vision stood
And bent over earth's pondering forehead curve.

That '*godhead*', the beautiful Goddess of the Dawn, is a '*visitor*', she stays with us for only an instant, a moment; the moment of dawn does not last long. Sri Aurobindo says that she stood '*On life's thin border awhile*', just for a moment. If we think about life on earth, there is the mass of matter which constitutes our globe, and everything that is alive forms a very thin layer on its surface, a '*border*' between the material mass and the inanimate atmosphere. There she stands, '*awhile*', just for a short time, and bends '*over earth's pondering forehead curve*'. The area of your face between your eyebrows and your hairline is your '*forehead*'. It is curved. Sri Aurobindo, as if taking a viewpoint from out in space, sees the curve of earth's surface like a forehead, with '*the Vision*', the Dawn Goddess, much larger, bending over that curve. He says that the curve, which is like a forehead, a brow, is '*pondering*', which means '*thinking*', '*musings*'; on the earth's surface, there is not only a thin layer of life, there is also a layer of mind.

Interpreting a recondite beauty and bliss
In colour's hieroglyphs of mystic sense,

It wrote the lines of a significant myth
Telling of a greatness of spiritual dawns,
A brilliant code penned with the sky for page.

'*Recondite*' means 'secret' or 'little known', 'hidden away'. The Vision is '*interpreting*': as I am trying to interpret to you the '*recondite beauty*' of Sri Aurobindo's wonderful images, she is interpreting a secret '*beauty and bliss*' that are hidden away behind the veil of appearances, translating the beauty and bliss of the higher subtle planes into a language of symbolic significant colours that have a '*mystic sense*', a mystic meaning like '*hieroglyphs*'. This is the word that we use for the ancient Egyptian picture writing. The word actually means 'sacred signs'. Not everybody could read that writing, much less actually write it. It was a secret script for people who had been specially educated to understand it. In the same way, we need some special teaching, some initiation, to be able to understand the mystic meaning of the symbolism of the colours that dawn brings into the sky. The Dawn Goddess uses the colours to write '*the lines of a significant myth*'. In *Savitri* Sri Aurobindo is re-telling us this significant myth, this ancient Vedic symbolic story of the inner meaning of Dawn, the meaning of the rising Sun and its return to the sky of our consciousness that has been dark, moonless and starless. What do these things mean? They are images, hieroglyphs that have a deep inner significance. At this moment, in the early morning, chasing away the darkness, the coming of Dawn is writing the lines of a significant myth which tells of '*a greatness of spiritual dawns*'. That is the inner sense of this whole passage. If we read it to ourselves very quietly, alone, indrawn in a meditative mood, we may experience an inner dawn in our own consciousness. The physical dawn is the symbol of such spiritual dawns. '*Code*' is secret writing. The Vision is using the whole sky as a page on which to write the lines of the significant myth of Dawn, in code, in the

secret language of symbolic colours and lines.

Almost that day the epiphany was disclosed
Of which our thoughts and hopes are signal flares;
A lonely splendour from the invisible goal
Almost was flung on the opaque Inane.

It has been such an extremely dark night, but now Sri Aurobindo seems to suggest that it is a particularly glorious dawn. Every day the dawn comes, but he says that on that day, it was almost as if '*the epiphany was disclosed*'. An '*epiphany*' is a revelation of the Divine. It is a Greek word, with a meaning similar to our Indian word 'Darshan': the Divine is revealed. Sri Aurobindo says that our thoughts and hopes are like '*signal flares*', signs of that epiphany, that revelation, signs that the Divine Presence exists somewhere. When you are lost at sea, if you are well-prepared you will have a flare-gun with you and in an emergency you can send up a signal flare to say 'I am here'. Our highest thoughts, our deepest hopes, are '*signal flares*' indicating that the Divine Presence exists and is waiting to be found. That epiphany is '*the invisible goal*' of our human journey. On this special morning, in this particularly beautiful dawn, some sign of that glory is seen: '*A lonely splendour from the invisible goal / Almost was flung on the opaque Inane*'. '*Flung*' means 'thrown'; we could think of the glorious radiance of the dawn being projected, as if onto a screen. A screen has to be '*opaque*': it should not let the light pass through but must reflect it back so the picture can be seen. Here the screen is '*the Inane*'. This word is normally used for something meaningless, stupid, but here it is with a capital letter 'I'; that makes us think, as Sri Aurobindo very often makes us think, of the original root meaning of the word; the root of this word is from Latin '*anima*', which means 'soul': something that is '*inane*' is without a soul, soul-less. Here it refers to

the blankness of the empty universe before the coming of Dawn; when she appears a wonderful expression of the supreme Light which is the goal of the journey of evolution is projected onto the blank opaque soullessness of the Night.

Once more a tread perturbed the vacant Vasts;
Infinity's centre, a Face of rapturous calm
Parted the eternal lids that open heaven;
A Form from far beatitudes seemed to near.

There is a Presence: '*Once more a tread*', a footfall, a step, '*perturbed the vacant Vasts*'; the footstep of the Dawn Goddess troubles, disturbs, those vast vacant spaces. This is the Divine Event which the foreboding mind of Night has been dreading, this disturbance brought by the coming of the light, compelling it to see and feel again, when all it wants to do is to fall back into unconsciousness. Now she is approaching, her footstep is heard or felt, she is coming nearer. Then her face is seen, a face that seems to be the very centre of Infinity. This seems paradoxical: how can Infinity, which is limitless, without any beginning or end, have a centre? But this Face seems to be a centre of infinite extension in all dimensions. It is a Face of '*rapturous calm*'. 'Rapture' is intense delight, bliss; this face is calm, at peace, and yet full of intense delight. The eyes open: '*lids*' here is a poetic reference to 'eyelids'; the eyelids part, the eyes open. These are eternal eyes, and when they open, heaven opens. First the tread, then the face, the eyes, and then a form: the whole body of the goddess comes close to the earth; it has come from '*far beatitudes*': 'beatitude' is the state of heavenly bliss; she has come from faraway states of blissfulness, of Ananda.

Ambadress twixt eternity and change,
The omniscient Goddess leaned across the breadths
That wrap the fated journeyings of the stars

And saw the spaces ready for her feet.

The Dawn Goddess, Sri Aurobindo says, is an '*Ambadress*'. This is the feminine form of the word 'ambassador'. An ambassador is a person sent to represent one country to another. There is an Indian Ambassador representing India in the capital city of each important country of the world; if the French government has any message to send to the Indian government, they send that message through the French Ambassador in New Delhi, or through the Indian Ambassador in Paris; in a more general sense it can mean simply one who carries a message. Here Sri Aurobindo uses the feminine form of the word, because the one carrying the message is the Dawn Goddess. She is carrying a message between the realms of Eternity and the world of change that we live in. '*Twixt*' is a poetic word meaning 'between'. We may wonder whether there is any connection between the eternal world and our world of constant change; here Sri Aurobindo says that the Dawn Goddess comes as an ambadress: she brings something of eternity here, and perhaps she carries back some message of aspiration and hope from the material world to the eternal planes. Sri Aurobindo describes her as '*omniscient*', all-knowing, all-seeing. He pictures her as vast, leaning across the '*breadths*', the broad spaces, '*that wrap the fated journeyings of the stars*', that enclose or envelop the orbits of the stars. He says that those journeyings of the stars are '*fated*'. This suggests two things: first that the orbits of the stars are fixed, determined by some inevitable laws of fate; but it also reminds us that human beings often feel that the movements and relationships of the stars carry some power of fate or destiny which may be significant in the circumstances of our lives; that is why people turn to astrologers, to try to get some light on their individual fate or destiny. The Dawn Goddess looks at the broad spaces in which the stars move, and sees where she can next place her feet. Sri Aurobindo paints this picture

on a vast scale: he takes us away from the flat earth we normally live on and out into the vastnesses, and makes us see the Goddess moving there.

Once she half looked behind for her veiled sun,
Then, thoughtful, went to her immortal work.

It is such a beautiful picture: she gives a glance behind to see whether the sun is following her. The sun is still '*veiled*', hidden; it will rise, unveiled, only after the Dawn has passed on. This '*veiled sun*' is Savitri, the sun before it rises above the horizon. Then Dawn moves on: '*her immortal work*' continues elsewhere.

Earth felt the Imperishable's passage close:
The waking ear of Nature heard her steps
And wideness turned to her its limitless eye,
And, scattered on sealed depths, her luminous smile
Kindled to fire the silence of the worlds.

Sri Aurobindo brings us back to earth and shows us that there is a response, here, to the passage of the Dawn Goddess. Earth is the symbol of the material world, and the base for the evolutionary adventure of consciousness. Earth feels the '*passage*' of the Goddess; Sri Aurobindo says, '*the Imperishable*'. Things that perish do not last long; we talk about 'perishable goods', milk and vegetables, things which will spoil quickly; and we are all perishable creatures: our bodies do not last very long; but those who belong to higher planes are made of a different kind of substance which does not perish, does not age and spoil, but remains ever young and beautiful. Earth, the home of perishable creatures, feels the imperishable presence passing very close to it; something in the natural world wakes up and hears her footsteps passing; all the wide spaces of the earth turn and look at that beautiful face and form in the sky, and the luminous smile of the Goddess is '*scattered on sealed depths*' as we

scatter seeds when we want them to grow in soil. She spreads and scatters her smile, and it is as if, in deep closed places within the earth, little flames are lighted. 'To kindle' means to get a fire going. These are fires of aspiration, lit in the depths of matter by the passing of the Goddess, who signals the approach of the Sun, the symbol of the full divine Presence and Power and Light.

All grew a consecration and a rite.

The passing presence of the Dawn Goddess, bringing the promise of new light, awakens a response in nature. There is a sense of a sacred meaning in everything. '*Consecration*' means 'making sacred'. When we offer ourselves to the Divine, we make all the apparently ordinary things sacred, so that they take on a divine significance and meaning. A '*rite*' is a ritual of worship: actions done in a special way, for the purpose of honouring and invoking the Divine.

Air was a vibrant link between earth and heaven;
The wide-winged hymn of a great priestly wind
Arose and failed upon the altar hills;
The high boughs prayed in a revealing sky.

This is Nature's response to the passage of the imperishable Dawn Goddess. Air becomes '*a vibrant link between earth and heaven*': the air is vibrating and connecting the earth and the sky, linking the material world with the higher planes. A wind arises and sinks again on the hills; Sri Aurobindo says that wind is like a priest, one who performs the rite and offers the sacrifice; the sound of the wind is a '*wide-winged hymn*', a chant of adoration and praise of the Divine. The hills are the altar, and the trees are lifting their branches towards the sky in prayer. The sky which was so opaque and dark has become '*a revealing sky*'; because of the light of Dawn it is no longer hiding the Divine but revealing it. Sri Aurobindo has written that we should not think of these things as just poetic images. He

says that something like this really happens, that he has seen and experienced the trees praying and the air becoming vibrant and the sound of the wind on the hills like a priest chanting the sacred words; this is not just a beautiful thought or imagination, but an exact and powerful description of something that happens and that can be seen and experienced if we become sensitive to the deeper truths and movements in Nature.

Here where our half-lit ignorance skirts the gulfs
On the dumb bosom of the ambiguous earth,
Here where one knows not even the step in front
And Truth has her throne on the shadowy back of doubt,
On this anguished and precarious field of toil
Outspread beneath some large indifferent gaze,
Impartial witness of our joy and bale,
Our prostrate soil bore the awakening ray.

In the previous sentences Sri Aurobindo was telling us about how the world of Nature responds to the passage of the dawn-goddess. Here he tells us about our human world of *'half-lit ignorance'*, which *'skirts the gulfs / on the dumb bosom of the ambiguous earth'*. To *'skirt'* means to move around the edge of something. Here we are on our little globe, which is spinning and moving round and round on the edge of the immense *'gulfs'* of outer space. We live on the bosom of the earth. The earth is our material mother, we are her children and she keeps us on her bosom, her breast, and nourishes us; but to our mental view, this mother of ours is *'ambiguous'*, unclear and doubtful. *'Ambiguous'* means *'having more than one meaning'*. If something is ambiguous, we cannot be sure what it means; is it positive or negative? Is this earth of ours a good mother or a bad one? Is she divine, or is she dragging us back into the material inconscience? Is she loving or indifferent? The earth is ambiguous to

us: sometimes it seems green and smiling, at other times dangerous and fierce, or just indifferent. Our earth is a riddle to us, and we live in a world of duality, of opposites. Everything here goes in pairs of inseparable opposites: hot and cold, light and dark, good and bad, left and right. We ignorant beings do not even know what the next step in our lives will be. If we go deep inside ourselves we may be able to get an indication of what we should do; but it is only for the step we are taking now, not for the next one. Here on earth, Truth, who is a great goddess, is throned '*on the shadowy back of doubt*'. In *The Life Divine* Sri Aurobindo has written about how important doubt is for us as a way of coming closer to the truth; we must not simply believe that everything really is the way that we see it and experience it; we need to doubt and question in order to be able to find the truth. A '*throne*' is the special seat for a ruler. For the *Meditations on Savitri*, Mother showed Huta how to paint the shining golden goddess of Truth seated on a dark high seat, as if made of black rock, the black rock of Doubt. Here Sri Aurobindo refers to the earth as '*this anguished and precarious field of toil*'; '*anguish*' is suffering, intense pain, whether physical or psychological. Our earth is a field of anguish; and it is a '*field of toil*', a field of effort and striving and hard labour. It is also '*precarious*': we may make an effort and gain something, but our gains are '*precarious*', at risk, insecure; nothing we have is certain and lasting, it can be lost at any time, we are always at risk, in danger, we are not secure. The expression '*field of toil*' is a translation of '*Kurukshetra*', the field of action, of effort and battle and danger that is our world. This field is spread out beneath a sky that seems to look down at us with '*a large indifferent gaze*': whatever powers may be there on higher levels of existence do not seem to care much about what happens down here on earth, they do not seem to take much interest in all our efforts and struggles and sufferings.

Whatever is there looking down on us is an '*impartial witness*': it is not taking sides and supporting this one or that one, it simply looks on, not caring whether we are experiencing joy or '*bale*'; '*bale*' is misfortune, suffering, the opposite of joy. But even here, '*our prostrate soil bore the awakening ray*'. '*Prostrate*' means '*lying flat*'; when we offer a full pranam we '*prostrate*' ourselves, we lie down stretched out flat. Here Sri Aurobindo is referring to human beings, so he does not mean only the soil, the flat ground beneath the sky; he also means our most unresponsive material part which bears the pressure of the '*awakening ray*' brought by the divine Dawn, with its promise of a greater light and a greater fulfilment.

Here too the vision and prophetic gleam
Lit into miracles common meaningless shapes;
Then the divine afflatus, spent, withdrew,
Unwanted, fading from the mortal's range.

'*Here too*', in our human world, the wonderful vision of the divine presence offers its '*prophetic gleam*'. A '*gleam*' is a soft shining light; the light of the Dawn is '*prophetic*': a prophet is one who can see into the future and say what will happen. Sri Aurobindo told us earlier that the Dawn-Light is foretelling and promising an '*epiphany*', a full revelation or darshan of the Divine Presence. Here too, in our human world, that light comes and touches all the '*common meaningless shapes*' that we see around us every day, and lights them up into something absolutely magical. You might have experienced this when getting up in the very early morning. I remember seeing it once in a railway station somewhere in North India: all the ordinary things looked so beautiful, lit up into magical colours by the first dawn light; everything was '*lit into miracle*' and looked beautiful and wonderful. But it lasted only a short time: '*Then the divine afflatus, spent, withdrew*'. '*Afflatus*' means literally, '*breath*', but

it has come to mean 'inspiration', which also has something to do with breath: the divine breath enters for a moment and makes everything divine, fills everything with divine beauty and wonder and significance. Here in the material world, that cannot last long, it is soon '*spent*' and withdraws because there is no response; it is '*unwanted*' so it fades away from our '*mortal range*'. The word '*mortal*' occurs 256 times in *Savitri*, so it is worth learning what it means. Literally it means 'subject to death'. Everything that is born is subject to death, it must die. Only the unborn part of us, our true soul, is immortal and can free us from subjection to the law of death. When we take birth in the material world we are born into a world of limitation; our senses are limited, our consciousness is limited, and so our range of experience and understanding is limited, usually to the most material realities that we can touch and see and taste. Finding no response, that vision, that '*prophetic gleam*' withdraws and fades away so that we can no longer see it or feel it – if we were aware of its presence at all.

A sacred yearning lingered in its trace,
The worship of a Presence and a Power
Too perfect to be held by death-bound hearts,
The prescience of a marvellous birth to come.

Something beautiful has come and gone, and leaves behind a sense of it being missed: '*A sacred yearning*', a longing for that divine Presence and Power; the yearning, the longing, '*lingered in its trace*'. To 'linger' means to remain for a time. The Dawn Goddess has come and gone, but she has left behind something that remains lingering. If a lady passes you in the street, the fragrance of the flowers in her hair or the perfume she is wearing may sometimes linger in her trace; she has moved on, but the fragrance still lingers where she has passed. Here it is not a fragrance that lingers, but a

'yearning', a sense of longing for something missed; this yearning is 'sacred'; there is something holy in it, some aspiration, some worship for that lovely divine Presence that has come and gone but was too perfect to be caught and held by our mortal '*death-bound hearts*'. That Presence carried a promise, the message of a great possibility awaiting us in the future, so that yearning and that worship are also carrying a '*prescience*', a foreknowledge or intuition of '*a marvellous birth to come*'. The Dawn-goddess has moved on, but she will return: in the form of Savitri, and in the form of our own new birth, the birth of the revealed Divine here on earth. The Mother has spoken about this '*sacred yearning*' in connection with the sunset. She said that after the sun sets there is a very special atmosphere, as if the whole of Nature is feeling a sacred longing for the sun which has disappeared below the horizon, the sun that brought warmth and light and energy; there is an atmosphere of yearning, an aspiration for the return of the sun. Here the longing is not just for the return of the sun and a new day, but for the coming of the perfect Divine Presence that promises us a completely new birth and new world.

Only a little the god-light can stay:

Spiritual beauty illumining human sight

Lines with its passion and mystery Matter's mask

And squanders eternity on a beat of Time.

The '*god-light*', the light of the divine presence, can only stay with us a little while. The power of spiritual beauty comes and lights things up and allows human beings to see for a moment behind the '*mask*' of Matter. A mask is a disguise put on over the face; children love to put on a mask to pretend to be a lion or Superman. Here Sri Aurobindo is telling us that Matter itself is a mask which is hiding something from our view, disguising something. The light of spiritual beauty lights up the mask and reveals something of '*the*

passion and mystery’ it is hiding, the intensity and the mysteriousness of the marvel within the mask. This happens just for a moment, a single ‘*beat of Time*’, but for that moment all the riches of eternity are there. ‘To squander’ means to waste, to spend all your wealth at one go on useless things. Here the word ‘*squanders*’ is very expressive, because of course the riches of eternity are infinite, but Sri Aurobindo is making us feel how lavishly they are all spent in one short moment of time, the moment when the indwelling Divinity is revealed.

As when a soul draws near the sill of birth,
Adjoining mortal time to Timelessness,
A spark of deity lost in Matter’s crypt
Its lustre vanishes in the inconscient planes,
That transitory glow of magic fire
So now dissolved in bright accustomed air.

Here is the image of a soul emerging from the psychic world to be born on earth. It comes near to ‘*the sill of birth*’: the ‘*sill*’ is the threshold, the step or line between ‘*mortal time*’ and Timelessness, marking the transition from the world of the Unborn to the world of birth. As the soul crosses over the threshold, the sill, and is born into the world of Matter, its ‘*spark of deity*’, the fire of divinity it is carrying, gets lost and its ‘*lustre*’, its shining light, vanishes. It has entered ‘*Matter’s crypt*’. A ‘*crypt*’ is a deep secret cave in the foundations of a sacred building. The root of the word means ‘hidden’, ‘secret’. There is an adjective ‘cryptic’ which means ‘mysterious’, ‘difficult to understand’. People who work with codes, with ciphers and secret writing, will ‘encrypt’ the message, hide its meaning so that only someone who has the right clue will be able to find it out. In the world of Matter the light of the higher planes gets hidden and disguised, so it is no longer seen clearly, ‘*its lustre*

vanishes in the inconscient planes', the levels where consciousness hides from itself. Similarly, as the light of the soul vanishes when it crosses the threshold and takes birth into the world of Matter, *'that transitory glow of magic fire'* from the dawn-light becomes invisible, dissolved in the *'bright accustomed air'* of ordinary daylight. *'Transitory'* means *'passing'*, *'short-lived'*: that glorious glow of magic fire does not last long. *'Accustomed'* means what we are used to, what is ordinary and normal.

The message ceased and waned the messenger.

The single Call, the uncompanioned Power,

Drew back into some far-off secret world

The hue and marvel of the supernal beam:

She looked no more on our mortality.

The Dawn-goddess has come, she has bent over the earth, she has brought her message; Sri Aurobindo told us that she is an Ambassadors bringing a message from the realm of Eternity to the realm of Change. She has given her message, and now the message has ceased and the messenger *'waned'*. This is a word that we use for the moon: the moon *'waxes'*, gets bigger and brighter and becomes full, and then it starts to *'wane'*, growing smaller and less bright. That lovely bright messenger of the Dawn fades away. Sri Aurobindo refers to her as *'the single Call'*: she is calling us to a higher state, our greater destiny; she is also *'the uncompanioned Power'*: a great Power who works alone, without any companion or helper. Now she starts to withdraw all those magical colours, all the wonderful beauty of the divine light, *'the supernal beam'* which she had brought with her; she draws them back into *'some far-off secret world'*. *'Beam'* here means a ray of light, as in *'sunbeam'* and *'moonbeam'*. The Dawn's light is *'supernal'*, heavenly, coming from a higher world. She moves on in her journey, she has cast her eyes

on our earth and lit everything up with her magical beam, but now *'She looked no more on our mortality'*. She has drawn away from our death-bound existence.

The excess of beauty natural to god-kind
Could not uphold its claim on time-born eyes;
Too mystic-real for space-tenancy
Her body of glory was expunged from heaven:
The rarity and wonder lived no more.

'Excess' means *'too much'*: the amount and quality of beauty that is natural to the beings of heavenly worlds is too much for us; it could not continue to impose itself on physical eyes, the eyes born in this world of time; our eyes are tuned to something else. Sri Aurobindo says that the body of the Dawn Goddess was too real, real not in the physical way that we use that word, but in a mystic way, a much truer way that is typical of higher worlds. *'Tenancy'*: a tenant is someone who lives in a place that does not belong to him, a house or a room that he rents for a time. Her *'body of glory'* is too real to live in our kind of time and space, so it *'was expunged from heaven'*: as if wiped out, it disappeared from our sky, our atmosphere. Here on earth that rare and precious influence, that marvellous wonder could no longer be seen.

There was the common light of earthly day.

It is no longer dark, the special magic light of Dawn has passed, and there is just our ordinary daylight.

Affranchised from the respite of fatigue
Once more the rumour of the speed of Life
Pursued the cycles of her blinded quest.

'Affranchised' means *'set free'*; Life is set free from *'the respite of fatigue'*: a *'respite'* is a short period of rest or relief between two

difficult periods. If you are in pain and someone gives you the right pill, you may experience some respite, but after some time the effect will wear off and the pain will come back. '*Fatigue*' is tiredness, exhaustion. Exhaustion gives us some respite: we fall asleep, our tiredness gives us some respite from all the business of life; but in the morning, we wake up, we are set free from that respite and '*the rumour of the speed of Life*' starts again. Here '*rumour*' means 'sound', the noise that accompanies Life as it speeds upon its way, following behind '*the cycles*' of Life's '*blinded quest*'. A '*quest*' is a search; the Life-power is always hunting after something, seeking for bliss, for delight, for satisfaction, and its quest is '*blinded*'. Here in the Ignorance, the Life-power is cut off from the consciousness of her origin and her aim; she does not know where she is going and cannot see what she is seeking. '*Cycle*' means something that moves in a circle, so it has come to mean a wheel: a bicycle is a vehicle with two wheels; but there is also the cycle of the day, from morning to noon to evening to night and back to dawn; there is the cycle of the year through the seasons; and there is the cycle of the ages, the yugas. Life's quest has its cycles too, of desire and the excitement of the chase, then possession and enjoyment, and then she gets tired and feels disgust and exhaustion, enjoys '*the respite of fatigue*', and then she is off again, hunting for something new; and all this movement of quest makes a sound, '*the rumour of the speed of Life*'. Now, in '*the common light of earthly day*', all this starts up again.

All sprang to their unvarying daily acts;
The thousand peoples of the soil and tree
Obeyed the unforeseeing instant's urge,
And, leader here with his uncertain mind,
Alone who stares at the future's covered face,
Man lifted up the burden of his fate.

Everyone wakes up and starts on their daily acts, which are 'unvarying': they do not change much, every day they are more or less the same. '*The thousand peoples of the soil and tree*', all the insects and birds and animals, obey their impulses; they follow the instinctive urge of the moment, not thinking about the future; they are 'unforeseeing'; they do what instinct drives them to do at each moment. The only one who tries to look into the future is Man. Man is the leading species here: even though our minds are so uncertain, although we live in this half-lit ignorance, still we are the leading species here at present, and the only one that thinks about the future. We cannot see what the future will bring, its face is covered; nevertheless we keep staring at that '*covered face*', trying to find some clue of what it holds for us, what is going to happen next. When day comes, Man must lift up '*the burden of his fate*'; there has been a respite, the respite that fatigue brings, but now he must again lift up that heavy load, the load of responsibility, the load of destiny. Mother asked Huta to paint a figure like a weight-lifter, standing on the curve of the earth, lifting up his heavy load. Huta says that the Mother liked this image very much; she said 'One likes to see this picture, because it shows some sense of effort and aspiration.'

This is the end of the first section of the first canto of the first book of Sri Aurobindo's epic. It has led us from the complete darkness of the hour before the dawn, the hour before the gods awake, to the common light of earthly day. The Dawn has come, and now it has passed. By his title for this canto, '*The Symbol Dawn*', Sri Aurobindo has made it clear that he is showing us not only a physical dawn, the rising of the sun above our physical horizon; the darkness at the beginning is not just the absence of the sun, but '*the Mind of Night*', a consciousness that is resisting the coming of the light. This is a theme that runs throughout the poem. There is the

Night, all the forces of darkness that resist; and there is the new Light coming. Savitri is connected with the Dawn, with the coming of the new Light. When the Mother was explaining to Huta about the painting of the Dawn-goddess withdrawing, Huta said, 'Oh, she has gone!' The Mother replied, 'She will come back – as Savitri'. Savitri represents the new light of the sun before it rises over the horizon; that is one of the meanings of her name. This first book is 'The Book of Beginnings': it opens with the resistance of the Mind of Night, then the coming of the Dawn with her message of Light and hope and love and the possibility of a higher life, a divine life; she planted her glorious seed of promise in the hours, and now she has moved on and a new day is about to begin. As we shall see, this is the day when Satyavan must die. The whole story takes place in this one day.

You can read this first section for yourself with concentration and try to feel or observe those movements happening in yourself as you read. There are parts that are in darkness; some of them are content in the darkness and unconsciousness, they do not want the light to come, they would rather go back to sleep, back into unconsciousness; but somewhere deep in the darkness there is a tiny movement that allows something to awake: a first beginning of aspiration. Something begins to look for absent light; it does not even know what light is, and yet it feels that something is missing. That tiny movement is like a child reminding its sleeping mother, and there is a response: something comes looking for that soul lost in the darkness, '*too fallen to recollect forgotten bliss*'. Gradually a faint light appears and grows, and then suddenly the darkness falls away and reveals the glorious light of Dawn. All the apparently inert earth-nature responds to it; for a moment everything in nature is on fire with aspiration, with love of all that divine beauty; even something in the human world responds, feels the magic touch. But

that message and promise cannot stay long; something in our present earth-nature does not allow it to stay. When it has passed, there may be a longing, a yearning for something truer and purer and higher, but the common light of earthly day and the speed of life's blinded quest return as usual. Savitri has come to change this, as we shall find as we read further.

End of Section 1

Section 2, lines 186-342

And Savitri too awoke among these tribes
That hastened to join the brilliant Summoner's chant
And, lured by the beauty of the apparent ways,
Acclaimed their portion of ephemeral joy.

Savitri too wakes up '*among these tribes*', these '*thousand peoples of the soil and tree*'. She is waking up in the forest, and in the early morning all the forest birds are singing, the gibbons and monkeys are whooping; we call it 'the dawn chorus'. All the animals and birds, waking up, are welcoming the sun, '*the brilliant Summoner*', praising him with their song, and all together making a great chant, a great hymn of praise. All the little beings hurry to join in; they are '*lured*', attracted by '*the beauty of the apparent ways*', the ways and things and possibilities that can be seen as the sun rises, and each of them joins in the chant, acclaiming '*their portion of ephemeral joy*'. 'To acclaim' means to say 'yes' with a shout. When a new leader is presented to the people and they are asked 'Do you accept him?' everybody says 'Yes!' with a loud shout. That is what is happening here: '*the thousand peoples of the soil and tree*' are saying 'yes' to the small share of joy that the coming day is offering to each of them. That happiness is '*ephemeral*', it lasts only a short time, but the earthly creatures accept it gladly, singing out their joy in the early morning.

Akin to the eternity whence she came,
No part she took in this small happiness;
A mighty stranger in the human field,
The embodied Guest within made no response.

Savitri also wakes up, but she does not share in this '*small happiness*',

the joyful welcome to the new day that all the other forest creatures give. Here Sri Aurobindo gives us a first indication of Savitri as he sees her, very different from the Savitri we read about in the Mahabharata, the Savitri who is traditionally remembered in India, the '*sukanya*' whose devotion to her husband enables her to save his life. Sri Aurobindo's Savitri has come from eternity with a mission. '*Akin*' means 'closely related'. Savitri is closely related to the eternal world that she has come from, '*the eternity whence she came*'. '*Whence*' means 'from where'. She is not lured by the beauty of the apparent ways; she is not attracted by the ephemeral joys that are acclaimed by earth-creatures. Within her is '*a mighty stranger in the human field*', '*the embodied Guest within*': she has come into our human field, our human world, as an embodiment of the Love of the Supreme Divine Mother. That Guest makes no response to the small happiness that lures earthly creatures.

The call that wakes the leap of human mind,
Its chequered eager motion of pursuit,
Its fluttering-hued illusion of desire,
Visited her heart like a sweet alien note.

When we wake to morning's call the mind leaps up and thinks, 'What have I got to do? What will happen today?' The call of daylight wakes the mind, makes it leap into action and sets it off on its '*chequered eager motion of pursuit*'. That enthusiastic movement of chasing after things is '*chequered*': alternating black and white; a chess board, with its black and white squares, can also be used for another game called 'Chequers', or 'Checkers' in American English; English poets have used this word to refer to alternating light and shade, the effect of the sun through leaves on the ground beneath, for example; Sri Aurobindo uses the word here for the alternation of light and dark in the mind's eager motion of pursuit. The mind is

always enthusiastically chasing after one thing or another that attracts it, as a child might chase after a butterfly, a beautiful coloured thing that flutters in front of it, luring it on: '*the fluttering-hued illusion of desire*'; desire waves some misleading attraction in front of us, to keep us moving on. Savitri is aware of this call and of the mind's response, which touch her heart like some '*sweet alien note*'; this note is '*sweet*' because she has so much compassion and love for human beings and the earth, but it is '*alien*' to her, strange, foreign, belonging to another world; it does not wake up in her the same '*eager motion of pursuit*' as it does in human beings and the creatures of the forest.

Time's message of brief light was not for her.

In her there was the anguish of the gods

Imprisoned in our transient human mould,

The deathless conquered by the death of things.

The beginning of each new day conveys '*Time's message of brief light*', one day at a time, one life at a time; but this message is not meant for Savitri. She is carrying within her '*the anguish of the gods*', the intense suffering of divine beings imprisoned in the human mould, divine souls who are aware of all the limitations, restrictions and unconsciousness of this '*human mould*', the physical body. They have accepted to become human here on earth to help us, but in the material body they feel their greatness '*imprisoned*' by its smallness and incapacity; they feel how short-lived, how '*transient*' it is. The word '*mould*' has a double suggestion: we use a mould for giving a shape to something shapeless, to wax for making a candle, to metal for making a statue; but the word '*mould*' is also used for rich soil that is full of organic matter; in *Savitri* the body is often referred to as '*clay*' or '*earth*'; here there is a similar idea: body is a mould for spirit, Sri Aurobindo tells us: life in a physical body allows formless

spirit to take on a shape, to become individualised. The body is '*transient*': passing, short-lived; the gods are deathless, immortal, but when they inhabit a human body they are subject to the law of death, they experience anguish when they feel '*conquered by the death of things*', the law of mortality ruling the material world, which is the opposite of their true immortal nature.

A vaster Nature's joy had once been hers,
But long could keep not its gold heavenly hue
Or stand upon this brittle earthly base.

The '*anguish of the gods*' is not Savitri's original nature: she has brought with her into the human world a joy, a bliss that belongs to the '*vaster Nature*' of her heavenly home; when she took on a human body the joy of the higher nature could not remain with her for long, it could not keep '*its gold heavenly hue*', the shining golden colour of the higher planes; it could not stand permanently on '*this brittle earthly base*': '*brittle*' means 'easily breakable': Matter, our material basis, seems solid to us, but here on earth everything is changing, nothing is permanent, nothing can last long; our physical substance is fragile, it breaks easily, it is '*brittle*'. The bliss that Savitri brought with her would need a much more permanent foundation, which is not yet on earth.

A narrow movement on Time's deep abysm,
Life's fragile littleness denied the power,
The proud and conscious wideness and the bliss
She had brought with her into the human form,
The calm delight that weds one soul to all,
The key to the flaming doors of ecstasy.

These lines have been illustrated by the Mother and Huta in the *Meditations on Savitri* series. The picture shows a first portrait of Savitri. She is holding something in her hand and looking at it

lovingly. Somebody asked me what she is holding. In the Mother's sketch it looks like the earth but in the painting it is golden.⁹ I asked Huta about it, and she told me that it is the golden earth, the earth as Savitri sees it in her vision, the way she wants it to become.

If we think of the huge gulfs of universal Time, '*Time's deep abysm*' ('*abysm*', like '*abyss*', means an immeasurably deep hole or chasm) Life has existed on earth for only a short time; it seems small and fragile compared to all the vastness of the universe; if matter is brittle and will break easily, life is even more easily damaged, like a flower-petal that may get bruised and spoiled by a touch, or a delicate glass that may break at any moment. The littleness and fragility of our life '*denied*', contradicted and refused, all the wonderful things that Savitri brought with her from the higher planes. To '*deny*' means to say '*no*', to refuse: earth existence seems to insist that the power, the vastness, the consciousness, the bliss that are Savitri's true nature cannot be real, or cannot be real here; especially it cannot believe in the '*bliss*', the '*calm delight*' which brings a sense of the oneness of all souls, and which, because it is '*calm*', free of all vital excitement, is the key that can open '*the flaming doors of ecstasy*'. '*Ecstasy*' is the most intense degree of delight, delight so intense that it is like a fire, a flame; one has to be perfectly pure to be able to experience that intense Ananda.

Earth's grain that needs the sap of pleasure and tears
Rejected the undying rapture's boon:
Offered to the daughter of infinity
Her passion-flower of love and doom she gave.

'*Grain*' has two meanings, and both of them are interesting here: it can mean a seed, so it gets applied to cereals in general, wheat, barley, rice and so on: all of these are called '*grain*'; and we may say

⁹Mother's sketch was published with Huta's permission in *Invocation* no. 7.

of someone 'He doesn't have even a grain of common sense': not even a seed or a tiny bit of good sense. Another meaning of the word is connected with the verb 'to grow': when you look at wood that has been cut and polished, you can see the lines of the tree's growth, the way it has grown; this is also the '*grain*'. It is easier for carpenters to cut 'along the grain', more difficult to cut across or against it; so we say of anything that is difficult or distasteful to us that it 'goes against the grain', it does not feel right or natural. The grain of the tree also marks the way that the sap rises in the plant; the sap is the life-blood of the plant, it rises from the root up the stem into the leaves, carrying its life-force. Here Sri Aurobindo says that Earth's grain, its nature, the way that it grows '*needs the sap of pleasure and tears*', a mixture of opposite flavours to nourish it; so it says 'no' to the boon which Savitri is bringing, the gift of '*undying rapture*', immortal bliss. Instead the earth-nature offers her a blossom which carries love, but also doom, suffering and death. There is an unusual-looking flower, the flower of the Passion-Fruit vine: the fruits of some varieties of this vine are very delicious, and the flower has an intense and beautiful scent. Mother has given it the spiritual significance of '*Silence*'; the name 'Passion Flower' has been given to it because people have seen in its form reminders of the suffering and death of Christ: the long thin petals look like the crown of thorns he was made to wear, and the pistils at the centre look like the nails used to nail him on the cross, and so on. '*Passion*' means intensity of feeling: intense suffering or desire or delight. The earth-nature offers to Savitri, '*the daughter of infinity*', the intense experiences of love and doom.

In vain now seemed the splendid sacrifice.
 A prodigal of her rich divinity,
 Her self and all she was she had lent to men,
 Hoping her greater being to implant

And in their body's lives acclimatise
That heaven might native grow on mortal soil.

Savitri's coming to earth in a human form, Sri Aurobindo says, was a '*splendid sacrifice*'. She had come to lend her self and all she was to humanity for a time, hoping to implant her greater being here on earth. Nowadays this word '*implant*' is used in medicine: the doctors may insert an artificial organ or device into the body to help it function better; but originally the word was connected with planting something in the ground. Savitri wanted to implant all the higher possibilities of the divine planes here, in earthly soil. The poet says that in doing this, she was '*a prodigal of her rich divinity*'. A '*prodigal*' does not count the cost, does not care how much he spends or lends or gives away, so the word is often used in a negative sense of a wastrel, an extravagant and foolish person who wastes his wealth; here Sri Aurobindo uses it to express the immense generosity of Savitri, who has left her blissful place in the higher worlds to lend all '*her rich divinity*', her self, everything that she is, to human beings in the hope that '*her greater being*', which is much greater than our present ordinary human nature, will take root in human life and get acclimatised here. In the early days of Auroville people started trying to introduce plants that were not native to this country or this climate at all. They had a hard time, most of the plants died, but after some time many varieties got '*acclimatised*', adapted to the local conditions, and now plants from all over the world grow well here. Savitri was hoping to acclimatise all her own rich divinity as a normal part of human life, so that '*heaven might native grow on mortal soil*', so that the qualities of the higher nature could become a natural part of earth life, like natives, born here, belonging here.

Hard is it to persuade earth-nature's change;

Mortality bears ill the eternal's touch:
It fears the pure divine intolerance
Of that assault of ether and of fire;
It murmurs at its sorrowless happiness,
Almost with hate repels the light it brings;
It trembles at its naked power of Truth
And the might and sweetness of its absolute Voice.

Now, as Savitri wakes up on this morning when she knows that Satyavan must die, the splendid sacrifice that she has made seems '*in vain*', as if it were useless, without effect. It is so difficult to persuade earth-nature to change. There is something in humanity that finds it difficult to bear the touch of higher things: '*mortality*', the state of things and beings that are subject to death, '*bears ill the eternal's touch*'; it is difficult for mortal beings to bear that touch which is so intense, so pure, so '*intolerant*' of our impurity and weakness. It is experienced as an attack, and our '*mortality*' fears that '*assault of ether and of fire*'. These words make us think of the five elements: earth, water, fire, air, and ether; we are earth-beings, under the domination of matter, the physicality of our bodies and the world around us; water, which flows and gives life, seems more related to our life-energies, our prana; air might correspond to the mind; ether is the subtlest and most rarefied of the elements, so pure that we cannot breathe it; it may symbolise our spiritual existence; fire is the most intense: we connect it with will and aspiration, it burns and purifies. Our earth-nature fears the '*divine intolerance*' of '*ether and of fire*' which will not allow anything impure or mixed; so when a divine messenger comes, offering '*sorrowless happiness*', the earth-nature '*murmurs*', it complains and revolts; it '*repels*', pushes away, '*almost with hate*', the higher light that the divine touch brings. It cannot stand it, does not want it; it trembles with fear at the '*naked power of Truth*' which will not allow any

pretence or insincerity and will expose all its littleness and shortcomings. Even though the divine Voice carries great sweetness, it is so powerful that our weak clay finds it terrifying; that is our mortality, the part of us that is ruled by Death. To change this earth nature is so hard that Savitri's mission and sacrifice seem to be in vain.

Inflicting on the heights the abysm's law,
It sullies with its mire heaven's messengers:
Its thorns of fallen nature are the defence
It turns against the saviour hands of Grace;
It meets the sons of God with death and pain.

In this sentence, the '*It*' which is repeated again and again is '*mortality*', the earth-nature that is subject to death and pain and limitation. It insists that the higher levels of consciousness, the higher beings who come, must obey the law of the lower levels, '*the abysm's law*', the law of unconsciousness, darkness, limitation and separation, with its resistance to progress and love and truth. An '*abysm*' is a very deep dark place, a bottomless dark hole. The earth-nature '*sullies with its mire heaven's messengers*'; '*mire*' is sticky dirty mud, the sort of mud that is mixed with filth and debris in the streets of slums; '*to sully*' means to dirty, to stain: the lower nature throws mud and filth on the divine messengers who want to share a higher truth. It defends itself from '*the saviour hands*' of divine Grace that would lift it up into a higher state, by turning against them '*its thorns of fallen nature*', the lower nature that is distorted and perverted. When we read the word '*thorns*' we think of Jesus who was made to wear a crown of thorns; but it also reminds me of something else. Some of you may know the book '*Le Petit Prince*' – '*The Little Prince*', by the French author Antoine de Saint-Exupéry; it is a beautiful story about an innocent little prince who has left his

own planet and come to earth; on that planet he has a rose growing and he worries about his rose, because he has left her all alone and all she has to defend herself against danger are her thorns. Why does the rose, that most beautiful of flowers, have those painful thorns? They are its defence. Mortality too has thorns which it uses to defend itself from change, even from '*the saviour hands*' of divine Grace; when the Avatars come, mortality meets the sons of God, the divine messengers, with death and pain.

A glory of lightnings traversing the earth-scene,
Their sun-thoughts fading, darkened by ignorant minds,
Their work betrayed, their good to evil turned,
The cross their payment for the crown they gave,
Only they leave behind a splendid Name.

This is what happens to the messengers, the beings from the higher levels who come to save the earth. They come like '*a glory of lightnings*', a short passage of powerful light, and then leave again. They '*traverse the earth scene*': they pass across the stage of history, lighting everything up, and then depart. When they have passed, their thoughts that were as bright as suns and came from the supreme sun of Truth, begin to fade because they get darkened by the ignorant minds of human beings who could not assimilate them, could not understand them. The work that they came to do seems to be betrayed, those who were supposed to carry it on fail, distort the message; the good news that they came to share gets distorted and used for evil, just the opposite of what they intended. Here again we cannot help thinking of Jesus Christ when Sri Aurobindo says '*the cross their payment for the crown they gave*': the messengers want to bring something wonderful to earth, a new and liberating power, a '*crown*' representing freedom and mastery, but the payment that the earth-nature gives for their efforts is suffering and death. Sri

Aurobindo and the Mother have told us that the Cross is the symbol of the resistance of the world of matter to the pouring down of the divine grace. '*Only they leave behind a splendid Name*': we remember their names with reverence, but we cannot live up to what they have taught us.

A fire has come and touched men's hearts and gone;
A few have caught flame and risen to greater life.

These lines too refer to God's messengers: their coming is like a fire, touching people, inspiring them; but when they leave only a few people have '*caught flame*', have kindled with the divine fire and been able to rise to a greater life; otherwise the sun-thoughts brought by the divine ones are fading away, '*darkened by ignorant minds*'.

Too unlike the world she came to help and save,
Her greatness weighed upon its ignorant breast
And from its dim chasms welled a dire return,
A portion of its sorrow, struggle, fall.

Now Sri Aurobindo returns to Savitri herself. He is explaining why, as she wakes up on the day when Satyavan must die, the splendid sacrifice that she has made, hoping to help humanity to rise to a diviner, more heavenly life, seems to have been in vain. It is because there is too big a difference between Savitri and this world that she has come to help and save. It is as if her greatness, the power and bliss, love and nobility that she has brought with her, is like a heavy weight pressing on the '*ignorant breast*' of our world; and when a weight presses down, something may well up from below; materially, it might be oil or water but this is on a subtler level: from the '*dim chasms*', the deep clefts and crevices of the ignorance, there comes up a terrible response: in return for the greatness she has brought to implant in our world, Savitri has to share the pain of this

world, '*a portion of its sorrow, struggle, fall.*'

To live with grief, to confront death on her road,—
The mortal's lot became the Immortal's share.

It is the '*lot*' of mortal beings, the portion that we get dealt in the game of life, to live with grief, to face death: these things come to all of us in the course of our life-journey; this is the lot of the mortal, the being held in the grip of death and ignorance, and this is what earth is offering to Savitri: '*the mortal's lot*' becomes the share of the Immortal that she is in her soul-reality.

Thus trapped in the gin of earthly destinies,
Awaiting her ordeal's hour abode,
Outcast from her inborn felicity,
Accepting life's obscure terrestrial robe,
Hiding herself even from those she loved,
The godhead greater by a human fate.

A '*gin*' is a terrible kind of trap which at one time was used to catch human beings; landlords with big estates used to keep deer and pheasants to hunt for pleasure, while all around them many poor people were living; men who needed food for their families would try to catch one of those birds, or even just a rabbit; to stop them the landlords would set these terrible traps which would catch them and break a leg, so that they could not move. I think that kind of trap was made illegal during the time when Sri Aurobindo was in England. Savitri is like that: she is caught in a terrible trap, '*the gin of earthly destinies*', which will not let her go. She cannot escape, she can only wait, just like a poor poacher who could only wait until one of the game-keepers, the guards, came and found him, and then he would have to face his '*ordeal*' of trial and punishment. '*Abode*' is the past tense of the verb '*to abide*', meaning to live or to remain or to stay. An '*ordeal*' is a difficult, very painful trial that has to be

faced. She can only wait for the ordeal which she must face when Death comes to take Satyavan away. This is the state that Savitri is in on that fateful morning. Because she is trapped, she is experiencing *'the anguish of the gods / Imprisoned in the transient human mould'*. She is *'cast out'*, exiled, excluded, from the *'felicity'*, the happiness which is her inborn right. She has accepted this dark robe, this covering, this disguise, by taking on a human body; and she is hiding herself even from those she loves. Not revealing her inner divinity or her mission to anybody, she is living in the forest as a simple girl; but really, Sri Aurobindo says, she is *'the godhead greater by a human fate'*: it seems as if she is trapped, as if her sacrifice is in vain, but the fact that she has accepted the obscure robe of the earthly body and the ordeal of human life is making her even greater than she was before.

A dark foreknowledge separated her
From all of whom she was the star and stay;
Too great to impart the peril and the pain,
In her torn depths she kept the grief to come.

'Foreknowledge': at the very beginning of the poem we read the word *'foreboding'*, the sense that something very bad is approaching; *'foreknowledge'* means *'knowing beforehand, in advance'*. Savitri alone knows that Satyavan must die one year after their marriage. That is the *'dark foreknowledge'* which separates her from all the people around her. She is their star, their guiding light, their *'stay'*, their support. An ordinary human being who had that dark foreknowledge of coming tragedy would not be able to refrain from sharing it, but Savitri does not share her pain with anyone. *'To impart'* means to share information with somebody, to communicate your knowledge to someone. Savitri does not want to share the danger and pain with anyone around her. She is holding deep

within all the grief that she is feeling, that she knows she is going to feel when Satyavan dies, the grief that she knows others must feel when Satyavan dies. Sri Aurobindo says that her depths are 'torn', deeply wounded, she is carrying a terrible pain deep inside.

As one who watching over men left blind
Takes up the load of an unwitting race,
Harbouring a foe whom with her heart she must feed,
Unknown her act, unknown the doom she faced,
Unhelped she must foresee and dread and dare.

Sri Aurobindo says that Savitri is like somebody who has been left as the guardian of a race that has become blind: they have become ignorant, without vision, without knowledge. A person with vision and knowledge who has been made the guardian of '*men left blind*' has to look after a whole race of people who are unaware; he has to take up '*the load*', the responsibility, the burden of that race of '*unwitting*' people, people who are not aware of their danger and do not even know that someone is looking after them. Sri Aurobindo and the Mother were guardians for humanity; they alone had the knowledge, and had to protect this blind human race. Savitri is like that; at the same time she is harbouring in her heart a '*foe*', an enemy. 'To harbour' means 'to shelter'; there is an enemy deep within, eating away at her heart. And nobody knows: her act is '*unknown*', nobody knows the doom that she is facing. There is no one to help: '*Unhelped she must foresee and dread and dare*'; she alone sees what is coming, she has to bear all the '*dread*', the fear of that terrible event that is going to come, she must have the courage to face it; if you '*dare*' something, something very difficult, very dangerous, you need a lot of courage and strength. Savitri must do all these things alone and unhelped: '*she must foresee and dread and dare*.'

The long-foreknown and fatal morn was here
Bringing a noon that seemed like every noon.

This is the morning which she has known for a long time would come: it is '*long-foreknown*', known far in advance; and it is '*fatal*'; a fatal wound is one that kills you; this morning is fatal, the morning of the day of death. But it will be a day like any other day. '*Noon*' is the middle of the day: this day will have a noon that seems like every other noon, as far as the rest of the world is concerned. But at noon, Satyavan will die.

For Nature walks upon her mighty way
Unheeding when she breaks a soul, a life;
Leaving her slain behind she travels on:
Man only marks and God's all-seeing eyes.

Nature goes on her path '*unheeding*': she does not seem to care or even notice when somebody drops by the wayside, it is just natural for her; when the process of Nature breaks a soul or a life, she does not pay any attention, she just continues on her journey. When I say, 'Pay heed!' it means 'Listen! Pay attention to what I'm saying, do not miss it!' But Nature is heedless, '*unheeding*', she does not pay any attention when she breaks a soul or a life. Those who have died, those she has '*slain*', the ones she has killed, are just left behind as she moves on her way. Who notices? Human beings notice: '*Man only marks and God's all-seeing eyes*': God sees everything, notices everything. Human beings are the ones who notice and suffer as Nature moves on '*leaving her slain behind*'.

Even in this moment of her soul's despair,
In its grim rendezvous with death and fear,
No cry broke from her lips, no call for aid;
She told the secret of her woe to none:
Calm was her face and courage kept her mute.

This shows the great courage of Savitri. We can hardly imagine what she had to bear, and yet she did not show anything outside; her face was calm, her courage was so great that she did not break down and share her secret with anyone, even in this moment when her soul was full of despair, feeling that her birth and her life were in vain, when her soul was facing death and fear. A *'rendezvous'* is an appointment; in French it means literally 'be there', at a particular place and time. Savitri knows that she has an appointment to keep with death and fear; but even so, she does not utter a cry or a sob, she does not call for help, she does not tell the secret of her *'woe'*, her sorrow, to anyone: *'Calm was her face and courage kept her mute'*. *'Mute'* means 'silent'. She does not speak of her pain to anyone.

Yet only her outward self suffered and strove;
Even her humanity was half divine:
Her spirit opened to the Spirit in all,
Her nature felt all Nature as its own.

Sri Aurobindo has shown us Savitri's suffering and her great courage; but now he tells us that this is the experience of her outer human self, her self turned *'outward'*. Even in her outer humanity the divinity of her inner self is very much apparent; inwardly, her spirit is open to the one Spirit that pervades the whole universe; and even her nature, the outward expression of her inner being, felt all Nature, the whole manifestation, *'as its own'*; that cord of sympathy is there not only on the soul-level, not only on the spirit level, but also on the nature level.

Apart, living within, all lives she bore;
Aloof, she carried in herself the world:
Her dread was one with the great cosmic dread,
Her strength was founded on the cosmic might;

The universal Mother's love was hers.

Earlier Sri Aurobindo told us that Savitri was separated from all those she loved, all those who loved her, by the dark foreknowledge she was carrying within her; but here he tells us that while living within herself, she is connected with all other lives. '*Aloof*' means 'at a distance'. Savitri is living in a remote hermitage in the forest, she does not meet many people; but she is carrying the whole world within her consciousness; the '*dread*', the grief and fear which she is feeling, is not just an individual thing: '*her dread was one with the great cosmic dread*', an individual experience of all the grief and fear that is part of universal existence; whatever that dread represents, she is carrying within herself. In her sense of oneness with the whole of nature, she shares the cosmic suffering; she is able to do that because she is also carrying the immortal universal strength within her. Her strength is based on, '*founded on*' the universal '*mights*' or powers; that strength enables her to bear the '*cosmic dread*'. More than that, she is carrying the love of the Mother of the universe, to help, to save and to transform.

Against the evil at life's afflicted roots,
Her own calamity its private sign,
Of her pangs she made a mystic poignant sword.

What wonderful lines! Out of her '*pangs*', her pain, Savitri creates a weapon, '*a mystic poignant sword*'. '*Poignant*' means sharp, pointed, piercing. A sword needs to be sharp to be effective, but this word is more often used in a psychological sense: something that is '*poignant*' touches your emotions painfully. Savitri is going to use this sword '*against the evil at life's afflicted roots*'. Here life is imaged as a great tree, with a destructive worm eating away at its roots. When a tree in your garden starts to lose its leaves and turn brown and bare, if you dig down into the roots you may find a worm there,

eating away. Savitri's own private '*calamity*', her own personal disaster – of a woman whose dearly beloved husband is going to die in the prime of his youth, when they have been together for only one year – is a sign of the evil which is causing suffering, perversion, distortion and death at the very roots of life in the material universe. In the face of this individual pain which she is experiencing, she is not just going to collapse and weep and wail: she is turning it into a weapon which she will use to fight against '*the evil at the afflicted roots of life*'.

A solitary mind, a world-wide heart,
To the lone Immortal's unshared work she rose.

In her mind, Savitri is '*solitary*', all alone, carrying a knowledge that no-one can share; but in her heart she is carrying the whole world, she is one with all nature, in sympathy with all beings. As an immortal being, she has come into the human form with a mission and she has work to do; so now, in the early morning, as she starts to wake up, she faces the '*unshared work*' which she alone can do. This is how she starts the day, rising to '*the lone Immortal's unshared work*'.

Then follows a description of her waking:

At first life grieved not in her burdened breast:
On the lap of earth's original somnolence
Inert, released into forgetfulness,
Prone it reposed, unconscious on mind's verge,
Obtuse and tranquil like the stone and star.

To start with, at the beginning of the process of waking up, the life part in her is not feeling grief, it is still sleeping; it is '*inert*', lying on the lap of the earth, the lap of matter. The '*lap*' is the space on the knees and thighs when sitting where a mother holds her child. The

life-force in Savitri is resting on the lap of the '*original somnolence*': the sleepiness of earth, the material principle. When we fall asleep at night perhaps the life-part in us lies in the lap of our mother earth who is also sleeping, unconscious; matter has not yet woken up and become conscious, it is still in the same sleepy state it has been in since the beginning of this creation, the '*original somnolence*'; and because the life-force is lying in the lap of matter it, like matter, is '*inert*'. Inertia is a basic principle of matter, which cannot move until something gives it a push; when we are asleep, the life-parts share the inertia of matter and are '*released into forgetfulness*'. Surely at no point in her waking day does Savitri forget about the coming loss of Satyavan; but when she falls into deep sleep, the life-parts of the body and the brain are set free from that memory, they are able to forget. So the life is resting: '*repose*' means 'rest', either like here as a verb, or as a noun. It is unconscious, on the very edge, the '*verge*' of mental consciousness; it is '*prone*', lying flat as we do when we sleep; and it is just as '*obtuse and tranquil*' as material objects such as stones and stars are. This word '*obtuse*' is used in geometry: where two lines or planes meet at an angle which is more than 90 degrees it is said to be '*obtuse*', as opposed to an acute angle, which is less than 90 degrees; the acute angle looks sharp, an obtuse angle looks blunt. We also use both of these words psychologically: someone who is acute is considered sharp, bright, intelligent; but if a person has difficulty in understanding things quickly, we may say that they are '*obtuse*', dull and stupid; but such people are not easily disturbed or upset, so they may seem relatively '*tranquil*', peaceful. A stone may lie peacefully in the same place, unmoving for centuries; the stars seem always the same to us, following their courses unmoved, unchanging, undisturbed by anxiety or emotion.

In a deep cleft of silence twixt two realms
She lay remote from grief, unsawn by care,

Nothing recalling of the sorrow here.

A '*cleft*' is a narrow crevice or ravine. Savitri's life-being is lying in '*a deep cleft*', an empty space between '*two realms*', two kingdoms, perhaps the outer awareness and the inner consciousness; there is a kind of gap between the two, '*a deep cleft of silence*'. '*Twixt*' means 'between'; nowadays we use this word only in poetry, not in ordinary speech. In that silent space, the life is far away, '*remote from grief, unsawn by care*'. A '*saw*' is a tool for cutting wood or stone, a metal blade with teeth. When we have troubles and anxieties, cares, worries, it may feel as if something is sawing away at us all the time. When Savitri is lying in that deep cleft of silence, there is no sawing going on because there is no memory; no part of her remembers the sorrow that is here in the waking world.

Then a slow faint remembrance shadowlike moved,
And sighing she laid her hand upon her bosom
And recognised the close and lingering ache,
Deep, quiet, old, made natural to its place,
But knew not why it was there nor whence it came.

Then memory starts to return slowly: there is a movement of consciousness, but it is '*faint*', unclear, like a shadow. She is not fully awake, but something begins to move, and with a sigh '*she laid her hand upon her bosom*': a hand moves to her heart, because something recognises that there is a pain there, an '*ache*'. It is close to her, it is '*lingering*': it remains, it does not go away, it is hanging close around her like a shadow, always there. It is not a very sharp intense pain: it is '*deep, quiet, old*'; it is '*natural to its place*'; it has been there such a long time that it seems to belong there, in her bosom, her heart; but because the mind has not yet woken up, the life-force does not know why that pain is there or where it has come from. '*Whence*' means 'from where'.

The Power that kindles mind was still withdrawn:
Heavy, unwilling were life's servitors
Like workers with no wages of delight;
Sullen, the torch of sense refused to burn;
The unassisted brain found not its past.
Only a vague earth-nature held the frame.

There is a Power of consciousness that '*kindles*' mind. 'To kindle' means 'to light a fire'; here, the fire of consciousness that is mind. For Savitri's body, waking up, that Power has not yet come to light the fire of mental consciousness. The '*servitors*', the servants and instruments of the life-force, are unwilling to start their work; they too are in a heavy sleep, they do not want to wake up, they are like reluctant workers who have '*no wages of delight*'. The senses need delight in order to feel motivated to work properly; if they do not get any delight, they are unwilling to work; the '*servitors*' which the poet mentions here are the senses and the brain; since that Power has not yet come to light the fire of consciousness, the senses do not want to start work. Our senses provide us with a kind of light, a '*torch*' with which to see in the darkness, but that torch is refusing to light up, it is '*sullen*'. A person who is '*sullen*' is not happy, they are feeling resentful and angry, so they are not willing to do what is expected of them. This word can also be used about a fire that is unwilling to blaze up. These lines remind me of what life used to be like in England, when the only heating was by coal or wood fires. In many stories about that time, you have the picture of the heroine sleeping and being woken by the maid who comes to light her fire first thing in the morning; if the servants are lazy, she may sleep a long time; sometimes the fire will not light easily, because the wood or the kindling is damp; then instead of a bright warm flame, you get a smoky '*sullen*' fire that will not blaze up. Because the senses do not light up, the physical brain has no help, no support, it still

cannot remember; supporting Savitri's body as she is lying there, is only the '*vague earth-nature*'. '*The frame*' means the body, the outer structure which is inhabited and used by the consciousness.

But now she stirred, her life shared the cosmic load.

At the summons of her body's voiceless call

Her strong far-winged spirit travelled back,

Back to the yoke of ignorance and fate,

Back to the labour and stress of mortal days,

Lighting a pathway through strange symbol dreams

Across the ebbing of the seas of sleep.

When Savitri moves, when she stirs, her life again becomes part of the universal life, the cosmic movement; and that little movement is a '*summons*', '*a voiceless call*' to her spirit, her consciousness: the movement of her body signals to the consciousness 'Now I am moving, it is time to wake up', and then '*her strong far-winged spirit*' returns. It has been far away in the subtle worlds; now it knows that it is time to return to the mortal body, so it travels back – back to all the loads and limitations of human life. It comes back to this '*yoke*', this load of '*ignorance and fate*', back to the '*labour and stress of mortal days*'. A yoke can be a wooden bar carried across the shoulders, joining two buckets or baskets so that they can be carried together; or it can be the frame that joins the bullock to the cart it has to pull; the idea in this word is 'joining': a yoke joins two things, holds them together, and in its origin, this old English word is connected with the Sanskrit word 'yoga'. Yoga links us to the Divine and is meant to bring us into union with the Divine. In the Bible, we read of Jesus saying 'My yoke is easy, my burden is light', meaning that his path to the Divine was easier to follow than other paths. But usually a yoke is something heavy; when we wear it we are carrying a heavy load. When Savitri's spirit rejoins her body, it takes up again '*the*

yoke of ignorance', of not-knowing, blindness, helplessness, and along with that the load of fate: subjection to the laws of matter, the universal laws, above all the law of death. Her '*far-winged spirit*', which has been travelling in other worlds and planes while her body slept, returns to take up again the load of all the effort, tension, stress, that fill our human days. As it returns to Savitri's body lying in a simple hut in the forest, her conscious spirit lights up a pathway '*through strange symbol dreams*'. Usually we remember only the dreams that come to us just before we wake up; perhaps these are memories of what our spirit has seen on its pathway back to our body. That pathway gets lit up by the consciousness, '*across the ebbing of the seas of sleep*'. This word '*ebbing*' is associated with the sea's tides. The tides mount, get higher, come further up onto the land, and then turn and start to ebb: gradually the waters draw back and expose more and more of the shore. Here there is the suggestion that as we sleep we are submerged in an ocean; as our consciousness returns and we begin to wake up, the '*seas of sleep*' ebb away and we wake up on the shore of another day.

Her house of Nature felt an unseen sway,
Illumined swiftly were life's darkened rooms,
And memory's casements opened on the hours
And the tired feet of thought approached her doors.

When her spirit comes back, this '*house of Nature*', her human body and the life in it, the frame that belongs to the earth, feels '*an unseen sway*'. '*Sway*' here means 'rule' or 'influence'; we say that a ruler, a king 'holds sway' over his country: he commands what happens there. The sleeping body, which has been left to itself, now feels that its ruling spirit has returned and is in command. Immediately all the dark rooms of the house light up and the brain remembers. '*Memory's casements*': '*casements*' are windows. In the picture I

mentioned before of the maids going around the house in the early morning trying to light the fires so that the people can wake and get up, the next thing that they do is to draw apart the curtains to let light in, and open the windows. The windows open onto the world outside the house, beyond the body itself; they let it know where it stands in relation to the world around, and to the passing of time; so when we wake up, it may take a few moments for us to remember where we are and why, what day it is and what we have to do. With memory, thought comes back; the mental being also has been wandering while the body and brain slept, but it does not return on strong far-flying wings like the spirit, the higher consciousness: it has '*tired feet*', and returns slowly.

All came back to her: Earth and Love and Doom,
The ancient disputants, encircled her
Like giant figures wrestling in the night:

When memory's casements open, everything comes back to her: Savitri remembers where she is, what day it is, what is going to happen. And then she is surrounded by these presences, '*like giant figures wrestling in the night*'. They are struggling and fighting in the darkness, encircling her, she is at the centre of their struggle. There are three of them: '*Earth*': Savitri has come to save the earth and men, but Earth also represents all the resistances as well as all the potentialities of Matter; '*Love*': she has come embodying Divine Love, the love that longs to save; and she is in love with Satyavan, who represents the soul of mankind; but because all this is being acted out in the human world, she and the earth and Satyavan are all threatened by '*Doom*', the law of Death. This is not just a personal struggle for two human beings: these are great cosmic principles and they are '*ancient disputants*', they have been '*wrestling*', opposing each other, trying to gain the upper hand, for a very long

time.

The godheads from the dim Inconscient born
Awoke to struggle and the pang divine,
And in the shadow of her flaming heart,
At the sombre centre of the dire debate,
A guardian of the unconsolated abyss
Inheriting the long agony of the globe,
A stone-still figure of high and godlike Pain
Stared into Space with fixed regardless eyes
That saw grief's timeless depths but not life's goal.

These '*giant figures*' of Earth and Love and Doom, are '*godheads*', individualised aspects of the Supreme, which have been born from the '*dim Inconscient*', from the darkness, from the night. Now as Savitri wakes up, they wake up too: to their struggle, and to the '*pang divine*', the divine pain of divided consciousness, the pain of love in the ignorance. The poet speaks of Savitri's heart as '*flaming*', like a fire: full of heat and light and energy and purifying intensity; a fire in the darkness is surrounded by shadows: in the shadow of her heart lies the '*sombre*', dark, centre of that dreadful struggle, that '*dire debate*' which is going on and on between those giant figures. At the centre of the darkness and the debate there is another godhead: '*A stone-still figure of high and godlike Pain*', like a statue of Pain. There is something noble about it; it is '*high*' and '*godlike*'. It too is a '*guardian*', keeping safe '*the unconsolated abyss*': all the deep darkness that has never been touched by light and love and comfort. 'To console' someone means to comfort them, to give them sympathy, help them bear their troubles. We can only console someone by taking away their grief; in the lower depths there is so much suffering, so much grief that is '*unconsolated*'. This figure is the guardian and representative of all that pain; it has inherited '*the*

long agony of the globe', all the suffering that has ever been on our earth since the very beginning; there he is, staring into Space '*with fixed regardless eyes*', eyes that are not really looking. Sri Aurobindo is using the French sense of the word '*regard*' meaning a look, a gaze, a way of seeing. These eyes do not see properly, they can only see the timeless depths of grief; they do not see where life is going to, the goal towards which all this suffering is leading; that might make the suffering worthwhile, might console him, but he cannot see '*life's goal*'.

Afflicted by his harsh divinity,
Bound to his throne, he waited unappeased
The daily oblation of her unwept tears.

This figure of Pain is a '*divinity*', a divine being, but a '*harsh*', cruel one; at the same time he suffers from his role, he is '*afflicted*' by it; he is '*bound to his throne*', he cannot escape from it. This demanding god is waiting for the '*daily oblation*', the daily offering or sacrifice of Savitri's tears: the tears that she will not weep, that she will not let anyone see, the tears that express her suffering. That is the worship, the offering that he is waiting for, '*unappeased*', unsatisfied. Some sacrifices are made in the hope of appeasing a high being who is displeased with you for some reason; when you have performed your penance long enough, perhaps you can be forgiven or spared the results of that displeasure; but this guardian of the world's pain cannot be appeased: however many unwept tears Savitri suffers or offers, for however many days, it will not be enough to satisfy that being of Pain, that guardian and representative of all the pain of the universe.

All the fierce question of man's hours relived.
The sacrifice of suffering and desire
Earth offers to the immortal Ecstasy

Began again beneath the eternal Hand.

'All the fierce question of man's hours': Why are we here? And why must it be so painful? When Savitri wakes up, this riddle of human life becomes alive again; it is a *'fierce question'*, one that is full of intensity, even anger: Why? Why? Why must it be like this? Sri Aurobindo says that all the suffering and desire which human beings experience is a *'sacrifice'* that *'Earth offers to the immortal Ecstasy'*, the immortal Delight, the Ananda of the Supreme. Earth is offering this special kind of delight, of *rasa*, a mixture of suffering and desire, to the infinite Ananda which upholds the universe; that offering begins again as earth-beings wake up to the first light of day. Above them is the eternal Hand stretched out in sanction, saying 'Yes' to all this.

Awake she endured the moments' serried march
And looked on this green smiling dangerous world,
And heard the ignorant cry of living things.

Now Savitri is fully awake; and once she is awake, she endures, she has to bear the pain of *'the moments' serried march'*; one after another the moments come, with no spaces between them. *'Serried'* means 'packed closely together'. The moments are marching on like an army, in close ranks, moving on and on towards the terrible moment that she is dreading. She has to endure this. She opens her eyes and looks out at the forest around her, the beautiful green smiling world that is also so full of danger. She hears all the animals and birds calling out, acclaiming their portion of ephemeral joy with *'the ignorant cry of living things.'*

Amid the trivial sounds, the unchanging scene
Her soul arose confronting Time and Fate.

Surrounded by the *'trivial sounds'* of the forest, those unimportant,

insignificant noises, and '*the unchanging scene*' – for what she can see is what she sees every day, it is the same as always – her soul rises up erect, '*confronting Time and Fate*'. '*Confronting*' means 'looking something directly in the face, ready to deal with it'. She knows that today she will have to face the outcome of the unstoppable passage of Time and Fate, the event which the forward movement of time is inevitably going to bring.

Immobile in herself, she gathered force.

This was the day when Satyavan must die.

'She gathered force', collecting her soul-strength, 'immobile', unmoving, because she knows that this is 'the day when Satyavan must die'. It is fixed, destined and cannot be avoided: this is the Fate, the Doom which she must confront in order to fulfil her mission.

End of Canto One

Canto Two

The Issue

Section 1, lines 1 to 185

In the previous chapter, we saw Savitri waking up on the morning when, as she alone knows, '*Satyavan must die*'. As she woke, '*she gathered force*': she needed all her strength to face this momentous day. Now we shall see her remembering everything in her life that has led up to this moment.

Awhile, withdrawn in secret fields of thought,
Her mind moved in a many-imaged past
That lived again and saw its end approach:
Dying, it lived imperishably in her;
Transient and vanishing from transient eyes,
Invisible, a fateful ghost of self,
It bore the future on its phantom breast.

Savitri's mind, for a time, '*awhile*', is '*withdrawn*', drawn inwards, concentrated within herself, '*in secret fields of thought*', moving '*in a many-imaged past*': she is remembering many pictures, many images from the course of her life. That happens to us sometimes: we wander in the fields of memory and it is as if the past is happening again; but there is also the consciousness that something is coming to an end. Whatever has happened to Savitri in the past is going to come to an end now with the death of Satyavan; so the past is dying, but it lives on '*imperishably*' in her memory: it cannot die completely because she is holding it in her consciousness. That past is '*transient*', passing, '*vanishing from transient eyes*': things happen and pass so that our physical eyes do not see them again; the past is invisible, but it remains full of fate and significance, determining the future, '*a ghost of self*'. A '*ghost*' is a subtle form of something or someone that has died. The remembered past is like a ghost of itself and herself, but it is '*fateful*': the past determines the future, carrying

the future '*on its phantom breast*'. '*Phantom*' is another word for '*ghost*', an almost invisible form; often it is used as a noun but here Sri Aurobindo uses it as an adjective meaning '*ghostly*'. Savitri remembers the past that has gone by and sees that it is carrying the future on its breast, as if on the surface of a river.

Along the fleeting event's far-backward trail
Regressed the stream of the insistent hours,
And on the bank of the mysterious flood
Peopled with well-loved forms now seen no more
And the subtle images of things that were,
Her witness spirit stood reviewing Time.

Time is like a river or stream of hours and moments; each event, every happening, has a '*trail*' stretching far back into the past; events are '*fleeting*': they happen in a brief time and are gone; but they leave a trail, carried along by the stream of hours. We cannot stop the stream of time, it is '*insistent*', unstoppable, flowing on and on, stretching away back into the past, regressing, going backwards. Savitri is standing on the bank of that stream and observing it: '*her witness spirit stood reviewing Time*.' That '*mysterious flood*', the river of the remembered past, is '*Peopled with well-loved forms, now seen no more*'. She can remember back to her childhood: the palace she grew up in, her family, all the people she does not see any more, all the '*well-loved forms*'. This '*many-imaged past*' is also peopled with '*the subtle images of things that were*': things that happened in the past persist as '*subtle images*' in the memory and Savitri watches them all flowing along like a river.

All that she once had hoped and dreamed and been,
Flew past her eagle-winged through memory's skies.

She sees everything she has been in the course of her life up to this point, everything that she has hoped for and dreamed of, flying past

her 'eagle-winged', on very powerful wings, through the skies of memory.

As in a many-hued flaming inner dawn,
Her life's broad highways and its sweet bypaths
Lay mapped to her sun-clear recording view,
From the bright country of her childhood's days
And the blue mountains of her soaring youth
And the paradise groves and peacock wings of Love
To joy clutched under the silent shadow of doom
In a last turn where heaven raced with hell.
Twelve passionate months led in a day of fate.

The past is brightly and colourfully lit up in her memory '*as in a many-hued inner dawn*' so that she sees as if on a map the '*broad highways*' of her life, its main lines, as well as '*its sweet bypaths*', the little lanes, the small, apparently unimportant but very sweet things that have happened; she can see it all in full detail with her '*sun-clear recording view*', starting from '*the bright country of her childhood's days*' and becoming more adventurous as she grew up: '*the blue mountains of her soaring youth*'. '*Soaring*' is what a bird does when it flies up very high, as if effortlessly; in her youth she had this soaring adventurous spirit. And then she met Satyavan, and experienced with him '*the paradise groves and peacock wings of Love*'. '*Groves*' are clearings in the forest. Later in this canto Sri Aurobindo will describe the beautiful scenery where she lived with Satyavan in the forest, full of glowing colours like those in the shimmering tail and wings of a peacock. Then came the time when she had to '*clutch*' her joy, to hold it tight, knowing that Satyavan is doomed to die. She held onto the joy of being with him '*under the silent shadow of doom*' '*in a last turn*' on the road of her life, where the heaven of being with him and the hell of knowing that he must die have been

racing along together side by side. The '*twelve passionate months*' that she has spent with Satyavan have all been leading up to this '*day of fate*', this day when he must die, and to this moment when she is waking up and remembering everything that has happened to her in the past.

Then Sri Aurobindo makes a general statement:

An absolute supernatural darkness falls
On man sometimes when he draws near to God:
An hour arrives when fail all Nature's means;
Forced out from the protecting Ignorance
And flung back on his naked primal need,
He at length must cast from him his surface soul
And be the ungarbed entity within:
That hour had fallen now on Savitri.

This is an experience which people who have come close to God have spoken about: they had to pass through '*an absolute supernatural darkness*' much deeper than the darkness of the physical night: an hour when '*all Nature's means*' fail, when nothing in the world can give any help. That moment happens to the chosen soul when it is '*forced out of the protecting ignorance*', out of the ordinary ignorant consciousness which gives a certain protection, and is flung back onto its '*naked primal need*': '*primal*' means 'original', 'basic', what has been since the very beginning. What we really need is contact with the Divine; when everything else fails or is taken away, that is the only thing that can help and heal. Then we have to cast off our '*surface soul*'. Sri Aurobindo has told us that we have two souls: our vital and mental surface soul which serves us in ordinary life; and deep behind it the true, essential entity. In the extreme moments '*when fail all Nature's means*' we have to become that '*ungarbed entity within*'. '*Ungarbed*' means 'without any

covering'. The '*primal need*' is '*naked*', and when at last we feel it, we have to find our true soul, also '*ungarbed*', without any covering or veil. '*That hour had fallen now on Savitri*'. The day has come. There is nobody to help her. Even the heavens seem to be indifferent and closed. She has to discover her own divine inner strength.

A point she had reached where life must be in vain
Or, in her unborn element awake,
Her will must cancel her body's destiny.

She had come to a moment where her whole life will be without significance, meaningless, useless, unless she can wake up in '*her unborn element*', in her true immortal self. Only its will is strong enough to '*cancel her body's destiny*'. The Mother has said that we have many different destinies: our body has a destiny, due to heredity and the circumstances in which we are born, but there are also other parts of our being; the destiny of our life being, our vital being, can interfere with the body's destiny, either to help it or to harm it. Even if we have a good destiny for our body, for a strong, vigorous, long life, if we indulge in all kinds of bad vital habits they will interfere with the body's destiny; similarly we have a mental destiny, built up during our previous lives or formations that we have picked up as we came into the body or in the course of our life; that too has its effect. As a human being, Savitri has this destiny: she is born to be married to Satyavan and to face his death. This is her body's destiny. Is it possible for her to connect with her immortal self so that a greater will from there can come and cancel the destiny of her body?

For only the unborn spirit's timeless power
Can lift the yoke imposed by birth in Time.

That is what she must do, because '*only the unborn spirit's timeless power*', the eternal power of the spirit which is free from time, can

'lift the yoke imposed by birth in Time.' When we are born into this world of time and space, certain conditions are laid on us and only our *'unborn spirit'* is strong enough to remove or change those conditions — or perhaps take advantage of them for our growth.

Only the Self that builds this figure of self
Can rase the fixed interminable line
That joins these changing names, these numberless lives,
These new oblivious personalities
And keeps still lurking in our conscious acts
The trail of old forgotten thoughts and deeds,
Disown the legacy of our buried selves,
The burdensome heirship to our vanished forms
Accepted blindly by the body and soul.

The Self, the one Self, is the only power that can change destiny. It builds all these little figures of itself, our outer individualities; and only that one power can *'rase'* or erase the *'fixed, interminable line'*, the endless line which joins all our *'numberless lives'*. In each life we have a different name, a different personality. Those personalities are *'oblivious'*, they have completely forgotten what happened in the previous lives; but there is a line connecting them all, which determines the destiny of our body in the present life. Only the one Self which is beyond all the changes of time can erase that line which *'keeps still lurking'*, hiding like an animal in the bush or a thief outside the house, hiding *'in our conscious acts'* things that are carried over from other lives: *'the trail of old forgotten things'* that we have thought and done in the past. Those *'old forgotten things'* are *'a legacy of our buried selves'*, from our past selves; a *'legacy'* is something that you inherit from someone in your family when they pass away; we also inherit things from our own actions in other lives in the past, from *'our buried selves'*, *'our vanished forms'*. That it

is '*a burdensome heirship*'. An 'heir' is the one who inherits; sometimes what we inherit is a burden, a load; the body and soul accept this burden blindly, without realizing it; only our true Self beyond space and time can '*disown*' that legacy, refuse to accept it. That is what Savitri has to do now.

An episode in an unremembered tale,
Its beginning lost, its motive and plot concealed,
A once living story has prepared and made
Our present fate, child of past energies.

There is an old story that we do not remember, the '*unremembered tale*' of all our '*vanished forms*', '*our buried selves*'. We are only aware of the '*episode*' we are experiencing now. Television dramas unroll through the course of many '*episodes*'; in the Mahabarata there are many separate stories, episodes forming part of the vaster overall story; the life we are living now is only one episode in a much longer tale, but we have forgotten all the rest: its beginning is lost so '*its motive and plot*' are '*concealed*': the purpose and course of the '*unremembered tale*' are hidden from us, because we have forgotten all that went before, all that explains and determines what is happening to us now, the motive or moving force that has prepared '*our present fate*'. Our present fate is the child born from all those past energies. That '*once-living story*' has prepared this episode, and the things that will happen to us in this life.

The fixity of the cosmic sequences
Fastened with hidden inevitable links
She must disrupt, dislodge by her soul's force
Her past, a block on the Immortal's road,
Make a rased ground and shape anew her fate.

What Savitri must do is to '*disrupt*', to break this chain of events, '*the fixity of the cosmic sequences*', these links in the chain, following

one after the other in a sequence, an order that is fixed and unchangeable, *'fastened with hidden inevitable links'*. She has to *'disrupt'* that, break it up. By *'her soul's force'*, the strength of her soul, she has to *'dislodge'*, to move out of her way the consequences of all that has happened in her past. It is as if a huge stone is blocking her path; she has to find a way to move it; she has to make *'a rased ground'*, a space that is clear and smooth, so that she can reshape her fate in a new form.

A colloquy of the original Gods
Meeting upon the borders of the unknown,
Her soul's debate with embodied Nothingness
Must be wrestled out on a dangerous dim background:
Her being must confront its formless Cause,
Against the universe weigh its single self.

A *'colloquy'* is a conversation, a dialogue. Sri Aurobindo tells us that the debate or discussion or argument between Savitri's soul and *'embodied Nothingness'*, the figure of Death which she has to confront, is *'a colloquy of the original Gods'*. It is as if Death is representing the Eternal No and Savitri is representing the Eternal Yes. They will meet *'upon the borders of the unknown'*. The debate or argument between these opposing powers has to be *'wrestled out on a dangerous dim background'*; *'Her being must confront its formless cause'*: Savitri has to face her source which is beyond form, beyond the manifestation, which has caused her to exist. She must weigh her single, small, individual human self against the whole universe as if in a balance: Savitri, one human woman, on one side, on the other the laws of the universe. This is a very profound sentence that carries in it a key to the whole message of the poem, but we will not go into the deeper meaning of it now.

On the bare peak where Self is alone with Nought

And life has no sense and love no place to stand,
She must plead her case upon extinction's verge,
In the world's death-cave uphold life's helpless claim
And vindicate her right to be and love.

We imagine a bare mountain top *'where Self is alone with Nought'*, with Nothingness; this is not an ordinary material mountain top, but the summit, the highest level of universal existence. There *'life has no sense'*, neither sense perception nor meaning; on that bare summit there is no place for love to stand. Savitri has to *'plead her case'* as if in a court of law: to tell her side of the story, how she sees it, what she wants to happen, on the very edge, the *'verge'* of *'extinction'*, of ceasing to exist. *'In the world's death-cave'* she has to *'uphold life's helpless claim'*. What right has Life to exist in this universe of dead matter? She has to *'vindicate her right to be and love.'* To *'vindicate'* means to prove that you are right or have a right: Savitri has to justify, prove her right to exist and to love. When everyone thinks you are guilty or wrong but then you are proven right or innocent, you are *'vindicated'*: it is proved that you have right on your side.

Altered must be Nature's harsh economy;
Acquittance she must win from her past's bond,
An old account of suffering exhaust,
Strike out from Time the soul's long compound debt
And the heavy servitudes of the Karmic Gods,
The slow revenge of unforgiving Law
And the deep need of universal pain
And hard sacrifice and tragic consequence.

'Economy': when we use this word we are usually thinking about money, finances, but here it refers to the balance of things in Nature. In Nature, if you are born you must die; if you have some

happiness, then you will have some suffering too. What Savitri is trying, wanting and wishing to do is to alter this harsh economy of Nature. In order to do so, she must become free from a bond or a debt from her past. '*Acquittance*' means becoming free from a debt or a contract. Hanging over from the past there is '*an old account of suffering*' which must be paid off, exhausted, finished. Sri Aurobindo says it is as if the soul has a long debt which is getting bigger and bigger. If you borrow some money, you have to pay interest on it for every month until it is repaid; if you cannot manage to pay the money back, the debt gets bigger and bigger and bigger: a '*compound debt*' means that interest has to be paid on the interest as well as on the original amount you borrowed. If you cannot pay, you may have to become a bonded labourer to try to work off your debt; so Sri Aurobindo refers to '*the heavy servitudes of the Karmic Gods*': we human beings are as if bound in service to those cosmic powers who look after the laws of the consequences of the past. There is an unforgiving karmic law in nature, and those karmic gods are always taking their '*slow revenge*', giving punishment for what we have done in the past. He says too that there is a deep need of pain in this universe. There is a need for sacrifice and '*tragic consequence*'. In order to save Satyavan, Savitri will have to '*strike out Time's long compound debt*': alter the economy of Nature to get the debt cancelled and win acquittance from bondage to the Law of Karma. It is a tremendous task.

Out of a timeless barrier she must break,
Penetrate with her thinking depths the Void's monstrous hush,
Look into the lonely eyes of immortal Death
And with her nude spirit measure the Infinite's night.

That task cannot be done here in our physical world. She has to break out of the barrier of the manifestation, go beyond time, and

with her individual consciousness, '*her thinking depths*', penetrate into the terrible silence of the Emptiness, and look into the eyes of Death, Death who is a god and immortal. All alone, with her own naked spirit she must measure how vast, how wide and deep that limitless night of the Infinite is.

The great and dolorous moment now was close.

A mailed battalion marching to its doom,

The last long days went by with heavy tramp,

Long but too soon to pass, too near the end.

'*The great and dolorous moment*', the moment full of sorrow and pain when Satyavan must leave his body, is close now. Savitri has been counting the days and the hours. '*The last long days*' have passed by '*with a heavy tramp*', like a troop of soldiers. A '*battalion*' is a unit in the army; this battalion is mailed, wearing heavy armour like a group of soldiers fully ready for battle, knowing that they are doomed to die. These last days have felt very long, for time always seems to lengthen out when we are waiting for something to happen; but at the same time they have passed too quickly, because what she is expecting is the end of her life with Satyavan; that end is too near and approaching too quickly, even though the hours pass slowly.

Alone amid the many faces loved,

Aware among unknowing happy hearts,

Her armoured spirit kept watch upon the hours

Listening for a foreseen tremendous step

In the closed beauty of the inhuman wilds.

There are people around her: Satyavan and his family, and hermits in the woods; but she is alone because she has a foreknowledge in her heart that she cannot share; so there she is, alone among the many faces of those she loves. She is aware, she is the only one who

is aware amongst all the others; they are happy because they do not know, they are '*unknowing*'. Narad spoke to her parents, but his prophecy has not been told to Satyavan's family at all. So her spirit is on guard, '*armoured*', keeping watch over the passage of time, always listening for the '*foreseen tremendous step*' of approaching Death which she knows will come '*in the closed beauty of the inhuman wilds*'. They are in a forest, a secluded wilderness away from the normal lives of men.

A combatant in silent dreadful lists,
The world unknowing, for the world she stood:
No helper had she save the Strength within;
There was no witness of terrestrial eyes;
The Gods above and Nature sole below
Were the spectators of that mighty strife.

Savitri is going to have to fight: she is '*a combatant*', one who fights. She is going to fight '*in silent dreadful lists*'. '*Lists*' is a word from Latin which means a space marked out for a contest or combat between two people; you might have seen pictures of knights in armour charging at each other on horseback; the marked-out space where they fight is a '*lists*'. In ancient times, if there were two equally matched armies sometimes the leaders would decide that rather than engaging in a deadly battle which neither of them could be sure to win, instead each army should choose a champion and those two champions would fight each other in single combat; the one who prevailed would win the battle for his side. The armies would stand around a '*lists*' where the two would fight. It is something like that for Savitri. She is going to fight in single combat on behalf of the world. The world does not know that she is fighting this battle: '*The world unknowing, for the world she stood*'. She is the champion of the world against the force of Death and her only

helper is the divine Strength within. There are no earthly eyes to witness this combat; the Gods above and Earth-Nature below are the only '*spectators of this mighty strife*', the contest against the forces of negativity and dissolution that Savitri must face.

Around her were the austere sky-pointing hills,
And the green murmurous broad deep-thoughted woods
Muttered incessantly their muffled spell.

Savitri is living in the foothills of the Himalayas. All around her are high, '*sky-pointing*' hills; they are '*austere*' because on the peaks there are no trees, only bare rock; she is living in the midst of '*green murmurous broad deep-thoughted woods*' which seem to be indrawn, musing in some deep state of thought and softly muttering '*their muffled spell*'. When someone mutters, we can tell that they are saying something, but cannot hear clearly what they are saying; in the woods this muttering goes on '*incessantly*', all the time, without stopping, on and on and on; they are muttering a '*spell*', a mantra, a magic formula, but it is '*muffled*', it cannot be heard distinctly. If you put your hand over your mouth when you speak, your words are '*muffled*'. Nevertheless the spell has its effect, even if no words are heard: the hills and the woods wrap Savitri in their special atmosphere of bareness, simplicity and deep thought.

A dense magnificent coloured self-wrapped life
Draped in the leaves' vivid emerald monotone
And set with chequered sunbeams and blithe flowers
Immured her destiny's secluded scene.

In just a few words, Sri Aurobindo evokes the beauty of the Himalayan forests and makes us think of their rich life of beautiful flowers and birds, trees and animals with their lovely colours. A forest is full of life, and all the living things are packed closely together and interconnected in a '*self-wrapped life*' that is self-

absorbed, not looking outward, not aware of the rest of the world, the human world. That life wears a vivid green robe, all one colour, a '*monotone*', the emerald colour of the leaves; as if embroidered on the robe, here and there are seen the light of '*chequered sunbeams*' contrasting brightly with darker shade, and '*blithe flowers*'. '*Blithe*' means happy and carefree. '*Immured*' means surrounded with a wall, enclosed. Hermits sometimes used to have themselves '*immured*', walled up in a cave where they could not be disturbed in their austerities: the forests and hills provide a protective enclosure where Savitri's momentous destiny can take place in this isolated setting.

There had she grown to the stature of her spirit:
The genius of titanic silences
Steeping her soul in its wide loneliness
Had shown to her her self's bare reality
And mated her with her environment.

In this place, enclosed and secluded in the forest, Savitri has grown to the full '*stature of her spirit*': '*stature*' means 'height'. Here her spirit has grown to its full maturity and scope. Sri Aurobindo is telling us that the secluded forest environment has helped her in that growth. In these huge '*titanic silences*' there is a spirit, a '*genius*', which has steeped her soul in that '*wide loneliness*'. If you want to dye some cloth, you will 'steep' it, put it into a vessel with water and dye; or before cooking dried beans, we steep them in water for some hours. Here, Savitri's soul has soaked up, absorbed and become coloured by the silence and vastness of the austere hills and the '*deep-thoughted woods*'. The spirit or genius of that silence and loneliness and vastness has shown to her the bare essential reality of herself. Beyond all the surface appearances — first as princess of Madra, living with her parents, then later alone in the forest —

something much deeper and truer has come to her in that silent atmosphere and has '*mated her with her environment*'. She has grown as vast, as silent and patient as that wonderful environment up in the Himalayan foothills.

Its solitude greatedened her human hours
With a background of the eternal and unique.

The '*solitude*' and isolation of this environment has made '*her human hours*' greater against a background of what is '*eternal and unique*', the infinite oneness.

A force of spare direct necessity
Reduced the heavy framework of man's days
And his overburdening mass of outward needs
To a first thin strip of simple animal wants,
And the mighty wildness of the primitive earth
And the brooding multitude of patient trees
And the musing sapphire leisure of the sky
And the solemn weight of the slowly-passing months
Had left in her deep room for thought and God.

In daily life, so much of our energy and attention are taken up with the '*heavy framework of man's days*', and the '*overburdening mass of outward needs*'. In that simple environment, '*a force of spare direct necessity*' ensured only the most basic needs. Life there was '*spare*', with nothing superfluous, only what was directly necessary. Think of '*the heavy framework*' of our days: all the things we have to do just to keep things running, and all the things we think that we need. In the forest environment, all this has been taken away, reduced to '*a first thin strip of simple animal wants*': water, simple food, shelter, then the work of the day is done; that leaves a lot of time to absorb the deep and peaceful atmosphere: '*the mighty wildness of the primitive earth*' and '*the brooding multitude of patient trees*', so many of

them, patiently living their slow vegetable life, '*and the musing sapphire leisure of the sky*', the sky that does not have to struggle and strive; it is just there, at ease, that peaceful blue expanse which is as if in a muse, a meditation; '*and the solemn weight of the slowly-passing months*', one after the other, slowly passing. All this has provided Savitri with '*deep room for thought*', for inner exploration and for feeling the divine presence all around her, enabling her spirit to grow to its full stature and maturity.

There was her drama's radiant prologue lived.
A spot for the eternal's tread on earth
Set in the cloistral yearning of the woods
And watched by the aspiration of the peaks
Appeared through an aureate opening in Time,
Where stillness listening felt the unspoken word
And the hours forgot to pass towards grief and change.

The '*prologue*' to Savitri's drama was lived out in this forest environment. A '*prologue*' is a preface or preparatory introduction before the drama starts. That prologue was the meeting of Savitri and Satyavan. This '*spot*' is a small clearing in the woods where the eternal can set foot on the earth; it is set like a jewel amidst '*the cloistral yearning of the woods*'. '*Yearning*' means longing, aspiration for something. '*Cloistral*' is an adjective from the noun '*cloister*'; in architecture a cloister is the technical term for a walled courtyard with a garden, often with a fountain, and a covered area all around where people can walk and sit and study; it is a feature of a monastery or abbey, so the word '*cloister*' has come to mean an enclosed place where one can go to leave the world and dedicate oneself to the search for the divine. The surrounding mountain peaks are also trying to reach heaven, and they are watching this spot. As if flooded with sunlight, this place '*appeared through an*

aureate opening in Time', as if Time opened up and revealed the space where the prologue to Savitri's drama is to be played out. '*Aureate*' means golden, from the Latin word for gold, *aureus*. This spot and this moment are so still and silent that '*the unspoken word*' can be heard, an indication of something that has not yet manifested; '*the hours forgot to pass towards grief and change*': time stood still in that golden moment when Savitri and Satyavan first met.

Here with the suddenness divine advents have,
Repeating the marvel of the first descent,
Changing to rapture the dull earthly round,
Love came to her hiding the shadow, Death.

In that wonderful spot in the forest she sees Satyavan, and very suddenly and unexpectedly, like a divine advent, the arrival of a god, Love comes to her. Sri Aurobindo says this advent is like a repetition of the marvel and miracle of the very first descent, when creation began. The '*dull earthly round*' of ordinary human time is suddenly turned into miracle and rapture. Love came to her, and at the time she did not see that he was hiding a shadow, that behind Love, behind all the delight and miracle of that first meeting with Satyavan, there was hidden the shadow of Death which she would have to face.

Well might he find in her his perfect shrine.

'*He*' here is Love, the great unsatisfied godhead; '*well might*' is an idiom which means correct, suitable, justified and appropriate. Sri Aurobindo says that it is appropriate that Love should find in Savitri '*his perfect shrine*'. A '*shrine*' is a place where a divinity can live. The god of love finds in Savitri the perfect home. Why is Savitri such a perfect shrine for the god of love?

Since first the earth-being's heavenward growth began,

Through all the long ordeal of the race,
Never a rarer creature bore his shaft,
That burning test of the godhead in our parts,
A lightning from the heights on our abyss.

From the very beginning of evolution when '*the earth-being's heavenward growth began*' ('-ward' at the end of a word means 'in the direction of', so '*heavenward*' means towards heaven, in the direction of heaven), '*through all the long ordeal of the race*', through the many tests and trials and experiences that the human race has passed through, '*never a rarer creature bore his shaft*'. The god of Love shoots you with an arrow, a '*shaft*', to waken love in your heart. The arrow of love is a '*burning test of the godhead in our parts*': it is a test of how far our soul and our nature have developed on our heavenward journey. It comes like a stroke of '*lightning from the heights*', from the heavenly ranges of consciousness, '*to our abyss*'. Here we are deep in the darkness; love comes, and something divine wakes up in us. Usually, for most human beings, that divine awakening does not last very long because of our impurities and imperfections and limitations, but Savitri is different: in all the history of humanity there has never been anyone purer or better fitted to bear the burning shaft of Love.

All in her pointed to a nobler kind.
Near to earth's wideness, intimate with heaven,
Exalted and swift her young large-visioned spirit
Voyaging through worlds of splendour and of calm
Overflew the ways of Thought to unborn things.

Everything in Savitri is pointing to '*a nobler kind*', a higher and greater species; '*kind*' here means species, or race. Now the poet is going to describe each aspect of Savitri's nature and show us how they point to a nobler kind and make her fit to be the perfect shrine

where Love can dwell. He starts with the highest part, her spirit. Her spirit is near to the wideness of the earth but it is also close to heaven; it is young, full of youthful enthusiasm and energy; and it is '*large-visioned*', with a wide scope of vision; it is '*exalted*' lifted up high, and '*swift*', it moves very rapidly; it travels through other worlds, '*worlds of splendour and of calm*'; with all these qualities, it is like a great winged being that flies very high and swiftly, far beyond the mind: it '*overflowed the ways of Thought to unborn things*'.

Ardent was her self-poised unstumbling will;
Her mind, a sea of white sincerity,
Passionate in flow, had not one turbid wave.

Two more aspects of Savitri's nature: her will and her mind; her will is '*ardent*', intense and powerful, '*self-poised*', balanced and clear, and '*unstumbling*'. The problem about our will is that it stumbles all the time because we cannot see where we are going. Her will is '*self-poised*', balanced in itself, not influenced by things from outside, and '*unstumbling*', sure-footed: she always wills the right thing. This is possible because her mind is absolutely pure, '*a sea of white sincerity*'; the will is likely to stumble if the slightest insincerity creeps in; but when the mind is '*a sea of white sincerity*' then the will can be pure too. Savitri's mind is also '*passionate in flow*'. Throughout the poem, Sri Aurobindo is always emphasizing the intensity, the passion, the pure flame that is in Savitri. In the '*sea of white sincerity*' and the passionate flow of her mind there was '*not one turbid wave*': '*turbid*' means muddy and troubled, as when waves have stirred up something dark and ugly from the depths; although Savitri's mind is '*passionate in flow*' it remains absolutely clear and pure.

Then the poet describes Savitri's heart in a very beautiful and complex image:

As in a mystic and dynamic dance

A priestess of immaculate ecstasies
Inspired and ruled from Truth's revealing vault
Moves in some prophet cavern of the gods,
A heart of silence in the hands of joy
Inhabited with rich creative beats
A body like a parable of dawn
That seemed a niche for veiled divinity
Or golden temple-door to things beyond.

It is the image of an oracle. Several times in the poem Sri Aurobindo refers to the oracle of Delphi in Greece at the shrine of Apollo, the god of the Sun, poetry, music and inspiration. There, if one wanted to have an answer to an important question, it was put to a priestess who sat in a cavern, an underground cave within the temple. She used to sit on a special three-legged seat, a *'tripod'*. She would go into trance and make sounds, and a priest would interpret the sounds and give the answer to the question. Here Sri Aurobindo says that the oracle, the divine revelation, is given in the form of a dance. The priestess is *'inspired and ruled from Truth's revealing vault'*; she receives true inspirations, and expresses them in the form of a dance, *'a mystic and dynamic dance'*. *'Immaculate'* means pure, without any stain or imperfection. A *'vault'* is a curved roof or ceiling. The priestess *'moves in some prophet cavern of the gods'*, a cavern or cave where she receives divine messages and expresses them in her dance. These are prophetic revelations, telling of things to come. Savitri's heart is like that: it is dancing to the rhythms of a higher revealing truth; and it is *'a heart of silence'* held *'in the hands of joy'*. It is beating, as our hearts beat, and its beats are rich and creative; it is inhabiting, living inside, a body which is like *'a parable of dawn'*. A *'parable'* is a simple story that conveys a deep truth. Savitri's very body expresses something of the new light that is to come; it is *'a niche for veiled divinity'*. A niche is a small recess where

the image of a deity is kept; but in this case the divinity is 'veiled', covered up, all we can see is the niche. Her body is also like a beautiful golden door to a temple; when we see that golden door we can sense that behind it lies the divine presence. Even her most external appearance gives an indication of the heart that is moving rhythmically within and telling of marvellous things to come in the future.

Then Sri Aurobindo tells us about the way that Savitri's body moves:

Immortal rhythms swayed in her time-born steps;
Her look, her smile awoke celestial sense
Even in earth-stuff, and their intense delight
Poured a supernal beauty on men's lives.

As she moves, there is something divine about the rhythm of her movement. As a human being, Savitri is moving in time, but '*immortal rhythms*' are expressed in the way that she moves. '*Her look, her smile awoke celestial sense*': when people see her look and her smile, even in their human nerves and senses a heavenly thrill wakes up, and the intense delight of seeing her pours '*a supernal beauty*' on the lives of people around her. '*Supernal*' means sublime or heavenly. That is what happened to the people who were privileged to be with the Mother, who saw her as she was moving around in the Ashram: her look and her smile poured '*a supernal beauty*', a beauty from higher planes, onto their lives. Savitri's smile and the way that she looks give a thrill of delight. They wake up '*celestial sense*', the way that divine beings feel, even in '*earthly stuff*'; usually the substance of our bodies cannot perceive or respond to such delight, but those who saw her had this experience. When we read these lines we cannot help thinking of the Mother in Pondicherry.

A wide self-giving was her native act;
A magnanimity as of sea or sky
Enveloped with its greatness all that came
And gave a sense as of a greatened world:
Her kindly care was a sweet temperate sun,
Her high passion a blue heaven's equipoise.

'*A wide self-giving*' was Savitri's natural way of being: she was ready to give herself to everybody with a '*magnanimity*', a generosity, as wide and vast as the sea or the sky, a wide self-giving that '*enveloped with its greatness*' everything and everyone that came into contact with her, and gave a sense to all around her that the world itself had become a greater place. Her '*kindly care*', her solicitude, taking care of all the small details of life, was like '*a sweet temperate sun*', not too hot but gentle like a spring sun. '*Temperate*' means '*mild*', without extremes. At the same time she is passionate, not in a petty way but with a high and noble serene intensity like that of a clear calm summer sky, perfectly balanced, equipoised, and smiling on everything.

As might a soul fly like a hunted bird,
Escaping with tired wings from a world of storms,
And a quiet reach like a remembered breast,
In a haven of safety and splendid soft repose
One could drink life back in streams of honey-fire,
Recover the lost habit of happiness,
Feel her bright nature's glorious ambience,
And preen joy in her warmth and colour's rule.

The soul is often imaged as a bird. Sri Aurobindo says that in Savitri's atmosphere, one could feel like a soul leaving our world of storms and trouble, escaping from all the tempest of earth life, flying like a bird that is being hunted and escaping into another

world. The poor little soul-bird, escaping from a hunter or from a storm, is exhausted; but then it reaches this quiet protected place where there are no storms, no hunters. It feels as if it has reached '*a remembered breast*', as if it has reached someone very familiar, as if it has found its way back to where it came from. When you came into Savitri's atmosphere, there was the sense of reaching a safe place, a sanctuary, '*a haven of safety and splendid soft repose*'. The soul-bird can rest there; its wings are so tired, but now it can rest: that '*haven*' is so soft and comfortable and at the same time '*splendid*', shining; there the soul-bird can '*drink life back in streams of honey-fire*', drawing wonderful warm regenerating energies back into itself and recovering its '*lost habit of happiness*'. The soul should always be happy, but in this world of storms it may lose that happiness. In Savitri's atmosphere it can '*recover the lost habit of happiness*' and '*feel her bright nature's glorious ambience*', the wonderful atmosphere of her nature. There, the soul-bird can '*preen*' itself. Preening is the way that birds clean themselves with their beaks, put all their feathers back in order, and make themselves beautiful again after escaping from a storm. The soul can '*Preen joy in her warmth and colour's rule*.' Near to Savitri there are no grey storm-clouds: '*her kindly care*' is like '*a sweet temperate sun*', and '*her high passion*' is like '*a blue heaven's equipoise*'. That is the wonderful atmosphere which Savitri is spreading around her, welcoming every tired soul, ready to give it back life and energy and happiness. Can you imagine a very lovely warm energy that is also very sweet? Hers must be something like that. Honey is the symbol of *ananda*, and fire the symbol of purity and intensity and aspiration: '*honey-fire*' is the kind of energy that one can absorb in Savitri's presence, in the atmosphere that she is spreading around her.

A deep of compassion, a hushed sanctuary,
Her inward help unbarred a gate in heaven;

Love in her was wider than the universe,
The whole world could take refuge in her single heart.

A '*sanctuary*' is two things: a safe place where nobody can harm or touch you; and the centre of the temple, the most sacred place. The sanctuary is where the god is installed. In the old days, if people were chasing you, even if you were a criminal you would be safe if you could reach that sacred place and stay there under God's protection; no one could touch you if you stayed in the sanctuary. For those who came to Savitri, '*her inward help unbarred a gate in heaven*', so that they could enter a higher state of consciousness. In her is a capacity for love that is wider than the entire universe; easily, the whole world can take refuge in her single heart. It is her mission to carry the whole world in her heart and offer it up to the Supreme. A '*deep of compassion*' means a deep place, as if in the sea, full of divine compassion. Her compassion is not just on the surface, but deep, fathomless, bottomless, and inexhaustible.

The great unsatisfied godhead here could dwell:
Vacant of the dwarf self's imprisoned air,
Her mood could harbour his sublimer breath
Spiritual that can make all things divine.

In this whole passage Sri Aurobindo has been describing the ways in which Savitri provides the perfect shrine for Love. '*The great unsatisfied godhead*' is Love. Love is never satisfied; he is always looking for more things to love. But, here in the shrine of Savitri's nature, this great unsatisfied godhead '*could dwell*', live permanently, because there is nothing egoistic in her: her whole being is '*Vacant of the dwarf self's imprisoned air*'. That is the air which we ego-centred beings are carrying with us, the narrow imprisoned atmosphere which feels it has to protect itself against all outside things; that makes it impossible for us to love as widely and

completely as Savitri could love. Her mood is able to '*harbour*', to hold or contain, Love's '*sublimar breath*' of spiritual love. There are many different levels of Love; Love expresses itself in different ways on the different levels of our nature; because Savitri does not have any of the '*dwarf self*' in her, she can hold Love's highest breath, the breath of spiritual love '*that can make all things divine*'. '*Dwarf*' means very small. We must all grow out of our little dwarf self into our true self which is must vaster and truer.

For even her gulfs were secrecies of light.

'*Gulfs*' are deep places in the sea, and here the word refers to the deeper parts of the being; in most of us, the deeper levels are dark but in her they were '*secrecies of light*'.

At once she was the stillness and the word,
A continent of self-diffusing peace,
An ocean of untrembling virgin fire;
The strength, the silence of the gods were hers.

Savitri has qualities which seem opposite: '*stillness*', and at the same time the power of the creative word; she is both '*a continent*', a solid mass of radiating peace, and at the same time a vibrational '*ocean of untrembling virgin fire*': a vast expanse of intensity, purity, aspiration, on the energy level. She has the strength and the silence of the gods. Silence and strength: these are qualities of Savitri which Sri Aurobindo will refer to over and over again, showing how she can reconcile intensity and peace, dynamic action and will and at the same time calm and silence. Because of all these qualities which point to a state far beyond the human, '*a nobler kind*', Love can find in Savitri '*his perfect shrine*'.

In her he found a vastness like his own,
His high warm subtle ether he refound

And moved in her as in his natural home.

In her he met his own eternity.

In Savitri, the god of Love could find a vastness as great as his own; he can find his own atmosphere, his own '*high warm subtle ether*' in her; in her, Love can move very easily and comfortably, '*as in his natural home*'. Here in the human world Love must normally move in very limited vessels, but in Savitri he met a being as vast, eternal and infinite as himself.

In 1936 Sri Aurobindo wrote about an earlier version of this passage:

This passage is, I believe, what I might call the Overmind Intuition at work expressing itself in something like its own rhythm and language. It is difficult to say about one's own poetry, but I think I have succeeded here ... in catching that very difficult note¹⁰.

Here I have tried to explain the meaning of some words and phrases and images that might be difficult to understand. But to be able to catch the full power and mantric vibration of this wonderful passage, it is essential to read it in the original, with full devotion and concentration, with the correct rhythm and pronunciation. In fact this is true of the whole of *Savitri*. All that I can do is to possibly assist those who aspire to take some first steps towards experiencing the inexhaustible magic and richness and power of Sri Aurobindo's incomparable poetry.

End of Section 1

¹⁰*Letters on Poetry and Art*, CWSA volume 27, pp. 289-90

Section 2, lines 186 to 367

Till then no mournful line had barred this ray.
On the frail breast of this precarious earth,
Since her orb'd sight in its breath-fastened house,
Opening in sympathy with happier stars
Where life is not exposed to sorrowful change,
Remembered beauty death-claimed lids ignore
And wondered at this world of fragile forms
Carried on canvas-strips of shimmering Time,
The impunity of unborn Might was hers.

'Till then': until the moment when *'Love came to her hiding the shadow, Death', 'no mournful line had barred this ray'*. *'Mournful'* means unhappy, sad; the *'ray'* is Savitri herself who has come into the human world as a ray of sunlight, a ray of the new light. Sometimes a cloud comes across a sunray, like a bar, like *'a mournful line'*, a line of shadow, a line of sorrow. Until that moment no cloud, no shadow, had come across her glorious ray of light, because since she first opened her eyes after being born into a human body *'On the frail breast of this precarious earth', 'The impunity of unborn Might was hers'*: she had enjoyed the *'impunity'* of immortal Powers, *'unborn Might'*. If you have *'impunity'* it means that you cannot be touched or harmed or punished. The beings of those higher planes are *'unborn Might'*, immortal powers. They have not been born and they will not die. When Savitri comes into the human world, she is born in a human form which eventually she will have to leave; yet from the very beginning of her life, when her eyes first opened here on earth, she had *'the impunity of unborn Might'*, she was protected. *'Her orb'd sight'*: an orb is a sphere, a perfect round; sometimes this word is used in poetry to indicate the eyes; *'her orb'd sight in its*

breath-fastened house: the body is like a house and all of its parts are held together by the life-breath. Her '*sight*', her power of vision, since she first opened her physical eyes as a baby, was '*in sympathy with happier stars*'. Her power of vision still remembered what it was like on those higher planes that she has come from. Now she is using her physical eyes, and she is not up there amongst those '*happier stars*', she is here '*on the frail breast of this precarious earth*' where life is '*exposed to sorrowful change*'. '*Frail*' means '*weak*', without much strength. Here on earth things are perishable and easily broken; so earth is '*precarious*', things here are not sure and certain. If something is '*precarious*' there is a risk that at any moment we can lose it. But Savitri's sight still remembered the beauty of those higher spheres, beauty that '*death-claimed lids ignore*'. Here the word '*lids*' refers to the eyelids; our mortal eyes are claimed by death, and do not know anything at all about the beauty of those higher worlds that Savitri has come from. In English the word '*ignore*' means to not pay attention; we try to ignore troublesome and unpleasant things; but Sri Aurobindo is using the word '*ignore*' with its French meaning which is connected with the original Latin sense of '*not knowing*'; we have that meaning in '*ignorance*', being ignorant of something. Savitri's '*orbed sight*' remembers the beauty of those other worlds and '*wonders*', looks with wonder and surprise, '*at this world of fragile forms*', this material world where forms break so easily. To that heavenlier power of vision it seems as if the fragile material forms are painted on strips, as stage scenery in a theatre is painted on strips of canvas, but these are strips of '*shimmering Time*'. If the power of vision is accustomed to the way things are on higher planes, everything here looks very fragile, very precarious, impermanent and even unreal. '*Shimmering*' is a movement of light, like sunlight reflected from the dancing waves of the sea, or light moving on shining silk; there is something

magical about light that is shimmering, like the magical light on the stage of a theatre. From the time that Savitri first opened her eyes on earth, she had been protected, immune to sorrow; '*no mournful line had barred this ray*' – until she met Satyavan in the forest, and '*Love came to her hiding the shadow, Death*'.

Then Sri Aurobindo continues describing the happiness that Savitri was always carrying with her:

Although she leaned to bear the human load,
Her walk kept still the measures of the gods.
Earth's breath had failed to stain that brilliant glass:
Unsmear'd with the dust of our mortal atmosphere
It still reflected heaven's spiritual joy.

She leaned down from her high world to help us bear the heavy load that human beings have to carry, but her walk '*kept still the measures of the gods*': she still moved through life with the same free pace as the gods, who are not weighed down by the material world and our human sorrows. '*Earth's breath*', the atmosphere of earth, had not managed '*to stain that brilliant glass*', the clear glass of Savitri's consciousness which was like a shining mirror. Despite the polluted atmosphere of the earth, no stain had come onto that glass; it remained '*unsmear'd*': if some dirt touches your dress it may leave a 'smear'; but her consciousness did not have any dirty marks, any smears, on it: '*it still reflected heaven's spiritual joy*'.

Almost they saw who lived within her light
Her playmate in the sempiternal spheres
Descended from its unattainable realms
In her attracting advent's luminous wake,
The white-fire dragon-bird of endless bliss
Drifting with burning wings above her days:
Heaven's tranquil shield guarded the missioned child.

The people who lived near Savitri, '*within her light*', could almost see '*The white-fire dragon-bird of endless bliss / Drifting with burning wings above her days*'. This glorious creature was her playmate '*in the sempiternal spheres*', the eternal worlds; when she came to earth, it followed her; it descended from those '*unattainable realms*' where they had played together, '*In her attracting advent's luminous wake*'. An '*advent*' is an arrival, a coming. From the beginning of December many Christians count the days of '*Advent*', the days leading up to Christmas Day, the day of Christ's birth on earth. When Savitri came down to earth, her advent attracted her dragon-bird playmate to follow '*in her luminous wake*'. When a boat is moving quickly through the water you will see its track, its '*wake*' behind it; sometimes leaves or surface debris get caught up in the wake of the boat and carried along with it, or dolphins will follow it because they like to be carried along by the wake. The bird comes down as if following in Savitri's wake, and even now that she lives on earth it is '*drifting*', gliding on its burning white-fire wings above her days. The presence of this ananda-bird is a shield of tranquillity, calm and peace, protecting Savitri as a child. She is a '*missioned child*': she has been sent with a work to do, a mission, and this protection is keeping her safe from any sorrow or grief until the time comes for her to do her work.

A glowing orbit was her early term,
Years like gold raiment of the gods that pass;
Her youth sat throned in calm felicity.

The early part of her life, '*her early term*' was like '*a glowing orbit*'. An '*orbit*' is the track of a planet around its sun. Our earth-years reflect the time that it takes for our planet to make one orbit around our sun. The curve of Savitri's life in those years was '*glowing*', warm and full of light; each year-long cycle as it passed was golden like

the '*raiment*', the clothing that robes the gods. Through all those years of her youth she sat on a throne like a princess, '*in calm felicity*', tranquil happiness – not physically but psychologically.

But joy cannot endure until the end:

There is a darkness in terrestrial things

That will not suffer long too glad a note.

Here on earth joy and happiness cannot last forever; they '*cannot endure until the end*' because there is '*a darkness in terrestrial things*', things that belong to the earth; that '*darkness*' will not allow things to remain happy for long. Here, the word '*suffer*' means '*allow*'. The darkness in terrestrial things will not allow '*too glad a note*' to last long: it as if the vibrations of our moods and emotions create a kind of music, and if the music is very happy, '*too glad*' the darkness will come and cut it short. Some kind of steady content may be allowed for a time, but the great heavenly happiness which Savitri brought with her will not be allowed to last for long, because of that darkness which is inherent in matter and '*terrestrial things*'.

On her too closed the inescapable Hand:

The armed Immortal bore the snare of Time.

That hand of darkness, which is '*inescapable*', which nobody here on earth can escape from, has closed on Savitri too. She is an '*armed immortal*'; she has come from those higher planes and has all their powers with her; but because she has accepted to be born as a human being she has to endure '*the snare of Time*'. A '*snare*' is a loop of fibre used to catch an animal or a bird. Although Savitri is powerful and immortal in her essence and origin, since she has taken a human birth and accepted to become a human being, she too is caught in '*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.

In this very striking sentence, Sri Aurobindo reveals that there is '*one*' who meets great beings when they come to earth, the beings who come with a burden, a responsibility, a mission to fulfil. That '*one*' now dealt with Savitri. That '*one*', assigns or sets '*the ordeal*', the painful difficult trial or test, and the path that each of the great beings must follow. A '*holocaust*' is a sacrifice, especially a fire sacrifice, a burnt offering. For those great beings, coming to this earth is a tremendous sacrifice. That '*one*' chooses '*death, fall, and sorrow as the spirit's goads*'. '*Goads*' are sticks or implements used to poke a bullock or an elephant to make it move faster; elephant drivers use big metal goads. That '*one*' goads great burdened beings to fulfil their mission. Now this '*dubious godhead*' dealing with Savitri, is lifting up '*his torch of pain*', using suffering like a light to reveal '*the chasm*', the deep pit, '*of the unfinished world*', and called her '*to fill with her vast self the abyss*.' With the pain that Savitri is feeling because of her foreknowledge of the death of Satyavan, that '*one*' shows Savitri all the pain and imperfection that need to be transformed in this world which is still '*unfinished*', not yet complete, not yet the divine world it is meant to become. He shows her: "Come, this is your task: you have to fill up this huge gulf of darkness with your immortal Light."

Amal Kiran asked Sri Aurobindo about this Being. He wrote:

Who is '*One*' here? Is it Love, the godhead mentioned before?
If not, does this '*dubious godhead with his torch of pain*'

correspond to the [*'stone-still figure of high and god-like Pain'*] spoken of a little earlier? Or is it Time whose 'snare' occurs in the last line of the preceding passage?

Sri Aurobindo replied:

Love? It is not Love who meets the burdened great and governs the fate of men! Nor is it Pain. Time also does not do these things — it only provides the field and movement of events. If I had wanted to give a name, I would have done it, but it has purposely to be left nameless because it is indefinable. He may use Love or Pain or Time or any of these powers but is not any of them. You can call him the Master of Evolution, if you like¹¹.

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.

This being is '*august*'; the spelling of this word is the same as that of the month August but the pronunciation is different: the stress is on the second syllable, instead of on the first. The month was named after the first Roman emperor, Caesar Augustus; they called him Augustus because he was majestic, imperial; his birth month was given this name and added to the Roman calendar; the quality which he had was described by the word '*august*'. This being is like that: '*august*', regal like an emperor; he is also '*pitiless*'; he feels no weak sympathy for the suffering of those to whom he must assign their task; instead he has a '*calm outlook*' on all that must be. He makes things more difficult for Savitri because she has come with more power, more strength; so he heightens '*the Eternal's dreadful*

¹¹*Letters on Poetry and Art*, CWSA volume 27, p. 295

strategy'. A '*strategy*' is a technique for getting something done. The Eternal has a strategy for getting his evolutionary process completed. Some aspects of that strategy seem '*dreadful*' to us, for example that he uses death, sorrow and fall as goads. '*Dreadful*' is an adjective for something that we dread, that we fear, that repels us. '*Fall*' here means the fall from our true highest being. All of us have to face the ordeal, the test, of death, fall, sorrow; but for Savitri, this godhead '*heightens*' the strategy, intensifies it, makes it more difficult: '*He measured the difficulty with the might*'. Since she has more '*might*', more strength, he makes the ordeal more difficult for her.

Assailing her divinest elements,
He made her heart kin to the striving human heart
And forced her strength to its appointed road.

Attacking, '*assailing*' the most divine parts of Savitri, he made her heart similar to our struggling human hearts, and '*forced her strength*' to follow the road that has been appointed for her, the road which she has to follow in order to fulfil her mission.

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.

This is why she has accepted to become human. She has come here to wrestle with '*the Shadow*', the darkness in terrestrial things that will not allow '*too glad a note*'; in order to do that, she has to '*confront the riddle of man's birth*', the mystery of our human existence, the struggle of life with death here in this world of unconscious Matter.

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.

This canto is called 'The Issue'. What is the '*issue*', the problem, the choice here? Savitri has to decide whether she is going to accept, '*to bear with*' ignorance and death, or whether she going to '*hew the ways of immortality*'. When an explorer or adventurer is going to pass through a thick jungle, he takes along a big knife to '*hew*' or cut his way through, to create paths where he can pass. Savitri has to create a new possibility for human beings, to conquer death and make it easier for human beings to achieve immortality. She has come here to win or maybe lose this '*godlike game*'. This is '*the issue*' that her soul has accepted; the outcome is going to be decided by a throw of the dice, just as in the dice-games described in the Mahabharata, where everything hangs on one dice-throw. '*Destiny*' has provided the dice that are to be thrown in this game. Who will be the winner; who will lose? In any case, Savitri has not taken on this contest for her own sake, she is not playing for herself; she is playing on behalf of the whole human race, '*To win or lose the godlike game for man*'.

But not to submit and suffer was she born;
To lead, to deliver was her glorious part.
Here was no fabric of terrestrial make
Fit for a day's use by busy careless Powers.

'*To submit and suffer*', to accept and endure — Savitri was not born for that; she was born for the glorious role of a leader, a deliverer, a liberator. She is not made of ordinary earth-substance. '*Fabric*' is cloth; fabric made of the usual earthly elements is just fit for '*a day's use*', a very short time, by the '*busy careless Powers*' who run the universe. Her fabric is not like that.

In the next sentence Sri Aurobindo tells us more about the way that those '*busy careless Powers*' use the brief lives of human beings, and throw them away when they have finished with them.

An image fluttering on the screen of Fate,
Half-animated for a passing show,
Or a castaway on the ocean of Desire
Flung to the eddies in a ruthless sport
And tossed along the gulfs of Circumstance,
A creature born to bend beneath the yoke,
A chattel and a plaything of Time's lords,
Or one more pawn who comes destined to be pushed
One slow move forward on a measureless board
In the chess-play of the earth-soul with Doom,—
Such is the human figure drawn by Time.

In this sentence Sri Aurobindo gives four symbolic pictures of our ordinary human life, '*the human figure drawn by Time*'. First, '*An image fluttering on the screen of Fate*': on a cinema screen or one of those cloth screens used for shadow-puppet plays '*an image*' can be shown; it is not fully alive, it is only '*half-animated for a passing show*'; it moves and gives the illusion of reality, as part of a performance or a play. Human beings are like puppets, or figures in a cartoon film, hardly existing, not really alive.

Then, '*a castaway*': someone who has fallen or been thrown overboard from a ship into the sea, the human being has been thrown into '*the ocean of Desire*', where it is tossed this way and that by the waves of vital impulses; it has been '*flung to the eddies in a ruthless sport*' as if thrown into the sea in order to make fun of its desperate state. '*Eddies*' are whirlpools; in the ocean of Desire there are whirlpools which catch hold of you and carry you round and round and down to your doom; or they toss you along in '*gulfs*',

deep stretches of sea, where you are helplessly driven by circumstances. Then:

A creature born to bend beneath the yoke
A chattel and a plaything of Time's lords ...

Usually, it is an animal that must '*bend beneath the yoke*': we put a yoke on the bullock and he must pull the plough or the cart; but in the past, slaves had to do that kind of work. In normal mortal existence we are slaves, 'the cattle of the gods' says the Upanishad. Here Sri Aurobindo uses the word '*chattel*'. A chattel is a possession, something that belongs to you. We have our goods and chattels, our belongings. Human beings are playthings for the lords of Time, we are their slaves, we belong to them, they can use us however they like.

The last image is from the game of chess. A human being may be '*just one more pawn*' the smallest piece in the chess game. There are the king and the queen, two bishops, two knights, two castles or elephants, and eight pawns, which are considered to be quite disposable, not so valuable or important; a pawn can be moved only one square forwards at a time, but if it crosses the whole board and reaches the other side, it can be exchanged for a more valuable piece. A human being is like a '*pawn*', which cannot move by itself and may get pushed only '*one slow move forward*' in a whole lifetime. The usual chess board has eight squares in each direction, 64 squares in all, but the cosmic board is '*measureless*' and '*in the chess play of the earth-soul with Doom*' the poor little pawn gets pushed '*one slow move forward*' on that '*measureless board*'. The earth-soul is trying to evolve, trying to become what it is meant to be; but the dark power of Doom, disaster, is always opposing it and slowing things down as much as it can.

Of all these four images, Sri Aurobindo says '*Such is the human*

figure drawn by Time.' Our human appearance in time is of something helpless, useless, without much value or significance, and without any power at all. But Savitri is different:

A conscious frame was here, a self-born Force.

A Force, a power from the higher planes, has taken birth here by its own choice; and it has gathered all the elements that were needed for its formation, so that even the body, the '*frame*', is conscious; Savitri is not subject to that play of circumstance, she is not '*a chattel and plaything of Time's lords*'. She is '*a self-born Force*', '*a conscious frame*'.

In this enigma of the dusk of God,
This slow and strange uneasy compromise
Of limiting Nature with a limitless Soul,
Where all must move between an ordered Chance
And an uncaring blind Necessity,
Too high the fire spiritual dare not blaze.

The world we live in is an '*enigma*', a mysterious puzzle that we do not know how to solve, because here we live in a '*dusk of God*'. Dusk is the time when light and dark are equally balanced, between night and day; we live in a twilight world of ignorance. Our world is also a '*slow and strange uneasy compromise / Of limiting Nature with a limitless Soul*.' The Soul of the manifestation is limitless, but this creation is ruled by '*limiting Nature*'; so here, in the material world at the present stage of evolution, '*in this dusk of God*', the limitless Soul compromises with limiting Nature; it accepts the limits that Nature has reached in its upward movement; there is a conflict between the soul and nature, and they play out a '*strange uneasy compromise*'; but slowly this changes as the individual soul grows and becomes more powerful, until at last it becomes the Master of Nature and can impose its will. But meanwhile everything here

'must move between an ordered Chance / And an uncaring, blind Necessity'. These are the rules of the game that have been set for this manifestation. One aspect of *'uncaring, blind Necessity'* in our world is, for example, the laws of physics. Matter sets certain rules: the law of gravity, the law of entropy, the laws which govern Matter; that is one aspect of Necessity, and there are other kinds which we have to accept because we do not have the power to change them; but on the other hand, things are not entirely predictable, there is always the possibility of something new and unexpected intervening; we call it *'Chance'*. Our world seems to be governed by a balance between *'an ordered Chance'* and *'an uncaring blind Necessity'*; these two together create the conditions and limitations under which the soul has to live in nature at the moment. Under these conditions, *'the spiritual fire'*, the fire of aspiration and upward effort, does not dare to flame up too high; it has to stay within limits: *'Too high the fire spiritual dare not blaze'*: a limit is set, even to spiritual aspiration. We can aspire, which is the sacred fire of the soul for progress, light and truth; but that aspiration, that fire, does not dare to blaze up too high because of the conditions of limiting Nature.

If once it met the intense original Flame,
An answering touch might shatter all measures made
And earth sink down with the weight of the Infinite.

If that aspiration, the spiritual fire in us, would flame too high and really meet *'the intense original Flame'*, the flame of divine energy on the highest levels of consciousness, and there were a response, that might *'shatter'*, break in pieces, *'all measures made'*. In the manifestation, we are living by *'measures'*, the limitations set by Nature: there are forms, there are shapes, there is the unrolling of time in days and years, which form the framework of the material manifestation; if there were a too-soon and too-powerful influx

from above, then all these structures might get broken and this whole earth might sink down '*with the weight of the Infinite*'. The Infinite is beyond all measures, all limits, all forms. Our earth, our whole world, depends on measures and if the measures are shattered, it will be lost.

A gaol is this immense material world:

Across each road stands armed a stone-eyed Law,

At every gate the huge dim sentinels pace.

At the same time '*this immense material world*' is a '*gaol*': this is the original spelling of the word 'jail', meaning a prison. Sri Aurobindo uses this older spelling two or three other times in the poem and in one place the spelling 'jail' also appears. '*Gaol*' is one of the many illogical spellings in the English language; it is not at all phonetic; when I was a student our professor told us that the pronunciation of this word comes from one dialect of old French and the spelling comes from a different one; many English words related with law and legalities come from French, from the time when England was conquered and ruled by the Normans from northern France. This spelling '*gaol*' is now less in use but both spellings are correct and are pronounced in the same way. This material world, not only our earth but the whole universe, is a prison. If we try to escape, a law is standing on every road to prevent our escape; that law has eyes of stone, it has no feelings, no sympathy nor compassion for us, it just holds its place: "This is the Law!" At every gate where we might try to get out, '*the huge dim sentinels pace*'. A 'sentinel' is a guard. At every gate they walk up and down and there is no chance to get past them.

A grey tribunal of the Ignorance,

An Inquisition of the priests of Night

In judgment sit on the adventurer soul,

And the dual tables and the Karmic norm
Restrain the Titan in us and the God:
Pain with its lash, joy with its silver bribe
Guard the Wheel's circling immobility.

A '*tribunal*' is a court with three judges. The '*Inquisition*' was a religious court established by the Roman Catholic Church 600 years ago to question people about their beliefs; it is notorious for its cruelty and intolerance. In that court '*The priests of Night / In judgment sit on the adventurer soul*'. The soul is adventurous, it wants to progress, it wants to break out of these human limits, to have new and higher experiences; but these forces are always challenging it. It is allowed to break out if it is strong enough, but first it must become highly developed enough. They are there to check: 'How far have you gone?' 'What is your power?' There is something in the whole set-up of this enigma that we live in, this '*strange uneasy compromise*' between the rule of Nature and the limitless aspiration of the Soul, which confines human beings within certain measures. Another expression of this is '*the dual tables*'. '*Tables*' here means stone tablets with the law written on them. The law that we live under is a law of duality: if we aim for the good, we somehow always fall into the bad because the two things are always linked together; if we strive for pleasure, pain will come after some time; hot and cold, north and south, this whole world is based on these '*dual tables*', the law of duality. In addition there is '*the karmic norm*': 'karma' is the theory that what we have done in the past determines our present and our future. There is some truth in that: what we do has consequences; for the physical being it is quite absolute: if you put your finger into the fire, you will get burned, if you go out in the rain you will get wet unless you take precautions. There is a karmic law that whatever you do, think or feel goes out from you into the universe; the Mother says that it goes out and all around

the universe and comes back to you; whatever you send out comes back. This applies to our physical being, our vital being and our mental being before it is fully developed. It does not really apply to the soul. Sri Aurobindo says that as far as karma is concerned, out of all the possible consequences that our past actions might have accumulated for us, the soul makes its choice of the things that it wants to face in this particular life for its further progress. That is another view of karma. But until we are living in our soul, we are subject to the action of karma which keeps everybody more or less at the same level. You are not allowed to become too good, and not allowed to become too bad either. The '*dual tables*', the law of dualities, and '*the karmic norm*' (a '*norm*' is a general standard that everybody should more or less fit into) restrain us: they hold back the god in us, the aspiring soul; but they also prevent us from becoming titans, from becoming rakshasas, bloated egos. A restraint is being exercised all the time. The wheel of karma, the wheel of works, is kept moving round and round. Pain lashes us with its whip to make us go the way it wants; the other thing that makes us go around with the wheel is joy. Sri Aurobindo says it is like '*a silver bribe*'; a '*bribe*' is an incentive, some payment you give to make someone do something. These words remind us of an incident in the story of Jesus Christ: his close disciple, Judas, took a bribe of thirty pieces of silver from the authorities to betray his master. But even if we do not know that story, we can understand the image: the joy we are given in our lives is not a golden bribe, it is only silver, but still we follow that bribe. The joy that we take is sometimes like that, a bribe for which we betray our highest impulses. These two things together, the pain and the joy, guard the wheel which is going round and round but never really moving forward: it is circling, but does not move forward.

A bond is put on the high-climbing mind,

A seal on the too large wide-open heart;
Death stays the journeying discoverer, Life.

There is an element of our mind that aims for progress, wanting to climb higher and do better; but '*a bond is put*' on it, it is tied down. Sometimes the heart would spontaneously like to open very wide in sympathy; but '*a seal*' is put to prevent that. Life is always journeying, trying to discover new possibilities, but it can only go so far; Life journeys a certain distance, but sooner or later Death comes and says "Now you cannot go any further."

Thus is the throne of the Inconscient safe
While the tardy coilings of the aeons pass
And the Animal browses in the sacred fence
And the gold Hawk can cross the skies no more.

The '*throne*' is the seat a king sits on, and if his throne is taken from him, he is not the ruler any longer. The Inconscient rules so much in our world, through matter, through our subconscious. Its throne is kept safe, protected by '*the dual tables and the karmic norm*' and all the laws that prevent us from moving forward too quickly. This has gone on for a long time. The throne of the Inconscient is being kept safe like this '*while the tardy coilings of the aeons pass*'. '*Aeons*' are very long stretches of time. In India, we speak about '*kalpas*', '*manvantaras*'. These are long, long stretches of time but they seem to go round in circles, in cycles: '*tardy coilings*'. '*Tardy*' means slow, taking too long; and it can also mean 'late'; something moves too slowly or comes too late. '*Coilings*' suggests that time is moving in cycles, in a circular or spiral movement, round and round. The immense stretches of time through which evolution is happening make us feel that it is all taking too long. The rule of the Inconscient is being drawn out too long; as long as it rules, we human beings are like animals tied in an enclosure waiting to be sacrificed, as in

the Vedic sacrifice. Because the animal body is kept there, the '*gold Hawk*', the symbol of the soul, can no longer fly freely. As long as the throne of the Inconscient is kept safe by the laws of duality and karma, the soul cannot fly up into the skies, the higher levels of consciousness.

But one stood up and lit the limitless flame.

Sri Aurobindo told us that '*too high the spiritual fire dare not blaze*': if it met the intense original flame everything here might be shattered; but here he says that someone did once stand up and do it: '*But one stood up and lit the limitless flame.*' This is Savitri.

Arraigned by the dark Power that hates all bliss
In the dire court where life must pay for joy,
Sentenced by the mechanic justicer
To the afflicting penalty of man's hopes,
Her head she bowed not to the stark decree
Baring her helpless heart to destiny's stroke.

Savitri is '*arraigned*'. This is a very old word which we do not come across very often nowadays; it means 'accused' as in a court: someone says that you have done something wrong, they make a case against you and take you to court. There is a '*dark Power that hates all bliss*'. Savitri represents Light and Love and Joy. That dark Power has '*arraigned*' Savitri in front of the grey tribunal of Ignorance, '*in the dire court where life must pay for joy*' because that dark power of falsehood and limitation hates all bliss. There she is, accused, in this '*dire*', terrible, court where life has to pay for joy. In our world of duality, if you get a certain amount of joy, you must pay for it with a certain amount of pain and suffering; and the one who gives the judgment, who passes sentence, is a '*mechanic justicer*'. A really wise judge will go to the heart of the matter and see what is behind the accusation, the thing which is said to have

been done wrong, and he will give a wise punishment; but here, it is a '*mechanic justicer*' who calculates mechanically that 'this much joy deserves this much punishment' by a mechanical process. Savitri has to pay the '*afflicting penalty of man's hopes*'. '*penalty*' means 'punishment'; '*afflicting*' means 'causing suffering': the penalty will be painful. Savitri is embodying all the highest hopes of humanity; our human hopes are often not very wise, and very often they get dashed, and we suffer because of that. She is carrying the flame of higher hope and aspiration and these get punished, just as our ordinary hopes often do; but Savitri does not accept the punishment: '*Her head she bowed not to the stark decree*'. The mechanic justicer says that she must pay, by the death of Satyavan, for all the hope and joy she has brought with her into the human world; but she did not accept his '*stark decree*', she will not willingly '*bare her helpless heart to destiny's stroke*'; she will not submit to the blow, the '*afflicting penalty*'.

So bows and must the mind-born will in man

Obedient to the statutes fixed of old,

Admitting without appeal the nether gods.

In her the superhuman cast its seed.

Our will, which is born from the mind under the influence of subconscious and vital impulses, has to bow and accept '*the stark decree*' of '*the mechanic justicer*'; the '*mind-born will in man*' often has to remain '*obedient to the statutes fixed of old*'. '*Statutes*' are laws; in our material world some laws have been fixed for such a long time that we have to accept them '*without appeal*'. If we do not agree with what a court decides, usually we can go to a higher court and make an '*appeal*'; but '*the mind-born will in man*' often cannot do that: it simply has to accept what the '*nether gods*' decree. '*Nether*' means lower; it is not often used in modern English, but there are many

place names in England where it appears; there are villages with the same name, 'Bradford', for example; so 'Upper Bradford' will be at the top of the hill and 'Nether Bradford' is the village at the bottom of the hill. Sri Aurobindo uses this word to refer to the lower levels of consciousness. Savitri will not accept the judgment of the nether gods, the powers that rule the lower levels of nature '*without appeal*', because within her is a being that will not bow its head to their judgment.

Inapt to fold its mighty wings of dream
Her spirit refused to hug the common soil,
Or, finding all life's golden meanings robbed,
Compound with earth, struck from the starry list,
Or quench with black despair the God-given light.

Her spirit is very strong and does not easily fold up its wings. It has '*mighty wings of dream*' which are meant to be spread wide; '*inapt*' means unsuitable, unfitted; the mighty wings of her spirit are not meant to be closed. Her spirit '*refused to hug the common soil*', to cling to the ordinary limitations of matter; and it will not '*compound*', come to an agreement, with the ordinary powers of earth. To '*compound*' means to come to an agreement, especially if you are at a disadvantage; for example, if you owe a lot of money and your creditors are pressing you for payment, somehow or other you have to come to an agreement with them, '*compound*' with them. Savitri's spirit will not do that; it will not make an agreement with the powers of earth, of matter, even when it finds '*all life's golden meanings robbed*'. If we found out that we must lose the person who means most to us in the world, we might feel that life has no more meaning or value for us; then we might accept to go on living in a very dull ordinary way, without any hope or aspiration, we might '*compound with earth*' and just accept life as it is, renounce our

golden hopes and aspirations. But Savitri's spirit will not do that; if it did, its name would be crossed out from '*the starry list*', the list of the lights and powers of the spirit. She is not going to fall into '*black despair*'. If you are very thirsty, you can '*quench*' your thirst by drinking a lot of water; if there is a fire, you will try to '*quench*' it, put it out, or you can quench a candle, put out the flame. Savitri is carrying within her '*the God-given light*' and she will not going to allow any mood of '*black despair*' to put it out.

Accustomed to the eternal and the true,
Her being conscious of its divine founts
Asked not from mortal frailty pain's relief,
Patched not with failure bargain or compromise.

Her being is '*Accustomed to*', very familiar with and used to what is eternal and true; her being remains '*conscious of its divine founts*', aware of its eternal origin; so it does not ask for relief from pain in the way that our '*mortal frailty*' does. When we suffer, the weakness of our nature causes us to seek relief in whatever way we can. Savitri will not do that. She is ready to endure everything; she will not patch a '*bargain or compromise*' with failure; she is determined to succeed in her mission. When you get a tear in your dress, you can patch it with another piece of cloth; if you have a disagreement with someone, you may try to patch it up by agreeing to a bargain or a compromise; but Savitri will not do that.

A work she had to do, a word to speak:
Writing the unfinished story of her soul
In thoughts and actions graved in Nature's book,
She accepted not to close the luminous page,
Cancel her commerce with eternity,
Or set a signature of weak assent
To the brute balance of the world's exchange.

'A work she had to do, a word to speak': Savitri has something to do, to say. She is still *'Writing the unfinished story of her soul'*; her soul-story is still *'unfinished'*. She is not writing it down in an ordinary book, but *'In thoughts and actions graved in Nature's book'*. *'Graved'* is a form of *'engraved'*, meaning *'cut'* into stone or metal. When something is engraved it remains as a long-lasting record. In our ancient temples here in South India records have been engraved on the stone walls and on copper sheets, metal sheets, commemorating important events and happenings connected with the temple or the kingdom which it belonged to. Similarly, Savitri's thoughts and actions are recording the story of her soul *'in Nature's book'*: they will have a long-lasting evolutionary significance and effect. So she will not accept, she will not agree *'to close the luminous page'*. Fate or Destiny, all the circumstances of material life are telling her "Your husband is destined to die. Just accept it." But she will not accept *'to close the luminous page'*, the page of light where she is engraving her soul-story; and she refuses *'to cancel'* or cross out *'her commerce'*, her relationship, her connection *'with eternity'*. Circumstances and the present state of the world are telling her to simply accept the way things are, *'the statutes fixed of old'*; but Savitri will not set her signature of *'weak assent'* to the *'brute balance'* of the play of forces in the world, the balance of things as they are at the moment. She will not say *'yes'* to that.

A force in her that toiled since earth was made,
Accomplishing in life the great world-plan,
Pursuing after death immortal aims,
Repugged to admit frustration's barren role,
Forfeit the meaning of her birth in Time,
Obey the government of the casual fact
Or yield her high destiny up to passing Chance.

In Savitri there is a force that has been at work '*since earth was made*' to carry out, accomplish '*the great world-plan*' in life, and continuing after death to pursue '*immortal aims*'; that force '*repugned to admit frustration's barren role*'. '*Repugned*' is an unusual word; we can see from its spelling that it is connected with the words '*repugnant*' and '*repugnance*', which express a feeling of disgust;¹² it rejects the fruitless '*barren role*' of being frustrated in its aims; that great force is going to push its way through to fulfilment, whatever obstacles may be in the way. Savitri will not '*forfeit*', give up, '*the meaning of her birth in time*'; she has accepted birth in time for a reason, a purpose, and she will not abandon that; she will not '*Obey the government of the casual fact*', the rule of the things that happen to be, for no particular reason; she is not going to '*yield up*', she is not going to allow any '*passing Chance*', any accidental circumstance, to take away her '*high destiny*'.

In her own self she found her high recourse;
She matched with the iron law her sovereign right:
Her single will opposed the cosmic rule.
To stay the wheels of Doom this greatness rose.

How is she going to change Destiny, change the existing rule of things? She finds all the strength that she needs '*in her own self*'. If we want to get things done, sometimes we have to '*take recourse to*' some higher authority which has more power than we do individually; Savitri does not need to do that because she has all the power and authority she needs within herself: '*in her own self she found her high recourse*'. She matched the '*iron law*' of death and ignorance that rules the way that things happen on earth, with her own '*sovereign right*': the soul has the right to rule nature; the

¹²But the pronunciation is different: in '*repugned*' the 'g' is silent and the 'u' becomes long: rep-yoond.

conscious soul has the right to rule over circumstances, to change Destiny; that is Savitri's '*sovereign right*', the right that a ruler has. '*Her single will opposed the cosmic rule.*' The cosmic rule says that everything that is born must die. She says, 'No, it does not have to be like that.' Alone, as an individual conscious soul, as an embodiment of the Supreme Divine Mother who has come with a great mission to save humanity, she '*opposed*', stood against that cosmic rule with her own individual will-power. The '*greatness*' in Savitri rose up '*to stay the wheels of Doom*': it is as if there is a great machine, running on tracks like a locomotive, a machine of Doom, of death and disaster; Savitri sets her own will in its way, to force those wheels of Doom to stop.

At the Unseen's knock upon her hidden gates
Her strength made greater by the lightning's touch
Awoke from slumber in her heart's recess.
It bore the stroke of That which kills and saves.

The foreknowledge that Satyavan must die is a signal to Savitri; the Unseen, the higher Power, is knocking at the '*hidden gates*' deep within her heart; that knock of the Unseen comes like a bolt of lightning; she was living her protected life, full of joy and spreading happiness all around her; but the prophecy of the death of Satyavan comes like a stroke of lightning that wakes up the hidden strength that was sleeping deep within '*her heart's recess*', waiting for the time when it would be needed; that strength of hers is strong enough to bear the lightning stroke of the Unseen, which sometimes kills and sometimes saves. When some disaster comes to us as a great shock, we may just collapse; but if that blow strikes deep enough, we may find our inner strength waking up and becoming greater; that is what happened to Savitri.

Across the awful march no eye can see,

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

Savitri finds within herself the strength to face '*the engines of the universe*': the mechanical aspect of the universe, that is moving forward unstoppably like a huge locomotive; she stands in the way of those engines, and forces them to pause. The route which those engines are following cannot be changed by any will, but Savitri faces them and blocks the path of '*the driving wheels*' with her heart and will and soul, forcing the '*giant workings*' to pause, to halt for a moment. '*Its stark conventions met the flame of a soul.*' '*Conventions*' are things that most people are agreed on; but a convention is only a social agreement and does not necessarily represent a permanent truth. The way that the universe works, with all its mechanical energies, what we call '*Necessity*', the Law of Nature, is not absolute; these so-called laws are just '*conventions*' that have been generally accepted; '*stark*' means harsh, unyielding, pitiless; but in Savitri there is '*the flame of a soul*': that soul-flame, full of divine love and power, is opposing those '*stark conventions*'.

A magic leverage suddenly is caught
That moves the veiled Ineffable's timeless will:
A prayer, a master act, a king idea
Can link man's strength to a transcendent Force.
Then miracle is made the common rule,
One mighty deed can change the course of things;
A lonely thought becomes omnipotent.

When the flame of the soul can connect with its eternal source, then a prayer, a mighty action, a powerful noble idea, can '*link man's*

strength to a transcendent Force' which is not bound or limited by anything in the universe; then '*A magic leverage suddenly is caught*'. If you have to move something heavy you will put a lever under it, a strong stick or a rod of iron; you will need a place to stand at some distance, and a '*fulcrum*' on which the lever can rotate, so that by exerting pressure on the other end of the lever, you will be able to move the stone or the heavy object that you want to shift. A lever may be able to do apparently impossible tasks: '*A magic leverage suddenly is caught / That moves the veiled Ineffable's timeless will*'. The '*Ineffable*' is the transcendent Divine beyond time and space and all expression; the will of the Ineffable is '*timeless*'; if the soul-flame in us is able to make a connection with that, if our human will finds that '*magic leverage*' through a prayer, an action, an idea, suddenly what seemed impossible can be done by a movement of '*the Ineffable's timeless will*'. Our human strength gets linked to a transcendent Force that comes from beyond the universe, beyond manifestation, and is therefore much more powerful than '*the cosmic rule*'. Then miracles can happen, and even '*become the common rule*'. Then just one deed, one action, can change the whole course of things; '*One lonely thought*' becomes all-powerful and influences the future.

All now seems Nature's massed machinery;
An endless servitude to material rule
And long determination's rigid chain,
Her firm and changeless habits aping Law,
Her empire of unconscious deft device
Annul the claim of man's free human will.

What Sri Aurobindo has just told us in the past few sentences is very difficult for us to believe. We may have faith in it because Sri Aurobindo tells us, but there are so many parts of us that cannot

believe that it is really true, because to us now everything seems to be just the machinery, the mechanical workings, of Nature, and we seem to be subject to that '*material rule*': we cannot change the laws of physics, the laws of matter and their influence on everything that we experience and do; there seems to be a '*rigid chain*' of cause and effect, stretching back as far as we can trace, that makes things the way they are. Nature seems to have these '*firm and changeless*' laws; but Sri Aurobindo says here that they are not laws, they are only habits; they are only the way that we have got used to things being done. Those habits of Nature are pretending to be Law: '*aping*' means imitating, copying. And of course Nature does have a lot of skill and power. She has her '*empire of deft device*'. She can do things so skilfully. There are tiny hairy caterpillars that you must be very careful not to touch, because if you touch them they shoot their hairs into your finger. Those hairs look like nothing, but actually they are covered with hooks. If you looked at them under a microscope you would be appalled. If they shoot into you they stay there for a long time and cause a painful irritation. Nature has given those little caterpillars their hooked hairs to protect them; this is just one of the amazing '*deft devices*' of Nature. '*Deft*' means 'skilful in doing small difficult things'; if you have deft fingers, you can do delicate tasks very skilfully and accurately. Even what we call our free will, our human power of choice, is really ruled by '*Nature's machinery*': our claim to have a will of our own is cancelled out, annulled, because in fact our will and our behaviour is ruled by the devices of Nature and the long chain of determination, of karma; we think what we think and want what we want and do what we do because of that '*machinery*'.

He too is a machine amid machines;
A piston brain pumps out the shapes of thought,
A beating heart cuts out emotion's modes;

An insentient energy fabricates a soul.

'He' refers 'man', in the previous sentence. We human beings too are machines amongst all the rest of Nature's machinery: our brain is just a little engine with pistons going up and down to pump out thoughts; the heart is a machine that cuts out emotions according to the patterns of nature; and all this machinery is driven by an '*insentient energy*', an energy without feelings which '*fabricates*' or manufactures the illusion of a soul.

Q: *The soul is conscious, but 'insentient' means without consciousness?*

Yes. It is a paradox: if Nature is an '*insentient energy*', where does the conscious soul come from? Sri Aurobindo is not saying that the soul is an illusory product of Nature: he says '*All now seems Nature's massed machinery*': at present this is what it seems like to our physical minds. The materialist scientists tell us that our consciousness and whatever we may feel as our soul is a product of the unconscious energies of nature and that we have all evolved from the material energy produced by the 'Big Bang'. That is a very widely accepted view in the earth-consciousness at present.

Or the figure of the world reveals the signs

Of a tied Chance repeating her old steps

In circles around Matter's binding-posts.

Another way of explaining the appearances of our world is as a play of Chance: Chance moves freely, everything is random, anything can happen, but within certain limits fixed by Matter, the laws of physics; so Chance is tied, like an animal to a post: if you tie a goat or a cow to a post, after some time you will see a circle of worn earth around the post, where the animal has trodden and eaten

everything. That is another way of explaining the appearances of our world.

A random series of inept events
To which reason lends illusive sense, is here,
Or the empiric Life's instinctive search,
Or a vast ignorant mind's colossal work.

Sri Aurobindo is telling us how things seem to human beings if they try to understand the world around them. We see Nature's machinery, or we see the play of Chance limited by the laws of Matter, or maybe we see that everything is random: maybe there is no order at all, maybe our own reason is constructing some kind of picture out of all these random happenings, and lending an '*illusive sense*' to this '*random series of inept events*'. We try to make sense of the world around us and think we have succeeded, but whatever order and meaning we have found is '*illusive*' or illusory, misleading and false. Or some people have said that what is really happening is the seeking of some universal life-force, instinctively trying out different possibilities: '*the empiric Life's instinctive search*', the life-force seeking for its own satisfaction; it is '*instinctive*', reacting instinctively, and it is '*empiric*', reacting only to what it experiences. Or maybe the governing principle is neither Matter nor Life, but Mind: maybe the world we see is the '*colossal work*', the huge, gigantic work, of some '*vast ignorant mind*'. Many people find such theories easier to believe than that there is a divine order and purpose of which we ourselves are an important part.

But wisdom comes, and vision grows within:
Then Nature's instrument crowns himself her king;
He feels his witnessing self and conscious power;
His soul steps back and sees the Light supreme.
A Godhead stands behind the brute machine.

When we come to the fullness of wisdom, '*vision grows within*'; then this human being who has been an instrument and plaything of Nature becomes independent and '*crowns himself her king*'. The developed individual experiences directly that he is a conscious '*witnessing self*', and that he has a '*conscious power*', which is not subject to Nature's rule and her machinery. '*His soul steps back*', detaches itself from identification with the play of Nature, and becomes aware of the Light which is the radiance of the supreme consciousness. He becomes aware that behind all this machinery, all these apparently unchangeable laws, there is a divine Presence, a Godhead. When he can connect to that divine Presence and will, these things which seemed like laws are found to be not so binding and absolute after all.

This truth broke in in a triumph of fire;
A victory was won for God in man,
The deity revealed its hidden face.

Savitri has come to this point. Here Sri Aurobindo says it in a few words; later on in the book he will describe in detail how '*this truth*' has come to her. It has broken in on her '*in a triumph of fire*', a burning, intense, purifying experience and realisation. Sri Aurobindo has written about this line. Somebody asked him about these two '*in*'s together, and he explained that it was done deliberately; we have to read them with a small pause between the two. Since this truth has broken in on Savitri, she is able to win '*a victory ... for God in man*'. The '*deity*', the Godhead that stands behind the brute machinery of material nature, '*revealed its hidden face*'.

The great World-Mother now in her arose:
A living choice reversed fate's cold dead turn,
Affirmed the spirit's tread on Circumstance,

Pressed back the senseless dire revolving Wheel
And stopped the mute march of Necessity.

At the '*knock of the Unseen upon her hidden gates*' the great power incarnated in Savitri rises up and makes the connection that moves '*the veiled Ineffable's timeless will*': '*A living choice reversed fate's cold dead turn*'. Fate, Destiny says that Satyavan must die. But the '*living choice*' of Savitri says 'No, I do not accept that it has to be like this; it can be different, it should be different'. The spirit is more powerful than circumstances. The presence of the great World-Mother, embodied in Savitri, '*affirmed the spirit's tread on Circumstance*'. 'To affirm' means 'to state powerfully and positively'. The spirit is so powerful that it can just crush circumstances beneath its feet. Savitri says 'I know that the spirit is stronger than Circumstance, stronger than Fate or Destiny. I choose that Satyavan shall live.' Since Satyavan represents the Soul of Humanity, this is her choice 'for Earth and Men.' So the Wheel that we read about earlier, turning round and round without moving forward, is '*pressed back*', prevented from following its round. '*The mute march of Necessity*' is stopped in its tracks. There are strong forces in the universe which say 'It has to be like this. You have to accept it, there is nothing you can do about it, there is no way to change it.' The ancient Greeks recognised these forces as four goddesses; one of them was called Ananke, Necessity; those four goddesses are faceless; in heaven when the other gods see them coming, they turn their faces away, they hide, because they do not want those great powers to look at them; even the Overmind gods are subject to Necessity. But Savitri affirms, 'There is a Power that is stronger than '*the mute march of Necessity*' and I am carrying it in me.'

A flaming warrior from the eternal peaks
Empowered to force the door denied and closed

Smote from Death's visage its dumb absolute
And burst the bounds of consciousness and Time.

Savitri embodies '*a flaming warrior*' who has come from the highest levels of consciousness, '*the eternal peaks*' and is '*empowered*' to force open a door that has been closed and forbidden. '*Smote*' is the past tense of 'to smite', meaning to give a blow. With one blow, she strikes off from the face of Death its mask of absoluteness, its wordless claim to rule everything in the universe. Savitri is able to strike off that pretence and break open the limits of Nature: '*burst the bounds of consciousness and Time.*'

Here Sri Aurobindo expresses the victory of Savitri in a few powerful words. It is significant that he does it here, at the end of this second canto which closes his introduction to the rest of the poem. This great epic is not like a detective story, where the author keeps you guessing until the very end who did it; he is telling us right at the beginning who did it, what they did and why; from the very beginning he is telling us who Savitri is, and why she is here, and that she will be successful in her mission. He is showing us the hugeness of the task that she had to do, but here he tells us that she fulfilled it successfully.

When we read these lines, we cannot help being reminded of the Mother's experience on February 29, 1956. Something about these lines seems to correspond to what she has described about her experience. She was standing in front of a huge closed door, as vast as the universe, and took a great golden hammer and struck one blow on the door, which sprang open, and all the force and light of the Supermind came pouring down on the earth.

The canto ends with the powerful words: '*And burst the bounds of consciousness and time*': the boundaries and the limitations of the material manifestation are shattered by the great act which Savitri is

empowered to perform '*for Earth and Men*'.

End of Canto Two

Canto Three
The Yoga of the King
The Yoga of the Soul's Release

Section 1, lines 1 to 145

The first two cantos of this 'Book of Beginnings', which we have already explored, form an overture or introduction to Sri Aurobindo's epic. After showing us the 'symbol dawn' of the day on which Satyavan must die, he introduces us to Savitri: who she is, her qualities, and 'the issue', the mission that she has taken birth to fulfil 'for Earth and Men'. At the end of the Canto Two, he tells us that she fulfils her mission. It is a tremendous challenge, but she is empowered to carry it out: she stands up and performs the great act which changes everything.

The rest of Book One is concerned with her father, King Aswapati. Savitri has come into the human world because of a tremendous effort of tapasya, spiritual endeavour, on the part of this King. That is why here at the beginning of Canto Three Sri Aurobindo says:

A world's desire compelled her mortal birth.

Savitri has been born as a human embodiment of the Supreme Divine Mother in response to the desire and aspiration of the whole world, embodied in one person, King Aswapati, who becomes her human father.

One in the front of the immemorial quest,
Protagonist of the mysterious play
In which the Unknown pursues himself through forms
And limits his eternity by the hours
And the blind Void struggles to live and see,
A thinker and toiler in the ideal's air,
Brought down to earth's dumb need her radiant power.

'*Her radiant power*': Savitri's power is shining and radiating like rays of the sun. That wonderful sun-like power has taken '*mortal birth*' in

response to the whole world's blind desire, and the '*world's desire*' has been embodied in a single individual: '*One in the front of the immemorial quest*'. A '*quest*' is a search and a journey: when we are searching for something we travel, inwardly if not outwardly. The Vedas speak about '*the human journey*', the journey in quest of divine fulfilment which is '*immemorial*': it has been going on for such a long time that no one can remember how long. This '*immemorial quest*' can be pictured as the upward-pointing triangle in Sri Aurobindo's symbol: there is '*one*' at the front of the quest, a single individual; as that one moves forward then more and more beings follow. The one who was at the front, at the very apex of the triangle at the time when this story is supposed to have happened, far back in the very dawn of human history, was the '*protagonist*' of a mysterious play or drama; a '*protagonist*' is the main character in a drama or a great historical event, the leader who embodies a particular movement, a representative acting on behalf of many other people; Arjuna was the protagonist of humanity at the time of the Gita; Sri Krishna was guiding him in order to bring about a significant change. In this story, King Aswapati is the protagonist of the mysterious play or game in which '*the Unknown pursues himself through forms*'. In an aphorism, Sri Aurobindo said that this is a game of hide and seek. In the manifestation, the one supreme consciousness has projected himself into a multitude of forms and beings: he hides himself in his many forms and in each of them he is trying to find himself again; this is the mysterious play in which the Unknown pursues himself, as if in a game of hide and seek, looking for himself in all the forms of the universe. The Unknown is eternal, but here in the manifestation he limits his eternity into years and days, hours and minutes and seconds. Through this game of hiding and seeking, a blind unconscious nothingness is trying to become conscious: '*the blind Void struggles to live and see*'. This is the mystery

of evolution. The one who at that far distant time was the protagonist leading the quest was '*a thinker and toiler in the ideal's air*'. The '*ideal*' is the high level of Mind where ideal forms of everything to be evolved in the course of the manifestation are kept. Aswapati's consciousness was centred on that high level; this '*thinker and toiler in the ideal's air*' '*brought down to earth's dumb need*' the radiant power of Savitri. Earth, the material principle, is '*dumb*,' she cannot speak, she cannot express her need; but the need is there and it becomes more and more conscious in human beings; Aswapati, as the protagonist of this quest, embodies and represents the need of the entire earth. It is in answer to his aspiration on behalf of the whole world that Savitri has been born.

His was a spirit that stooped from larger spheres
Into our province of ephemeral sight,
A colonist from immortality.

This protagonist is not an evolutionary being like us, developing upwards from the Inconscience of Matter; his spirit has '*stooped from larger spheres*'. 'To stoop' can mean simply to bend down, to pick something up or to talk to a small child; it is also the technical word for the coming down of a bird of prey: when a big bird of prey like an eagle or kite sees something below that it wants, it will 'stoop', meaning that it quickly comes down and seizes its prey; we shall find the word used in the second sense in several places in the poem, but here the first meaning seems to be intended.

This is what the Mother has said about this passage:

This is the description of the One through whom Savitri was born. Sri Aurobindo says that it is through the intermediary of somebody who did not belong to the earth but came from the higher and freer regions. ... This is the description of one of those who are not purely human, but whose origin is far

higher, far greater, and whose existence is much longer than the existence of the earth. When these come upon earth, it is to help the whole of humanity to rise towards the highest Consciousness.¹³

A great soul has come down from '*larger spheres*' into '*our province of ephemeral sight*'. A '*province*' is a part of a country. Sri Aurobindo describes the human world as a province, part of a larger empire which contains many other realms; it is a '*province of ephemeral sight*': '*ephemeral*' means 'lasting only a short time', 'quickly passing': our world is a place where things are seen for only a short time. Here on earth everything is subject to time, nothing lasts long, and our sight is fleeting, we see things only for a very short time. That '*one*' has come into our province as '*a colonist from immortality*'. A '*colonist*' leaves his home country to establish a colony somewhere else; in principle, it should be a place that is not yet developed or civilized. In the city-states of ancient Greece every seven years they would select young people of certain generation, give them a boat and send them out to find a suitable place to found a new city which would be a colony of the mother state. The earth was much less populated then than it is now. That is how the Greeks spread their civilization around the Mediterranean. When this '*protagonist*' came down from his larger spheres of immortal existence into '*our earthly province of ephemeral sight*', he came in order to establish here on earth a colony of the larger immortal spheres which are his home.

A pointing beam on earth's uncertain roads,
His birth held up a symbol and a sign;
His human self like a translucent cloak
Covered the All-Wise who leads the unseeing world.

Aswapati's birth is like a torch-light in the darkness, a '*pointing*

¹³ *About Savitri*, Part Three, Havyavahana Trust, Pondicherry 2005

beam' showing us which way to go on the '*uncertain roads*' of earth as we pursue the human journey. A great soul is a light that others can follow. '*His birth held up a symbol and a sign*': when a great being like Aswapati takes a human birth, it is a symbol of the divine presence which is born in all the forms and appearances of the manifestation, and a sign of the soul in each human being which has the capacity to turn towards a diviner future. Aswapati had a human body like everybody else and a human nature, but his was not thick and dark as ours is, veiling our inner light; his '*human self*' was '*like a translucent cloak*'. Anything which is '*translucent*' allows light to shine through it; most glass is '*transparent*' and we can see through it, but frosted glass is '*translucent*': although you cannot see through it clearly, it allows light to pass through. '*His human self like a translucent cloak / Covered the All-Wise who leads the unseeing world*'; perhaps we can say that this '*All-Wise*' is the universal Guru, the teacher who is guiding our '*unseeing world*' towards its higher destiny. Aswapati's '*human self*' was a transparent covering which allowed the light of the '*All-Wise*' to shine through and illumine the world. When we read these words, we cannot help associating them with Sri Aurobindo and what Sri Aurobindo represents for us.

Affiliated to cosmic Space and Time

And paying here God's debt to earth and man

A greater sonship was his divine right.

'*Affiliated*' is a word which is found in business and legal contexts, when units, businesses or institutions are closely linked. King Aswapati is '*affiliated*', closely connected, closely related '*to cosmic Space and Time*', to the larger immortal spheres that he has come from. He has come to earth as a colonist in order to pay '*God's debt to earth and man*'. God owes us a debt. Sri Aurobindo tells us in several places that a mutual debt binds god and humanity. God's

debt to us is that he has created all this and put us in this situation, and he owes it to us to get us out of it! On the other hand, we owe him a debt because he has created us to carry out his purpose of evolution; we have to pay our debt to him and he has to help us; that is his debt to us. Sri Aurobindo says that for Aswapati '*a greater sonship was his divine right*': he was not only a son of man, a human being; he was also a son of God, a divine being with a divine right. He has come here, to suffer '*the indignity of mortal life*', as Sri Aurobindo puts it¹⁴, for a purpose: to help pay the debt of God to man by uplifting the human race, helping it to move forward to its true destiny.

Although consenting to mortal ignorance,
His knowledge shared the Light ineffable.

Although he had consented, accepted, to be ignorant the way we human beings are, he had within him a knowledge that '*shared the Light ineffable*': Light is consciousness; his knowledge shared the transcendent consciousness which is '*ineffable*', beyond all expression.

A strength of the original Permanence
Entangled in the moment and its flow,
He kept the vision of the Vasts behind:
A power was in him from the Unknowable.

Aswapati is a power, a strength from '*the original Permanence*'. What is permanent does not change; behind all the changing appearances of the world, there is an original unchanging Permanence that remains forever the same; out of the '*original Permanence*' this strength has come, and although here on the earth he is '*entangled*', tied up in the flow of time, he still keeps within him the vision of

¹⁴*Savitri*, CWSA volumes 33 and 34, p. 313, line 137

the 'Vasts' that lie behind and beyond Space and Time. When you are in strong wind, your hair gets '*entangled*', tangled up so that you cannot get a comb through it easily; or if you go deep into the forest you may get tripped up and caught amongst creepers so that you cannot move: you get '*entangled*'. Aswapati has come here into the entanglement of Time, but he still keeps '*the vision of the Vasts behind*'. '*A power was in him from the Unknowable*', from the ever-mysterious transcendent Reality. Beyond the highest that can be known there lies the great mystery, the '*Unknowable*' that is forever beyond total comprehension.

An archivist of the symbols of the Beyond,
A treasurer of superhuman dreams,
He bore the stamp of mighty memories
And shed their grandiose ray on human life.
His days were a long growth to the Supreme.

An '*archivist*' is a person who takes care of archives, who collects records, documents, information, putting them in order and making them accessible. Aswapati is '*an archivist of the symbols of the Beyond*', collecting in his consciousness '*symbols of the Beyond*', the Reality that lies beyond the manifestation. He is also '*a treasurer of superhuman dreams*', collecting and treasuring dreams that are beyond anything that we human beings dream, glorious ideas and wonderful visions. He carries '*the stamp of mighty memories*': powerful memories of larger spheres have left their '*stamp*' upon him; the influence of those '*mighty memories*' is radiating out and having an effect on the world around him as he sheds '*their grandiose ray*' on human life: the glorious light radiated by his mighty memories greatens and heightens the life of human beings around him. '*His days were a long growth to the Supreme*': each day he is growing nearer and nearer to the Supreme Origin; he is the

protagonist of the human journey, of the unfolding of the Divine purpose in the world.

A skyward being nourishing its roots
On sustenance from occult spiritual founts
Climbed through white rays to meet an unseen Sun.

The image is of a plant growing: Aswapati is '*a skyward being*', constantly growing towards the sky, the higher levels of consciousness; his being is '*nourishing its roots*', getting its '*sustenance*', the food it needs to grow, from hidden '*spiritual founts*', sources of spiritual energy. A plant has its roots in the earth and draws up nutrients mixed in water in order to grow; it also manufactures food from sunlight falling on its leaves; Aswapati's being is nourishing its roots from hidden sources of spiritual energy and growing up towards the higher levels of consciousness through the pure and integral '*white rays*' of the inner sun. A plant needs sunlight, and grows towards the light; similarly, Aswapati's '*skyward being*' is growing up towards '*an unseen Sun*', a divine source of Light and Energy which cannot yet be seen.

His soul lived as eternity's delegate,
His mind was like a fire assailing heaven,
His will a hunter in the trails of light.

These are different parts of his being: first, the soul: '*His soul lived as eternity's delegate*'. A '*delegate*' is a representative, someone who has been sent to represent a group or an organisation. Aswapati's soul lives in the world as a representative of eternity in time. '*His mind was like a fire assailing heaven*': burning with aspiration and will. 'To assail' means 'to attack': his mind was besieging and trying to conquer heaven, the higher levels of consciousness. His will was '*a hunter in the trails of light*', always searching for light wherever it could be found; just as a hunter following an animal will follow its

tracks, its '*trails*', his will was always following the traces of the higher light.

An ocean impulse lifted every breath;
Each action left the footprints of a god,
Each moment was a beat of puissant wings.

The soul, the mind, the will have been described; now comes the life force, the *prana*. We have a limited life force, but in Aswapati '*an ocean impulse lifted every breath*', a limitless surge of power like an ocean supported every breath he took. Many of the actions that we do have little or no significance, their effect is gone very quickly; but Aswapati's actions left a lasting impression, a permanent mark like '*the footprints of god*', and each moment of his life was like the powerful wing-beat of a great bird.

The little plot of our mortality
Touched by this tenant from the heights became
A playground of the living Infinite.

Aswapati touched '*the little plot of our mortality*', the little piece of land where we human beings live; he has come down from '*larger spheres*' to live here as a '*tenant*' for some time; a '*tenant*' stays for a time in a house that does not belong to him. By his touch and presence, this '*little plot*' became '*a playground of the living Infinite*', a place for the divine to play amongst his many selves.

This bodily appearance is not all;
The form deceives, the person is a mask;
Hid deep in man celestial powers can dwell.

'*This bodily appearance*', the physical appearance we present to the outside world, is not all there is to us; the outer form is deceptive; it does not show what is hidden within; '*the person*', the role that we play to the world and to ourselves, is a '*mask*' that has been put on

temporarily by the inner being; behind the appearances and the superficial personality heavenly powers are hidden; deep within our humanity '*celestial powers can dwell*'.

His fragile ship conveys through the sea of years
An incognito of the Imperishable.

When a big celebrity wants to travel privately and quietly, to be able to move around without everybody recognising them, they will travel '*incognito*', under an assumed name, wearing dark glasses or even a disguise to avoid being recognised; '*incognito*' comes from Latin and means 'unknown'. The '*fragile ship*', the perishable human body is carrying the '*Imperishable*' in disguise '*through the sea of years*': the one who cannot die, the one who is always young and not affected by age, is carried through time in the ship of a human body, '*incognito*', wearing the many different disguises of the world.

A spirit that is a flame of God abides,
A fiery portion of the Wonderful,
Artist of his own beauty and delight,
Immortal in our mortal poverty.

'*Abides*' means dwells, stays or remains. Within us there is a living spirit, a spirit which is like '*a flame of God*', a small flame of the great sun of divine presence, '*a fiery portion of the Wonderful*'. A '*portion*' is a part or a share. The spirit abiding within us is the '*artist of his own beauty and delight*', shaping his world like an artist and delighting in the beauty that he shapes. The spirit is a flame that shapes our lives from within; it is immortal, but it lives '*in our mortal poverty*', within all the limitations and littleness of human nature; we are '*mortal*', born to die, but an immortal and imperishable '*flame of God*' is dwelling within each of us.

This sculptor of the forms of the Infinite,

This screened unrecognised Inhabitant,
Initiate of his own veiled mysteries,
Hides in a small dumb seed his cosmic thought.

The spirit that is '*immortal in our mortal poverty*' is described by Sri Aurobindo as an artist and a '*sculptor*' who creates forms, '*forms of the Infinite*'. The Infinite is limitless and beyond all forms, but the indwelling spirit creates forms of the Infinite. He is the '*screened unrecognised Inhabitant*' abiding within each one, veiled, unrecognised, '*incognito*'; he is an '*initiate*' who has secret knowledge that is not easily accessible; he has a secret inner knowledge of '*his own veiled mysteries*', of the occult and mysterious ways of his own being and action. He '*hides in a small dumb seed his cosmic thought*': in a very small form within us which is '*dumb*', which cannot speak, cannot express itself, he hides his whole universal idea; eventually the seed will sprout and reveal its hidden possibilities.

In the mute strength of the occult Idea
Determining predestined shape and act,
Passenger from life to life, from scale to scale,
Changing his imaged self from form to form,
He regards the icon growing by his gaze
And in the worm foresees the coming god.

The sculptor, the artist spirit, uses '*the mute strength of the occult Idea*' which lies hidden in that little seed to determine '*predestined shape and act*'. '*Predestined*' implies that things are decided in advance, that our lives and actions are predetermined; it is not a very popular idea nowadays, for we feel that we have a power of choice; but still, most people believe in cause and effect, and know that our choices lead to certain consequences. Determinism says that things and people are shaped by what happens to them and the experiences

they pass through and these things will have effects in the future. Here Sri Aurobindo says that the sculptor spirit hidden in the form determines in advance the course of development of the seed he has planted. He himself lives within that seed; he passes '*from life to life, from scale to scale*', changing the size and shape he has imaged for himself. A human sculptor uses hands and tools to create his forms; the artist spirit uses his power of vision to shape the progressive forms of his creations. He is always watching, seeing all that is happening; that look of his, that '*gaze*', guides the seed how it has to grow. Sri Aurobindo calls the form an '*icon*': an image of a god. The icon is changing '*from life to life, from scale to scale*', but all the changes that it goes through are determined by the gaze of the artist spirit dwelling within it, the '*artist of his own beauty and delight*'. Through the whole process of evolution he watches that individual seed growing; when it is only a worm, an insect or an amoeba he knows that in the full course of its development it will become a divinity: '*in the worm he foresees the coming god.*'

At last the traveller in the paths of Time
Arrives on the frontiers of eternity.

Through these different forms, the traveller moves '*in the paths of Time*', until he at last he reaches '*the frontiers of eternity*' where time and eternity meet.

In the transient symbol of humanity draped,
He feels his substance of undying self
And loses his kinship to mortality.

When he arrives on that frontier, although he is still '*draped*' or covered in '*the transient symbol*' of the human form, '*he feels his substance of undying self*': he no longer feels himself to be mortal as we do, for he has lost '*his kinship to mortality*'. He knows himself as an immortal being who is no longer connected with '*mortality*', no

longer subject to death. A '*symbol*' is a shape which has a deeper meaning; Sri Aurobindo says that the form of humanity is a symbol which comes and goes, it is '*transient*', passing: but even though he is wearing the human form draped over him like a cloak, when '*the traveller in time*' arrives on the frontiers of eternity, '*he feels his substance of undying self*' and realises that he has an immortal body, made of immortal substance.

A beam of the Eternal smites his heart,
His thought stretches into infinitude;
All in him turns to spirit vastnesses.

This is what '*the traveller in the paths of time*' experiences when he reaches '*the frontiers of Eternity*' and '*feels his substance of undying self*': he is struck by a wonderful sunbeam, a beam of eternal light: '*a beam of the Eternal smites his heart*'. '*His thought stretches*', his mind widens '*into infinitude*' and everything in him '*turns to spirit vastnesses*'. '*To smite*' means to strike, to hit hard. You can smite somebody with a sword, but this is a strong ray of light coming from the eternal and striking his heart, the centre of his being.

His soul breaks out to join the Oversoul,
His life is oceaned by that superlife.

Sri Aurobindo is describing what happens to different parts of the being: the heart feels a beam of eternal light striking it, the mind opens, the whole nature widens and becomes vast; his soul, his flame of God, breaks out of its coverings, its disguises, and unites with its origin, '*the Oversoul*', the central being above. His life changes too: our individual life force is limited; but when the soul breaks out of the human limits it feels itself absorbed into the limitless ocean of superlife.

He has drunk from the breasts of the Mother of the worlds;

A topless Supernature fills his frame:
She adopts his spirit's everlasting ground
As the security of her changing world
And shapes the figure of her unborn might.

Then the '*traveller*' realises that all the time he has been drinking '*from the breasts of the Mother of the worlds*'. She is feeding all of us all the time; that is where we are all taking our nourishment from, although we do not realise it. Along with that realisation he finds that he is no longer subject to the limiting Nature which we mortals experience; instead, '*a topless Supernature fills his frame*' the framework of the body; that '*Supernature*' has no upper limit, it is '*topless*'. Then '*the Mother of the worlds*', seeing that this being is ready, takes the '*everlasting ground*' of his spirit as the firm foundation for her ever-changing world, and '*shapes the figure of her unborn might*s': because his spirit has become conscious and stabilized in its own sense of immortality, all the aspects of his nature can be changed: in and through him she can reveal '*the figure*', the shape or image, '*of her unborn might*s': powers and qualities that she has not yet given birth to, future possibilities which she wants to bring about in her world.

Immortally she conceives herself in him,
In the creature the unveiled Creatrix works:
Her face is seen through his face, her eyes through his eyes;
Her being is his through a vast identity.

'*Immortally she conceives herself in him*': the Mother of the worlds prepares to give birth to herself in that one individual in an immortal form; '*in the creature*' (the human frame) '*the Creatrix*' (the creative Mother) works '*unveiled*'. She is working secretly all the time, of course, in all of us; but it is only after this moment of realisation comes that she can work '*unveiled*', openly revealing her

work. '*Her face*', the face of the Mighty Mother, '*is seen through his face, her eyes through his eyes*', and there is an identification: '*Her being is his through a vast identity*', a vast oneness: Spirit and Supernature become one.

Then is revealed in man the overt Divine.

A static Oneness and dynamic Power

Descend in him, the integral Godhead's seals;

His soul and body take that splendid stamp.

When that happens, '*the overt Divine*' is '*revealed in man*'. '*Overt*', means open, no longer hidden, occult or covert. The overt Divine is expressed in two aspects: a '*static Oneness*', unchanging and immutable, supporting everything; and a '*dynamic Power*' which acts; both the Oneness and the Power descend into the realised individual as '*the integral Godhead's seals*', the marks or signs of integral divinity; '*his soul and body take that splendid stamp*': this is the goal of Sri Aurobindo's yoga: both soul and body shall be stamped by the seals of integral Godhead, and the whole being shall be transformed.

A long dim preparation is man's life,

A circle of toil and hope and war and peace

Tracked out by Life on Matter's obscure ground.

Sometimes we feel that our life is just going round in circles: toil, hard effort, hope, conflict, peace, constantly circling around and around; but Sri Aurobindo says that human life is '*a long dim preparation*'; it is '*dim*', there is not much light in it or on it, so we do not see where we are going; and it takes a long time, because Life is circling around on its journey on the dark inert basis of Matter; but still, this long dim process is a preparation for something else.

In his climb to a peak no feet have ever trod,

He seeks through a penumbra shot with flame
A veiled reality half-known, ever missed,
A search for something or someone never found,
Cult of an ideal never made real here,
An endless spiral of ascent and fall
Until at last is reached the giant point
Through which his Glory shines for whom we were made
And we break into the infinity of God.

Man, humanity, all human beings are taking part, whether we know it or not, in this human journey. Here Sri Aurobindo says it is a climb towards a '*peak*', a mountain top or summit experience which no one has yet reached; no feet have stepped on the top of that mountain, but we are all climbing towards it '*through a penumbra shot with flame*', a twilight lit up by fiery flashes; we are searching for '*a veiled reality, half known, ever missed*'. We only half-know what we are searching for, but something in us is always missing it and so we are continually travelling on, looking for it, seeking for '*something or someone never found*'. '*Cult*' means worship; we are worshipping '*an ideal never made real here*': we have a sense that things should be better than they are, more ideal, more perfect, and that search for something better and more perfect keeps us always moving forwards. We are all following after different flames and flashes of light according to our nature or our experience; what we share is a longing for something better: it is the attraction of our predestined future drawing us towards it. This '*long dim preparation*' is '*an endless spiral*': not just a circle, but a spiral; although it goes round and round, it is progressing until '*at last is reached the giant point*'; a point has no dimension, but here Sri Aurobindo says '*the giant point*': it is a huge and important point because through it is shining the Glory of the Supreme, the '*one for whom we were made*'. When we reach that '*giant point*' we shall break out of the penumbra

and the seeking, *'into the infinity of God'*.

Across our nature's border line we escape
Into Supernature's arc of living light.

An *'arc'* is part of the circumference of a circle: from this lower hemisphere where we live now, through that giant point, we escape across the border line of our human nature into Supernature, which has a different border or horizon, an *'arc of living light'*.

This now was witnessed in that son of Force;
In him that high transition laid its base.

Sri Aurobindo has been telling us about the journey which all human beings are following. Here he says that this whole process, of preparation and finally arriving at the giant point and breaking through into Supernature, was seen *'in that son of Force'*: Aswapati. He refers to Aswapati as a *'son of Force'* who belongs to a family of great dynamic souls, sons of Shakti, the Supreme Mother. In him *'that high transition'*, the passage from human nature to Supernature *'laid its base'*: a foundation is prepared in him, as the protagonist, the representative of the world's desire, the One in the front of the immemorial quest.

Original and supernal Immanence
Of which all Nature's process is the art,
The cosmic Worker set his secret hand
To turn this frail mud-engine to heaven-use.

'Immanence' means *'dwelling within'*; the *'immanent Divine'* dwells within the entire manifestation, and within each of these material forms of itself; it is the *'Original and supernal Immanence / Of which all Nature's process is the art'*. This indwelling Presence is the artist and sculptor of his own beauty and delight; all Nature's processes are the art of that artist, the *'cosmic Worker'* who is shaping the whole

universe from within. In Aswapati *'the cosmic Worker set his secret hand / To turn this frail mud-engine'*, the human body, this little engine made of matter, *'to heaven use'*. When the cosmic Worker takes up *'this frail mud engine'* it can be made fit for use by heavenly powers.

A Presence wrought behind the ambiguous screen:

It beat his soil to bear a Titan's weight,

Refining half-hewn blocks of natural strength

It built his soul into a statued god.

That Immanence is a *'Presence'* at work behind *'the ambiguous screen'* of material appearances. *'Wrought'* is the past tense of a verb that means *'to work'*, *'to shape'*; it is often used as an adjective: we speak of *'wrought iron'*, iron that has been worked on and shaped; here it is an active verb. The Presence was working secretly on Aswapati's being *'behind the ambiguous screen'* of appearances. When something is *'ambiguous'*, we are not sure what it means, its meaning is unclear. Behind the screen of ambiguous appearances that Presence is working; like a blacksmith shaping wrought iron, it is beating, hammering Aswapati's *'soil'*, his physical matter, to make it strong enough to bear the weight of a superhuman being, a *'Titan'*. In Aswapati's nature there are some *'blocks of natural strength'* but they are only *'half-hewn'*; when a sculptor is preparing to make a sculpture he takes a block of stone that has come from a quarry only very roughly cut, *'half-hewn'*; *'to hew'* means to cut with effort: we hew wood, or a way through the jungle, or rocks in a quarry. Now the cosmic Worker starts *'refining'* those half-hewn blocks of natural strength, working on them, chiselling and polishing to make them perfect, as a sculptor makes a statue out of marble, until Aswapati's soul has been built *'into a statued god.'*

The Craftsman of the magic stuff of self

Who labours at his high and difficult plan
In the wide workshop of the wonderful world,
Modelled in inward Time his rhythmic parts.

A sculptor is a '*craftsman*'; he has the skill to make and shape things. This divine Craftsman is not using clay, wood, stone or metal, but '*the magic stuff of self*', the subtle stuff of which everything is made. He is labouring '*at his high and difficult plan / In the wide workshop of the wonderful world*'. He has a plan for a new creation, and this world is his workshop. To prepare this particular Aswapati figure, the Craftsman is '*modelling*'. When a sculptor is preparing a big sculpture he will shape a model in clay before he casts it in bronze or sculpts it in stone. '*In inward time*' the cosmic Craftsman is shaping, modelling, what he wants Aswapati to be: all the '*rhythmic parts*' he is working on will make a glorious statued god when he has finished; he keeps on working at it '*in inward Time*'.

Then came the abrupt transcendent miracle:
The masked immaculate Grandeur could outline,
At travail in the occult womb of life,
His dreamed magnificence of things to be.

Then a moment comes when the statue is really finished. Suddenly there is the miraculous moment of '*abrupt transcendent miracle*' when the Craftsman, the immanent Presence, '*the masked immaculate Grandeur*', stainlessly pure but '*masked*', working incognito, in disguise, is able to outline '*his dreamed magnificence of things to be*'. At last he could create in Aswapati an outline of the glorious beings who will inhabit the world in future, '*his dreamed magnificence of things to be*'. '*Travail*' means labour and especially the labour of a woman giving birth; that Grandeur has been '*at travail in the occult womb of life*', secretly preparing new forms for Life to give birth to; now this Aswapati figure that he has been working on can be seen.

A crown of the architecture of the worlds,
A mystery of married Earth and Heaven
Annexed divinity to the mortal scheme.
A Seer was born, a shining Guest of Time.

It appears as a '*crown of the architecture of the worlds*', a supreme crowning achievement of the manifestation, '*a mystery of married earth and Heaven*'; perhaps we can say a union of matter and spirit which connects '*divinity to the mortal scheme*'. Sometimes a country will take over or 'annexe' another, making them one; this '*mystery of married earth and heaven*' unites '*the mortal scheme*' to '*divinity*': Aswapati has become the connecting link between them. '*A Seer was born, a shining Guest of Time*': a '*Seer*' is a rishi, a prophet, a highly-developed being who is no longer limited by time, but living in it as a guest. Aswapati is this rishi, this '*shining Guest of Time*'.

For him mind's limiting firmament ceased above.

When the cosmic Worker has done his work, Aswapati is no longer limited by the human mind, which for us is like a '*limiting firmament*'; '*firmament*' implies something that is fixed and immovable; for us mind is like that, a state that we cannot get out of or go beyond. Now Aswapati is released from that limitation. There is no longer any limit for him; everything opens up.

Then follow two mysterious lines:

In the griffin forefront of the Night and Day
A gap was rent in the all-concealing vault;

The second line is easier to understand: '*A gap was rent*', a gap is torn open in '*the all-concealing vault*'; a '*vault*' is a curved roof or ceiling; this vault is the limiting firmament, the closed sky or lid of mind, which hides all the truth that lies beyond; for Aswapati, a gap is torn open in '*the all-concealing vault*'. This happens, Sri Aurobindo

says, *'In the griffin forefront of the Night and Day'*. A *'griffin'* is a symbolic creature from ancient Greek mythology, a combination of a lion and a powerful bird of prey, with the body of a winged lion and a big beak like an eagle or vulture; the lion is the king of animals, representing power and royalty, similarly an eagle represents great power in the sky: the griffin can move everywhere, in both heaven and earth. In the ancient Greek tradition griffins drew the chariot of the Goddess of Necessity, the Goddess of Fate, pulling her car as she moved. We might say that the griffin is at the forefront of this world of duality, our world of Night and Day, carrying everything that is determined by the laws of Necessity and Fate; but now *'a gap is rent in the all-concealing vault'* and Aswapati moves into a completely different state.

The conscious ends of being went rolling back:

The landmarks of the little person fell,

The island ego joined its continent.

As a result, *'the conscious ends of being went rolling back'*, like a vast curtain. There are no longer any fixed limits for Aswapati: *'the landmarks of the little person fell'*: the fixed features delimiting the small human personality disappear. The individual ego is like a small island cut off from the infinity of things, but with this experience *'the island ego joined its continent'*: as if the sea between them has dried up, it rejoins the huge land mass, the huge solid state that it belongs to, no longer a separated island but connected to a much larger whole.

Overpassed was this world of rigid limiting forms:

Life's barriers opened into the Unknown.

Aswapati passed beyond this world of matter with its *'rigid limiting forms'*; the limiting barriers of life opened up into the vast Unknown.

Abolished were conception's covenants
And, striking off subjection's rigorous clause,
Annulled the soul's treaty with Nature's nescience.

Conception's '*covenants*' were '*abolished*'. A '*covenant*' is an agreement; for Aswapati now the ordinary accepted ways of thinking are '*abolished*', wiped out, they no longer exist. Sri Aurobindo says that as long as we are evolving in the ego the soul has an agreement, a '*treaty*' with the nescience of Nature; as governments make treaties between them, the soul has made a '*treaty*' with Nature; according to the conditions of that treaty, the soul has agreed to be subject to the way that Nature works; but for Aswapati now that treaty with the '*nescience*', the not-knowing of Nature, has been '*annulled*', cancelled; the '*rigorous clause*' in the treaty by which the soul accepted to be subject to Nature is struck off, crossed out and cancelled, so that the soul becomes master of Nature instead of subject to her. During most of the evolutionary process, the soul accepts the way that Nature is doing things; but when we reach the giant point where the higher forces pour into us, that is all changed: the soul becomes the master of Nature.

All the grey inhibitions were torn off
And broken the intellect's hard and lustrous lid;
Truth unpartitioned found immense sky-room;
An empyrean vision saw and knew;
The bounded mind became a boundless light,
The finite self mated with infinity.

'All the grey inhibitions were torn off': an '*inhibition*' is an inner restriction that holds us back. Perhaps you would spontaneously like to do something, but you feel: "Oh, people will be upset. I've been taught that I mustn't do this thing." There are many inhibitions that prevent us from acting entirely spontaneously, and

sometimes they even hold back the soul. Sri Aurobindo says the inhibitions are 'grey', a grey veil or skin, a covering that is limiting the soul, holding it back. For Aswapati now, these '*grey inhibitions*' are torn off, and the hard, shining lid formed by the mind, '*the intellect's hard and lustrous lid*' is broken. The Upanishads speak of a golden lid that hides the Truth from us; as long as we are limited by that lid we cannot grasp the Truth, which is so infinitely vast. We can only get a little bit of truth into our minds, and we put it into the shape of words, of concepts and ideas and hold on to those and feel, think and say: "That is the truth." It is only when a gap is rent in the all-concealing vault, the grey inhibitions are torn off and the intellect's hard and lustrous lid is broken that we can experience '*Truth unpartitioned*', Truth no longer separated and divided. We use a partition to divide one room into two, or a country gets partitioned, divided. '*Truth unpartitioned*' is no longer divided; it finds '*immense sky-room*': Aswapati has the living experience that there is no limit to the infinite extent of Truth.

This is a very strong, absolutely overpowering experience, the experience of the spiritual realisation. Everything that is familiar, all the landmarks of the little person, are gone; instead there is '*an empyrean vision*'. The '*empyrean*' is the heavenly sky. Now Aswapati has a power of vision like the boundless sky, he can see everything in a single gaze: his '*bounded mind became a boundless light*'. There are no more boundaries, no more limits. '*The finite self*', this little limited self, '*mated with infinity*', which is another way of saying that '*the island ego joined its continent*': the '*finite self*' is not dissolved, it is still there, but it has united with its infinite source.

His march now soared into an eagle's flight.

Aswapati has been marching forward on the human journey, but at this point his march becomes '*an eagle's flight*'. Eagles have powerful

wings and can fly very high; they can also see very acutely, and it is even said that the eagle can look directly and steadily at the sun without damaging its eyes; its superb powers of flight and vision make the eagle a good symbol for a great soul.

Out of apprenticeship to Ignorance
Wisdom upraised him to her master craft
And made him an archmason of the soul,
A builder of the Immortal's secret house,
An aspirant to supernal Timelessness:

As a human being, Aswapati has been apprenticed to Ignorance; an apprentice is a young person who learns a craft by acting as an assistant to a master. So far, Aswapati has been an apprentice of Ignorance; Ignorance has been teaching him, helping him to grow; but now Wisdom comes, takes him away from Ignorance, raises him up and makes him into a master craftsman, '*an archmason of the soul*'. An '*archmason*' is not just a simple builder but a highly skilled master mason. Aswapati is building '*the Immortal's secret house*'. That is what all of us eventually have to do, we have to help build the Immortal's secret house so that the divine presence can be expressed here, even in the body. He is '*an aspirant to supernal Timelessness*': he is aspiring to a divine immortal state that is free from the constraints of Time and Space.

Freedom and empire called to him from on high;
Above mind's twilight and life's star-led night
There gleamed the dawn of a spiritual day.

'*Freedom and empire*', Swaraj and Samraj, are two of the goals of Yoga: Swaraj means 'self-rule': the yogi is in full control of himself, free from domination by nature and her impulses; as a consequence of being free in himself, he is able to rule nature: like a great ruler, he will have the power to control and guide a vast empire. This is

the great achievement that is calling Aswapati to go even higher. The mind's consciousness, Sri Aurobindo says, is like '*twilight*', the half-light between day and night; life too has a kind of consciousness, but it is darker than twilight, it is like a night with a few stars which give a little light and an indication of which way to go; but beyond the twilight and the night lies the possibility of a new dawn, the sunrise of a spiritual day, a full consciousness. When the dawn starts to appear there is a very soft beautiful light, a '*gleam*' which grows brighter as the sun rises. Aswapati now sees the first gleam of '*the dawn of a spiritual day*'.

End of Section 1

Section 2, lines 146 to 436

As so he grew into his larger self,
Humanity framed his movements less and less;
A greater being saw a greater world.

As Aswapati grew into the '*larger self*' that he has become aware of, the normal human nature limited and determined him less and less: '*Humanity framed his movements less and less*'. His being has become greater and his vision of the world has also become greater.

A fearless will for knowledge dared to erase
The lines of safety Reason draws that bar
Mind's soar, soul's dive into the Infinite.

'*A fearless will for knowledge*': is one of the characteristics of Aswapati, and now this fearless will for greater knowledge is courageous enough to wipe out '*the lines of safety*' which Reason draws for us, which prevent the mind from going off-track at the impulsions of the lower nature, but also bar it from soaring up like an eagle into higher levels of consciousness and prevent the soul from diving into the ocean of the Infinite.

You may remember the incident in the Ramayana where Sri Rama goes off into the forest to chase the golden deer and leaves Lakshmana behind to look after Sita; then they hear a voice calling – it sounds like Rama's voice; Sita says, 'Oh, something has happened to Rama – go!' She forces Lakshmana to go and look for Rama, to help him. Then Lakshmana draws a line of safety and tells Sita, 'Stay inside this line – do not step across it.' Unfortunately Sita does; she gets carried away by Ravana and the whole story unfolds. Reason draws lines of safety for us and tells us not to step beyond them; and as long as we are in our present state of development we

have to observe those lines of safety. The Mother warns us, 'Do not give up your reason, otherwise you will become one of those half-crazy people there are already too many of in the world.' We have to open up to a higher knowledge, but we should keep within the lines of safety which Reason draws; only when that higher knowledge becomes overwhelming, when we have an experience such as Aswapati has had, then we can dare to erase those lines of safety so that the mind can soar upward, and the soul can dive into the depths.

Even his first steps broke our small earth-bounds
And loitered in a vaster freer air.
In hands sustained by a transfiguring Might
He caught up lightly like a giant's bow
Left slumbering in a sealed and secret cave
The powers that sleep unused in man within.

Even Aswapati's first steps in this freer movement go beyond '*our small earth-bounds*', the boundaries of our normal earthly limitations; he '*loitered in a vaster freer air*'. The word '*loiter*' suggests the way that a person moves when they are not in a hurry, when they take their time to look at and enjoy what is around them; here it gives the sense of a great ease and leisure – when we go beyond our earth bounds there must be this sense of ease and freedom. Then comes the image of the '*giant's bow*'. Again this reminds us of a story in the Ramayana. Sita's father has a bow that is so huge and heavy that nobody can pick it up to set a bow-string to it; but Rama shows that he has the power to take up the bow, to string it and use it. Here the giant's bow represents powers that are sleeping within us, unused. Aswapati is able get hold of those powers easily and use them, because his hands are supported, '*sustained by a transfiguring Might*', a great strength that is transfiguring him, making him more than

human. To 'transfigure' something means to turn it into a higher form. That bow has been left '*slumbering*', a beautiful poetic word meaning 'sleeping', '*in a sealed and secret cave*'. There is a secret cave, sealed up and hidden deep within our being; divine powers are sleeping there unused; when a transfiguring Might supports us from above, we can lift up the giant's bow and make use of those unused powers.

He made of miracle a normal act
And turned to a common part of divine works,
Magnificently natural at this height,
Efforts that would shatter the strength of mortal hearts,
Pursued in a royalty of mighty ease
Aims too sublime for Nature's daily will:
The gifts of the spirit crowding came to him;
They were his life's pattern and his privilege.

Using those powers, things that would seem miraculous to us became '*a normal act*' for Aswapati: he could turn them into '*a common part of divine works*'. At the height where he is now, all this becomes '*magnificently natural*'; if normal human beings would try to do such great things, the effort would break them, it would '*shatter the strength of mortal hearts*'; but Aswapati could now pursue, follow, aims that are too sublime, too high, '*for Nature's daily will*', the normal will of beings like us, still dominated by the lower nature. Not only could Aswapati pursue these high aims, he could pursue them '*in a royalty of mighty ease*', in a very easy sovereign way. In addition to all this, '*the gifts of the spirit crowding came to him.*' There are so many gifts of the spirit: they came to him in crowds, many at the same time. For Aswapati now, these gifts became '*his life's pattern and his privilege*'. A '*privilege*' is granted only exceptionally, it is not for everyone. Now Sri Aurobindo will tell us

more about '*the gifts of the spirit*':

A pure perception lent its lucent joy:
Its intimate vision waited not to think;
It enveloped all Nature in a single glance,
It looked into the very self of things;
Deceived no more by form he saw the soul.

The first essential thing, the first gift of the spirit is '*a pure perception*'. Our perception, the way that we see and perceive things, is very mixed. Perceptions come to us mainly through our senses and are then apprehended by our sense mind, which is clouded by many things, things in the environment, subconscious things, things we were taught as children, or by our vital movements: we like this, we do not like that, we are afraid of this or that; so our perception is clouded and dimmed. One gift of the spirit is to clear all that away and give a pure perception which brings a '*lucent joy*', a joy that is full of light. The '*intimate vision*' of the pure perception comes from deep and close within, and it does not wait to think "What I am seeing? What was that?" It is spontaneous; it can envelop '*all Nature in a single glance*'; at the same time it can look deep '*into the very self of things*'. So Aswapati is no longer deceived by the forms seen on the outside, the surface of things, the appearances that veil the soul behind: now, with that pure perception, he can see through the appearances to the soul.

In beings it knew what lurked to them unknown;
It seized the idea in mind, the wish in the heart;
It plucked out from grey folds of secrecy
The motives which from their own sight men hide.

When he looks at other beings, human beings, the pure perception lets him know things that those beings do not know themselves, things that are lurking in them. 'To lurk' means to hide, the way a

wild animal hides in order to catch its prey, or a thief hides in the bushes so that when he sees that you have gone away and left the door unlocked, he can enter your house. There are things hiding in us which we do not know are there, but that pure perception could see them. It could seize hold of the ideas that people have in their minds, the wishes in their hearts. The '*motives*', the reasons people have for doing certain things, saying or wishing or thinking certain things, are often wrapped up in '*grey folds of secrecy*', hidden from view; but the pure perception is able to unveil the motives that people have hidden even from their own sight. Sometimes we give to ourselves and other people good reasons for things that we do, but the real motives may be hidden under '*grey folds of secrecy*' inside. The pure perception can see through all that: it gives a truth-sight, a truth-feeling.

He felt the beating life in other men
Invade him with their happiness and their grief;
Their love, their anger, their unspoken hopes
Entered in currents or in pouring waves
Into the immobile ocean of his calm.

Aswapati could feel '*the beating life in other men*' invading him, coming into him: their happiness, their sorrows, their love, their anger and the '*unspoken hopes*' which they have never revealed to anyone; all those feelings enter '*the immobile ocean of calm*' that he has become, either '*in currents*', thin streams, or '*in pouring waves*'. He perceives them entering his vast calm consciousness and remains undisturbed, unmoved.

He heard the inspired sound of his own thoughts
Re-echoed in the vault of other minds;
The world's thought-streams travelled into his ken;
His inner self grew near to others' selves

And bore a kinship's weight, a common tie,
Yet stood untouched, king of itself, alone.

He is aware of the sound of his own thoughts, inspired from above, going out into the world and coming echoing back to him; they have been received by '*the vault of other minds*' and come echoing back to him; in a cave or a room or a big open space covered by a '*vault*', a curved dome or ceiling, sounds will echo. He heard the returning echo of his own thoughts coming back to him from other minds. In fact all '*the world's thought-streams travelled into his ken*': he became aware of the currents of thought streaming through the world; our '*ken*' is what we know, or what we can know and be aware of; if something is '*beyond our ken*', we are not aware of it and we do not know anything about it. '*Thought-streams*' are constantly moving around in the mental atmosphere of the earth, passing through one mind and on to another in what is called '*the noosphere*', a subtle atmosphere of thought-waves enveloping the whole earth; we are normally not aware of that subtle atmosphere although it is affecting and influencing us all the time; but Aswapati is now aware of them. '*His inner self grew near to other selves / And bore a kinship's weight*': our '*kin*' are the people who are related to us, our relatives; he can feel the relationship, the closeness, the common tie between himself and other beings; his inner self feels this nearness, and yet remains detached: it '*stood untouched, king of itself, alone*.' With this calm, this centeredness, focussed in his deepest self, he is able to perceive things going on around him and all over the world, but remains unaffected by them: his inner being remains free, '*king of itself, alone*.'

A magical accord quickened and attuned
To ethereal symphonies the old earthy strings;
It raised the servitors of mind and life

To be happy partners in the soul's response,
Tissue and nerve were turned to sensitive chords,
Records of lustre and ecstasy; it made
The body's means the spirit's acolytes.

Here is another gift of the spirit: in addition to the '*pure perception*' which reveals the truth behind earthly appearances, Aswapati is granted '*a magical accord*', a sense of sympathy and harmony. Here Sri Aurobindo uses some images from music. '*Accord*' happens when things are in tune, in harmony; '*quicken*' means 'awakened' or 'made more alive, more sensitive', and '*attuned*' means 'set in tune', in harmony. Some musical instruments have two sets of strings, the strings that the musician plays and others that resonate in '*accord*', in sympathy, in harmony. The musician must tune all his strings so that they resonate in harmony, '*attuned*'. The individual being is like a musical instrument with many strings which respond and resonate to the vibrations of things around us; in Aswapati now '*the old earthy strings*' of the ordinary nervous system are '*quicken*', woken up and made more sensitive, and attuned to '*ethereal symphonies*': they respond to rich and complex music from high subtle planes. '*Symphonies*' are very complex compositions played by many different instruments. 'To quicken' something means of course to make it move more quickly, but also to give it more life-energy, so that it grows more alive and responds more sensitively. Something 'quick' is alive, sensitive. We speak of 'the quick and the dead', the things or people which are alive and those which are not. This '*magical accord*' with the rhythms and vibrations of subtler planes raises up '*the servitors of mind and life*', the senses and nerves, the physical body and brain, the parts that serve and support the mind and life, so that these physical parts too can become '*happy partners of the soul's response*'. The soul responds in a very sensitive way to those ethereal symphonies, but usually the body does not;

but now for Aswapati even the tissues and nerves are turned into '*sensitive chords*' which can respond to '*lustre and ecstasy*', heavenly light and delight. From being simply the means, the instruments, the '*servitors*' of the body, the tissues and nerves now become '*happy partners of the soul's response*' and helpers of the spirit: '*acolytes*' serve in a sacred place to assist the priest and prepare what is needed for the sacrifice or worship.

A heavenlier function with a finer mode
Lit with its grace man's outward earthliness;
The soul's experience of its deeper sheaths
No more slept drugged by Matter's dominance.

In our normal state of '*outward earthliness*', '*the soul's experience of its deeper sheaths*' is '*drugged by Matter's dominance*'. The soul is covered by the material body, its outermost '*sheath*', and by other '*deeper sheaths*': several subtle bodies or '*sheaths*' cover the soul and are meant to express it, but here in our human setting the soul's experience of all its deeper and subtler levels is '*drugged by Matter's dominance*'. Even the operations of our mind, which should be a freer part of us, are dominated by the fact of being in the material world and depending on a physical brain; this is '*Matter's dominance*' which affects everything in the material universe. Now for Aswapati '*a heavenlier function with a finer mode*', a more refined and subtle way of working, lights up the ordinary human '*outer earthliness*' with '*its grace*'. The word '*grace*' here seems to have a double meaning: the grace or gracefulness that a dancer has, a quality of lightness that lifts up all the heavier, clumsier ways that come from being dominated by matter; and at the same time the grace of a divine Blessing.

In the dead wall closing us from wider self,
Into a secrecy of apparent sleep,

The mystic tract beyond our waking thoughts,
A door parted, built in by Matter's force,
Releasing things unseized by earthly sense:
A world unseen, unknown by outward mind
Appeared in the silent spaces of the soul.

Because of the '*finer working*' of the tissues and nerves and senses, Aswapati is able to see things in the subtler worlds. For us the '*dead wall*' of Matter closes us off from our '*wider self*'; for Aswapati, '*a door parted*', opened up, in that wall. The door is surrounded by material energy, '*built in by Matter's force*', but now it opens into a space that seems like a state of sleep: '*a secrecy of apparent sleep, / the mystic tract beyond our waking thoughts.*' A '*tract*' means a space, an area, a territory. The opening of that door set free, released, things that our earthly senses cannot seize, cannot grasp, so that Aswapati became aware of a whole new world: '*A world unseen, unknown by outward mind / Appeared in the silent spaces of the soul*'. This new awareness is a result of the pure perception that came to him as a gift of the spirit, and of the '*magical accord*' which attuned him to the vibrations of the subtler worlds.

He sat in secret chambers looking out
Into the luminous countries of the unborn
Where all things dreamed by the mind are seen and true
And all that the life longs for is drawn close.

A chamber is an enclosed secluded room. Sri Aurobindo shows us Aswapati sitting in the '*secret chambers*' of the inner world; he is looking out, not with his physical eyes but with subtle physical eyes, '*into the luminous countries of the unborn*', lands inhabited by beings who are not born into our material world, beings of subtle worlds. In those '*luminous countries*' things that the mind has dreamed about can be seen, and they are true, they are real, not

hallucinations or illusions; even all the delights that our life longs for become close and accessible there. 'To long for' means to wish very intensely for something.

He saw the Perfect in their starry homes
Wearing the glory of a deathless form,
Lain in the arms of the Eternal's peace,
Rapt in the heart-beats of God-ecstasy.

'*The Perfect*' means 'perfect beings', beings of the higher planes who are free from all the imperfections of the material world. Sri Aurobindo says that their homes are '*starry*', like stars, or full of stars; the stars are symbols of the many truths. Each of those perfect beings is wearing '*the glory of a deathless form*' an immortal form; since they are unborn they are also deathless, and the forms that they wear are glorious, beautiful, full of light; they are cradled '*in the arms of the Eternal's peace*'; they are also '*rapt*', seized and carried away '*in the heart-beats of God-ecstasy*'; they experience a constant and everlasting peace, but also a throbbing heart of intense delight; they are in a state of rapture: '*rapt*'. It is worth saying something about this word: there are birds called 'raptors', eagles and hawks and falcons, which swoop down from a great height, seize their prey and carry it off; when you experience 'rapture' it is as if you have been seized by intense delight, as if a god or some higher being has come down and caught hold of you and carried you out of this world to somewhere else, into a state of unearthly delight; then you are '*rapt*': in a trance of delight.

He lived in the mystic space where thought is born
And will is nursed by an ethereal Power
And fed on the white milk of the Eternal's strengths
Till it grows into the likeness of a god.

The centre of Aswapati's consciousness has changed; he is no longer

living centred in his body or in this material world but '*in the mystic space where thought is born*', the inner place and state out of which thought originates; in that same '*mystic space*', the poet says, '*an ethereal Power*' nurses, nourishes and strengthens the power of will; '*ethereal*' is an adjective derived from the word '*ether*' meaning the very subtlest substance. There are said to be five elements, the elemental forms of substance, symbolically called earth, water, fire, air, and ether; each is subtler and finer than the previous one. Sri Aurobindo tells us that these elements do not correspond to anything that we see here; when we hear the element '*earth*' mentioned we should not think about the soil in the garden, we should not think about water in our rivers, we should not think about the form of fire that burns and we should not think of the air that we breathe; all these are mixtures; when the ancients spoke about the five elements they were speaking about subtle states of substance underlying what we call matter. Everything we experience in the material world is made up of a mixture of these different elements, and here the element of '*earth*', meaning the material principle, is predominant. At the other end of the scale, the very subtlest and finest element or state of substance is '*ether*'. Our material scientists believe that they have proved that there is no such thing as ether; they think that they can leave ether out of material physics, that there is no such thing; but long after the physicists had proved that to their own satisfaction, Sri Aurobindo went on referring to '*ether*', and he mentioned that one day even the physical scientists will come into contact with that element and find out that it really exists after all. There is '*an ethereal Power*', a Power that belongs to the purest, most refined element, the highest level of substance; as a mother nurses her baby and feeds it on her milk, that '*ethereal Power*' feeds and nourishes the power of will on the '*white milk of the Eternal's strengths*'. The will is nourished by that Power

and becomes stronger and stronger, until it grows '*into the likeness of a god*'. Sri Aurobindo has translated the *Hymns to the Mystic Fire* from the Rig Veda into English; these are hymns praising and invoking Agni, the divine flame, the flame of aspiration, strength and will; that 'mystic fire' is a fire of will. When he says here that will can grow '*into the likeness of a god*' it may be a reference to the god Agni.

In the Witness's occult rooms with mind-built walls
On hidden interiors, lurking passages
Opened the windows of the inner sight.
He owned the house of undivided Time.

A witness is somebody who sees or watches; when there is an accident or a crime the police want to find witnesses, people who have seen what happened. In the spiritual life we are advised to take the position of the witness: to stand back from all that we are thinking, doing, feeling and saying, to step back into our inner consciousness and watch what we are doing, what thoughts are coming into us, what movements are coming, how we are behaving and why we are behaving like that. It is possible for a part of our mind to separate itself, to step back and to watch, to take the position of the witness; if we cultivate that poise more and more, we can become identified with the inner consciousness which is always watching, the Witness who is always watching what goes on in this world, seeing it and supporting it. Sometimes this is called the 'purusha' consciousness, as opposed to the 'prakriti', the mechanical aspect of nature. The purusha stands behind and watches, allowing prakriti, nature, to do whatever she is doing. When we say 'purusha' it means much more than part of the mind which we can separate and look out from; it is the conscious presence of the Divine dwelling within us and aware of all that we

do and experience. The Witness lives in secret '*occult rooms*'; the walls of those rooms are built by mind: the Witness lives behind '*mind-built walls*'. When Aswapati takes the position of the Witness, '*the windows of the inner sight*' open up, revealing '*hidden interiors, lurking passages*'. '*Interior*' means 'inner' or 'inside'; an 'interior designer' is a person whose profession is to think about the inside of houses, the rooms and furnishings and how they should look. When the '*windows of the inner sight*' open up in Aswapati's consciousness he can see '*hidden interiors*' and '*lurking passages*'. Here is the word '*lurking*' again: the secret passages deep within are not simply hidden but actively hiding, keeping out of sight. He is able to take possession of the inner house: '*He owned the house of undivided time*', he can see the past, the present and the future equally well: past, present and future are equally accessible to his inner sight.

Lifting the heavy curtain of the flesh
He stood upon a threshold serpent-watched,
And peered into gleaming endless corridors,
Silent and listening in the silent heart
For the coming of the new and the unknown.

Here Sri Aurobindo says that '*the flesh*', this physical stuff that our bodies are made of, is like a '*heavy curtain*' hanging in front of a doorway, an opening. Aswapati lifts up that curtain and finds himself standing on '*a threshold*'. The '*threshold*' is the door-sill that we step over to pass from outside to inside, or from one room to another; it marks the transition between one space and another. In many cultures the threshold is considered to be a sacred feature of the building, because not everyone is allowed to pass across and enter. In this case the threshold is guarded by a serpent or serpents. When Savitri, at the beginning of her yoga, comes to this threshold the guardian serpent rises up hissing and gives her a warning. This

may happen to us too, when we try to enter into the subtler realms: not that we necessarily see or hear a serpent, but something may warn us that we have to be careful, that there is a danger – for there really is a danger if we are not sufficiently developed and pure, and that is why the warning comes to us; when it is the right time for us to enter we can do it: the serpent may warn us, but we do not necessarily have to follow the warning. At first Aswapati did not actually enter: he stood at the threshold, and *'peered'*, looked into this new space to see what was inside. First he sees *'gleaming endless corridors'*, shining inner passages, one after another. He stands there *'silent and listening in the silent heart / For the coming of the new and the unknown'*: through these corridors new unknown things will come; silently he watches and listens to see what will appear. *'Gleaming'* is a word for light; it means shining softly. If you have vessels made of copper or silver or brass, when you keep them polished they gleam with a gentle light.

He gazed across the empty stillnesses
And heard the footsteps of the undreamed Idea
In the far avenues of the Beyond.

Aswapati peered into those gleaming endless corridors, silently listening and watching to see what will emerge: he *'gazed'*, looking steadily and for a long time *'across the empty stillnesses'*. There are corridors and spaces, but they are empty and still; he hears footsteps in the distance: *'the footsteps of the undreamed Idea'*; some wonderful new creative Idea is moving far away in another realm, something that has not yet been dreamed of in our world, it has not been envisioned at all; but it is moving, perhaps approaching, and he can hear its footsteps *'in the far avenues of the Beyond'*. An avenue is a broad street or pathway. That *'undreamed Idea'* is moving in the spaces beyond the surface, it is something that has not yet entered

the manifestation.

He heard the secret Voice, the Word that knows,
And saw the secret face that is our own.
The inner planes uncovered their crystal doors;
Strange powers and influences touched his life.

Another thing that Aswapati experiences when the inner being starts to open up is '*the secret Voice*', the Voice with a capital 'V', speaking '*the Word that knows*'. When we see this 'Word' with a capital 'W' we think of the Word of Creation which can bring something new into existence. The Word that Aswapati hears now brings Knowledge, true Knowledge. And he sees a face, '*the secret face that is our own*': as if there is one secret face that belongs to all of us. The '*inner planes*', the different levels of inner consciousness, reveal their entrances to him, as if inviting him in to explore them. Each of these levels or planes of consciousness has a door opening onto it, a door made of '*crystal*', a very clear and pure substance. '*Strange powers and influences*' from those inner planes '*touched his life*', affecting his experiences even here in our world.

A vision came of higher realms than ours,
A consciousness of brighter fields and skies,
Of beings less circumscribed than brief-lived men
And subtler bodies than these passing frames,
Objects too fine for our material grasp,
Acts vibrant with a superhuman light
And movements pushed by a superconscient force,
And joys that never flowed through mortal limbs,
And lovelier scenes than earth's and happier lives.

This is another gift of the spirit, which Sri Aurobindo has written about in one of his sonnets, 'The Other Earths'. '*A vision came of higher realms than ours*': Aswapati becomes able to see higher

kingdoms, higher worlds than this one that we are living in; he gains a consciousness, an awareness of *'brighter fields and skies'*. When the sun is shining here it is very bright, but the fields and skies of those worlds have another kind of light, a brighter light; the beings who live there are *'less circumscribed than brief-lived men'*. *'Circumscribed'* means literally *'enclosed in a circle'*, limited. We short-lived human beings are limited by the small circle of a material life between birth and death. The beings in those other worlds which Aswapati now sees are less limited because their bodies are subtler than our *'passing frames'*. Our body is our frame, the framework that supports our life, our thoughts and feelings; and our frames are *'passing'*: they do not last long, they are soon finished; those subtler bodies are freer than ours and do not have to die as ours do. Even objects in those worlds are made of finer substances than matter, and we would not be able grasp them with our hands because they are so subtle. Actions there are full of energy, *'vibrant with a superhuman light'*, a light and consciousness beyond ours. Movements in those worlds are impelled or pushed by a force that is higher than anything that we are conscious of, *'a superconscient force'*. The beings there experience joys and delights *'that never flowed through mortal limbs'*; our material bodies cannot experience the joys that flow through subtler bodies; and in those brighter fields and skies there are much *'lovelier scenes than earth's and happier lives'*. I remember a letter of Sri Aurobindo to one of his disciples who enthusiastically wrote about the sunset, the mountains and seas, the beauties of nature. Sri Aurobindo replied, *'Yes, these things are beautiful but in the subtler worlds are much more beautiful things which we can see when the inner eyes are opened'*.

A consciousness of beauty and of bliss,
A knowledge which became what it perceived,

Replaced the separated sense and heart
And drew all Nature into its embrace.

I think this refers to King Aswapati's own consciousness. Sri Aurobindo says '*A consciousness*': it suggests that Aswapati's consciousness has changed and gone beyond the limits of personality and become impersonal: '*A consciousness of beauty and of bliss, / A knowledge which became what it perceived*'. It can identify with what it perceives or sees, and know that thing as we know ourselves, by identity; that kind of awareness and knowledge, for Aswapati, '*replaced the separated sense and heart*', the way that we experience things in our surface consciousness. We always feel separate from the people and objects around us because we become aware of things outside our little selves through the action of our senses, which is an indirect action. If we can have the direct knowledge by identity which becomes what it perceives we will know things much more intimately and fully and perfectly than we do now. That new consciousness, that knowledge, '*drew all nature into its embrace*'. Aswapati could take everything in nature and embrace it in his own self-awareness; I think that '*all nature*' includes not only material nature but also the nature of the inner worlds and planes.

The mind leaned out to meet the hidden worlds:
Air glowed and teemed with marvellous shapes and hues,
In the nostrils quivered celestial fragrances,
On the tongue lingered the honey of paradise.

When the inner senses begin to open up, even here in the body it is possible to be aware that all around are '*hidden worlds*', so that the air is experienced differently from the way we normally experience it. It glows and is full of life, teeming with countless '*marvellous shapes and hues*', so many glorious forms and colours swarming

around that they cannot be counted. Aswapati also becomes aware of *'celestial fragrances'*, heavenly perfumes, and even subtle tastes: *'on the tongue lingered the honey of paradise'*.

A channel of universal harmony,
Hearing was a stream of magic audience,
A bed for occult sounds earth cannot hear.

These lines mark the beginning of a long description about the experience of subtle hearing. The poet has touched briefly on other subtle sense experiences; now he describes many wonderful things that can be experienced through the subtle hearing. The sense of hearing is *'a channel of universal harmony'*: wonderful harmonious sounds are received from all over the subtle universe, and become *'a stream of magic audience'*. When we use the word *'audience'* we normally mean people who sit and watch a performance; here Sri Aurobindo is using this word in its original French sense of *'hearing'*. The subtle sense of hearing is like a stream or channel, through which a stream of sound flows, like water filling the bed of a river: *'a bed for occult sounds earth cannot hear'*: the sounds of the inner worlds which our physical ears cannot hear.

Out of a covert tract of slumber self
The voice came of a truth submerged, unknown
That flows beneath the cosmic surfaces,
Only mid an omniscient silence heard,
Held by intuitive heart and secret sense.

A *'tract'* is a territory, a space or area, and *'a covert tract'* means a covered, secret, hidden place; *'covert'* is close in meaning to *'occult'*. This *'covert tract'* is a space *'of slumber self'*: *'slumber'* means sleep; there is a sleep-self, or a self of sleep, an indrawn inner consciousness; out of that *'covert tract of slumber self'* flows the voice of a truth that is *'submerged'*, *'below the surface'*, *'underwater'*. A

submarine can move beneath the surface of the sea: it 'submerges', goes down below the surface so that it cannot be seen. With his new power of subtle hearing Aswapati becomes aware of the voice of a truth that is submerged, that lies below the surface. This truth is '*unknown*' because it is flowing beneath the surfaces of the cosmos, of the material universe; the voice of that truth can only be heard when we come into an '*omniscient silence*' where everything is known. '*Omniscient*' means 'all-knowing'. That submerged truth cannot be grasped by the physical senses but only by the '*intuitive heart and secret sense*'.

Now Sri Aurobindo tells us more about that voice of unknown truth:

It caught the burden of secrecies sealed and dumb,
It voiced the unfulfilled demand of earth
And the song of promise of unrealised heavens
And all that hides in an omnipotent Sleep.

Here Sri Aurobindo uses the word '*burden*' which appears several times in the poem. This word has a double meaning: a burden is a heavy load; but a song may also have a '*burden*', a meaning or message. Some songs have a few lines that get repeated at the end of every verse, the chorus or the refrain of the song; this used to be called '*the burden*' of the song; and even today we may still say, "I cannot remember his exact words, but the burden of what he was saying was this ...", and we try to give the meaning or the essence of what was said. Here Sri Aurobindo says that the voice of submerged truth '*caught the burden of secrecies sealed and dumb*', the essential message of those secret places or movements which are sealed up, closed, unable to express themselves, but are carrying the load of a message which is meant to be communicated. The voice of truth which Aswapati heard '*voiced*' or expressed '*the unfulfilled*

demand of earth'. It also expressed '*the song of promise of unrealized heavens*': there are heavens which have not yet been realized yet, but they will be realized in future and will fulfil the demand of the earth. It also gives voice to '*all that hides in an omnipotent Sleep*', everything that is still hiding in the all-powerful Sleep of the Unmanifest: there are many things yet to be manifested that are still hiding in some deep inner sleep state, until the time when they will wake up and be born. The voice of truth was carrying all these different messages, and Aswapati has become able to receive them. He can also hear many other things:

In the unceasing drama carried by Time
On its long listening flood that bears the world's
Insoluble doubt on a pilgrimage without goal,
A laughter of sleepless pleasure foamed and spumed
And murmurings of desire that cannot die:
A cry came of the world's delight to be,
The grandeur and greatness of its will to live,
Recall of the soul's adventure into space,
A traveller through the magic centuries
And being's labour in Matter's universe,
Its search for the mystic meaning of its birth
And joy of high spiritual response,
Its throb of satisfaction and content
In all the sweetness of the gifts of life,
Its large breath and pulse and thrill of hope and fear,
Its taste of pangs and tears and ecstasy,
Its rapture's poignant beat of sudden bliss,
The sob of its passion and unending pain.

With the new subtle hearing that has come to him as a gift of the spirit, Aswapati can hear all these things going on: the '*unceasing*

drama that is being carried by Time, Time that is like a river or a sea, a 'flood', the 'long listening flood' of Time, as if Time is also listening. That 'flood' or flow of Time is carrying along 'the world's insoluble doubt / On a pilgrimage without goal'. Time, like a great river or a huge wave, is carrying along with it all the dubiousness, the uncertainty of our world, its feeling of being lost, as if we are on a pilgrimage but do not know the way or the goal, the destination. An 'unceasing drama' is going on, being carried along by the flood of Time; in that drama, underneath the surface, there is a current of delight: 'a laughter of sleepless pleasure foamed and spumed'. If a river flows quickly, 'foam' will form on the surface, many tiny bubbles; and if the foam gets blown up into the air we call it 'spume', foam that is blown by the wind; 'Foamed and spumed': these words tell us that there are fast-moving waves in this flood of time; in their movement there is 'a laughter of sleepless pleasure'. There are also 'murmurings', indistinct sounds like a voice speaking so softly that you cannot tell what it is saying; these are 'murmurings of desire that cannot die', an undying longing. Aswapati also hears 'a cry ... of the world's delight to be': there is a delight of existence, a delight in simply being; beneath all the pleasure and pain and indifference that we experience, lies this flowing current of delight: 'the world's delight to be' and 'the grandeur and greatness of its will to live'. The world wants to live and to go on living, to experience more and more. This cry of the world's delight of existence 'recalls', reminds Aswapati, that the soul has undertaken this adventure into the world of space and time as 'a traveller through the magic centuries'; on its way it is experiencing 'labour', a difficult struggle here in 'Matter's universe'; and it is searching for 'the mystic meaning of its birth'. On its journey the soul feels a 'joy of high spiritual response' and a 'throb', a heart-beat, 'of satisfaction and content / In all the sweetness of the gifts of life': it delights in all the gifts of life. Then the poet lists

some of the gifts which life offers to the soul: '*Its large breath and pulse and thrill of hope and fear*'; '*Thrill*' is a feeling of excitement. Life offers the soul many different flavours of delight, different '*rasas*' or tastes: '*Its taste of pangs and tears*', pain and sorrow, but also of '*ecstasy*', intense delight; '*Its rapture's poignant beat of sudden bliss*'; '*rapture*' is intense delight, but sometimes if that intense delight comes too suddenly or strongly, it is '*poignant*' like something piercing you to the heart with a sharp knife; and there is a '*sob*', as when we catch our breath because of intense emotion, '*passion*', whether of happiness or sorrow, and '*unending pain*'. The voice of that submerged truth is catching and expressing all these emotions and experiences.

The murmur and whisper of the unheard sounds
Which crowd around our hearts but find no window
To enter, swelled into a canticle
Of all that suffers to be still unknown
And all that labours vainly to be born
And all the sweetness none will ever taste
And all the beauty that will never be.

All these subtle sounds are crowding around our hearts but they do not find any opening, any window where they could enter; in Aswapati's subtle hearing their '*murmur and whisper*' grows stronger and stronger '*into a canticle*': a sacred song or chant, a song that might be sung in a temple or a church, a song of praise and longing. This '*canticle*' expresses the prayers and longings of things that want to manifest, things that are suffering because they are still unknown; they labour to be born but in vain, they do not find the way to be expressed; there is so much sweetness that no one will ever taste, and so much beauty that will never be realised in our world.

Inaudible to our deaf mortal ears
The wide world-rhythms wove their stupendous chant
To which life strives to fit our rhyme-beats here,
Melting our limits in the illimitable,
Tuning the finite to infinity.

Aswapati also hears something else that we do not hear with our '*mortal ears*' which are deaf to those subtle sounds: there are wonderful vibrations, '*wide world-rhythms*' going on; they form a '*stupendous chant*', a song with many powerful voices and rhythms. Sri Aurobindo says that the life power is striving, trying hard to fit our human rhythms, our '*rhyme-beats*', to that stupendous chant, trying to attune us to the universal rhythms and keep us in harmony with them; as we become more attuned to that '*stupendous chant*', our limited beings will melt into the illimitable, our finite lives will be in tune with infinity.

A low muttering rose from the subconscious caves,
The stammer of the primal ignorance;
Answer to that inarticulate questioning,
There stooped with lightning neck and thunder's wings
A radiant hymn to the Inexpressible
And the anthem of the superconscient light.

'*Muttering*' means speaking under the breath so that what is being said cannot be heard clearly; muttering often expresses a complaint: we say something to express our feelings, but do not dare to say it out loud. Aswapati hears a '*low muttering*' coming up from the deep caves of the subconscious: it is '*the stammer of the primal ignorance*'. A '*stammer*' happens when we try to speak but cannot get the sounds out; the original ignorance has something to say but it can only stammer. Nevertheless a wonderful response from above answers to the muttering, the stammer, the '*inarticulate questioning*' which is

rising up from the subconscious caves. An '*inarticulate*' person is one who has difficulty in finding the right words to express what he wants to say. Although the questioning coming up from the lower levels of existence is not clearly expressed, an answer comes down like an amazing bird. It has been mentioned earlier that while in ordinary speech 'to stoop' means to lean down, for example to pick something up, the same word has a special sense which Sri Aurobindo uses several times in the poem. It is the word that is used for the way a powerful bird swoops down to catch its prey. The eagle or falcon is high up in the sky, looking down for something to eat. When it sees some small animal – a mouse or a lizard – it drops down very fast and catches it. This is stooping. Here the word is used like that: '*A radiant hymn to the Inexpressible*' comes down in response to that mutter, that stammer, that inarticulate questioning which cannot express what it wants to say. The answer comes in the form of a '*hymn*', a sacred song of praise, which is '*radiant*', full of light, a '*hymn to the Inexpressible*', to That which is beyond all power of expression, which cannot be expressed no matter how articulate, however eloquent you are; however much command of language you may have, you cannot express that high wonderful truth, '*the Inexpressible*'. That '*radiant hymn*' '*stooped*': came down like a great powerful bird '*with lightning neck*', coming down as quickly and powerfully and brightly as a thunderbolt; its neck is like lightning, and its wings sound like thunder. That response is '*a radiant hymn to the Inexpressible*' and it is also an '*anthem*', which is another word for a sacred song. Now we have three words for three different kinds of sacred songs: '*hymn*', '*canticle*' and '*anthem*'. This is '*the anthem of the superconscious light*'. From below comes a '*muttering*', an '*inarticulate questioning*' rising up from the subconscious caves; and from above there comes a powerful illuminating response from the very highest level, in the

form of a sacred song of adoration for the Supreme.

All was revealed there none can here express;
Vision and dream were fables spoken by truth
Or symbols more veridical than fact,
Or were truths enforced by supernatural seals.

In those subtle worlds which Aswapati can now see '*all was revealed*', everything was made visible which nobody can express here; visions and dreams came that were '*fables spoken by truth*'. A 'fable' is a story, often a very simple short story, but it has a meaning, a message or a teaching. In India we have the *Panchatantra* stories and in Europe there are Aesop's fables: they seem like amusing stories for children, but each of them teaches something. The incidents or events which Aswapati saw in his visions and dreams indicated deep truths; or they were symbols. Sometimes we have strange dreams which do not seem to hang together and we wonder why we are seeing these things, but they may be symbolic dreams expressing some deeper or higher truth. The poet says that the symbols seen by Aswapati in his visions and dreams were '*more veridical than fact*'. '*Veridical*' means 'truth-speaking'. Here in the outer world what we call 'facts' often do not really correspond to deep inner realities; they do not correspond to what is of lasting truth and value and significance. The symbols that we see in dreams or visions may speak much more truth than the facts that we see around us every day. It was like that for Aswapati. Or maybe what are seen in dreams are really truths; those dreams will be fulfilled, they will be realised, because they are '*truths enforced by supernatural seals*'. There are two words to look at here: first, '*enforced*': when parliament passes a law, the police and the courts are meant to see that it is '*enforced*', to make sure that it is carried out. A 'seal' is the mark of the authority which has decided the law. A seal nowadays

is likely to be a rubber stamp, but in earlier times the kings used to wear beautiful seal-rings: their command was written down and they would sign it and make a mark on the document with their ring to show that the king has given his order and the thing must be done; those would be natural seals; but the truths that are encoded into the workings of this world have been there since its origin, and they will be '*enforced by supernatural seals*', signs of an authority that is above material Nature.

Immortal eyes approached and looked in his,
And beings of many kingdoms neared and spoke:
The ever-living whom we name as dead
Could leave their glory beyond death and birth
To utter the wisdom which exceeds all phrase.

With this pure perception that has come to him as a gift of the spirit, Aswapati can look beyond the veil of matter into the subtle worlds, and he can see the immortal beings who inhabit them. With their beautiful faces and immortal eyes, they come near and look into his eyes. The beings from many inner kingdoms could come near to him and speak with him. Among them were '*ever-living*' beings who once lived here on earth in human forms but have now left their mortal bodies so that we would think of them as dead. They could leave their glory, whatever high plane they are now living on, '*beyond death and birth*', to visit him. Aswapati did not go to find them on their high immortal levels: they came and spoke to him, to '*utter*', to say or express, '*the wisdom which exceeds all phrase*'. A '*phrase*' is a sequence of words within a sentence. The wisdom which those beings expressed to him was deeper and truer than anything that can be put into words.

This makes me think of the time when Sri Aurobindo was in prison in 1908 to 1909. One of the marvellous things that happened to him

there was that the spirit of Swami Vivekananda, who had already left his body, came to him regularly over about two or three weeks. Sri Aurobindo says, 'He came with a specific purpose and he kept coming till he had made me understand'. What he made Sri Aurobindo understand was the principle of the hierarchy of the planes of existence; and on the basis of what he learned from Swami Vivekananda then, he later developed his own understanding of Supermind. In all these lines Sri Aurobindo is describing things he experienced, and this is an example which we happen to know about because he spoke about it.

The kings of evil and the kings of good,
Appellants at the reason's judgment seat,
Proclaimed the gospel of their opposites,
And all believed themselves spokesmen of God:
The gods of light and titans of the dark
Battled for his soul as for a costly prize.

When we come into contact with the subtle worlds, especially if we have a high purpose, we become aware that conflicting forces are trying to get hold of us. Among these '*beings of many kingdoms*' are powers that want to lift us up, and others that want to hold us back and drag us down: '*The kings of evil and the kings of good*'. Sri Aurobindo says that they are '*appellants at the reason's judgment seat*'. Reason is sitting like a judge and these beings come and try to prove their case, so that the judge, the Reason, will decide in their favour. An '*appellant*' is a person who makes an appeal to a judge. Each of them is stating their case: each of them is proclaiming, speaking out, the good news, the '*gospel*' or sacred truth of their own position; and these positions are opposites, they contradict each other. The reason must judge between them. Each of those beings presents itself as a representative of the divine, a spokesman of God; and behind those

beings there are gods, cosmic powers of light and of dark, battling *'for his soul as for a costly prize'*: Aswapati is such a great being that they would all like to have him on their side. He experiences these opposing powers competing to win his soul.

In every hour loosed from the quiver of Time
There rose a song of new discovery,
A bow-twang's hum of young experiment.

For Aswapati this is a time of intense experience and adventure: it is as if every passing hour comes like an arrow that has been *'loosed from the quiver of time'*: the *'quiver'* is the case where an archer keeps his arrows; he carries it on his back so that he can quickly take out an arrow, fix it in the bow and let it go; then take the next and the next, in rapid succession. We should not confuse it with the other word *'quiver'* which has the same spelling and the same pronunciation but a completely different meaning: a small movement. For Aswapati now it is as if Time is an archer letting loose one arrow after another, one hour after another. As each of these hours is *'loosed from the quiver of Time'*, the string of the bow vibrates and makes an exciting sound, *'a song of new discovery'*; that is the *'twang'* of the bow, the *'hum'* of the vibrating string, which is like a thrilling song *'of young experiment'*. At each moment Aswapati is experiencing something fresh and exciting.

Each day was a spiritual romance,
As if he was born into a bright new world;
Adventure leaped an unexpected friend,
And danger brought a keen sweet tang of joy;
Each happening was a deep experience.

'Each day was a spiritual romance': nowadays we use the word *'romance'* for a love affair or a love story, but originally this word meant a fanciful story in verse, about knights and ladies and

travelling to strange countries and experiencing amazing and incredible things, full of high adventures and improbable happenings, and it is still occasionally used in that sense. Now for Aswapati each day was like that, bringing some great adventure, as if he had been born '*into a bright new world*', completely different from our material world, where exciting and unexpected things happened suddenly: '*Adventure leaped an unexpected friend*'. An adventure may be dangerous and risky, but it may also help you. Even when there was danger, that danger brought '*a keen sweet tang of joy*'. A good cook knows how to put some lemon or some chilli into a dish to give a '*tang*', a sharp enjoyable taste; danger felt like that to Aswapati: it brought a '*keen*' taste, sharp and sweet together, a special flavour of joy.

There were high encounters, epic colloquies,
And counsels came couched in celestial speech,
And honeyed pleadings breathed from occult lips
To help the heart to yield to rapture's call,
And sweet temptations stole from beauty's realms
And sudden ecstasies from a world of bliss.

Here are some examples of the adventures which Aswapati experienced in these days of '*spiritual romance*': '*high encounters*', thrilling meetings with great beings, and '*epic colloquies*': a colloquy is a conversation, it means '*speaking together*'. These conversations were on a very high level: '*epic*' implies something very noble and full of significance. And '*counsels came*': advice. These '*counsels*', these words of advice, were '*couched in celestial speech*': expressed not in ordinary words, but in a heavenly way. Things were trying to attract him: '*honeyed pleadings*', very sweet things, '*breathed from occult lips*' / '*To help the heart to yield to rapture's call*': there is nothing more attractive to us than rapture, extreme delight. '*Sweet*

temptations stole from beauty's realms': we have come across this word '*stole*' before, the past tense of the verb 'to steal', in the sense of creeping in so silently and secretly that it is impossible to hear or see it coming; those '*sweet temptations*' crept secretly in from the kingdoms of beauty, along with experiences of intense delight coming suddenly from a higher level, '*sudden ecstasies from a world of bliss*'.

It was a region of wonder and delight.

All now his bright clairaudience could receive;

A contact thrilled of mighty unknown things.

The subtle worlds that Aswapati had come into were '*a region of wonder and delight*'. Now '*his bright clairaudience could receive*' all these different wonderful things. We are more familiar with the word 'clairvoyance', a French word which means literally 'clear sight', and is used of 'subtle vision'; here we have '*clairaudience*', meaning 'subtle hearing'. The pure perception that has come to Aswapati as a gift of the spirit gives him the capacity of subtle hearing; now he can hear all these different things, and as a result '*a contact thrilled of mighty unknown things*': he receives the thrilling contact of many powerful new things. Sri Aurobindo has described in detail '*clairaudience*', the capacity of subtle hearing, and now in the next sentence he mentions other senses:

Awakened to new unearthly closenesses,

The touch replied to subtle infinities,

And with a silver cry of opening gates

Sight's lightnings leaped into the invisible.

The sense of touch is awakened to new subtle '*unearthly closenesses*', things that do not belong to this earth but have now become close and near to him, and so it could respond to '*subtle infinities*'. '*And with a silver cry of opening gates / Sight's lightnings leaped into the*

invisible: '*silver*' of course is a colour, and also a metal; there might be gates made of silver, which when they open make a beautiful musical sound: '*a silver cry of opening gates*'. These gates are opening up the power of vision, and suddenly, as if in lightning flashes, Aswapati can see '*into the invisible*', into many new realms that were not visible before.

Ever his consciousness and vision grew;
They took an ampler sweep, a loftier flight;
He passed the border marked for Matter's rule
And passed the zone where thought replaces life.

'*Ever*' means '*always*': constantly his consciousness and his power of vision are growing, taking on '*an ampler sweep*'. '*Ample*' means '*plentiful*'; the '*sweep*', the range of his consciousness and his power of vision become more and more wide and can fly ever higher. '*Lofty*' means '*high*', so '*loftier*' means '*higher*'. In this way he goes beyond the border that is marked for the rule or domination of Matter, and even further: he passes beyond '*the zone*', the area where life is replaced by thought, where thought becomes dominant: he goes beyond that zone too.

Out of this world of signs suddenly he came
Into a silent self where world was not
And looked beyond into a nameless vast.

We live in a '*world of signs*'; all the forms and appearances that we see are signs of something else; and that is true even when we have contact with the subtle worlds: the things that are seen there are still '*signs*'. Now Aswapati passed '*out of this world of signs*', beyond the material world and the inner worlds of form, and came suddenly into a realm of '*silent self where world was not*', a state beyond manifestation, beyond creation, beyond all signs. He comes into a state of '*silent self*', where there is no awareness of any world at all,

and looks beyond into a vastness that has no name; there are no mental labels any more.

These symbol figures lost their right to live,
All tokens dropped our sense can recognise;
There the heart beat no more at body's touch,
There the eyes gazed no more on beauty's shape.

In that realm or state of '*silent self*' beyond manifestation, all these '*symbol figures*', these signs and shapes and appearances, whether material or subtle, have no right to exist anymore: all the '*tokens*' that our senses can recognise fell away. When we touch something we feel 'Oh, plastic, stone, hair ...': our senses give us these tokens that we can recognise; but in that signless realm the senses no longer find any tokens to recognise and work with. Even the heartbeat stops, there is no awareness of body and the life processes going on; there are no forms for the eyes to enjoy, not even the most subtle and refined forms; his experience has gone beyond all that.

In rare and lucent intervals of hush
Into a signless region he could soar
Packed with the deep contents of formlessness
Where world was into a single being rapt
And all was known by the light of identity
And Spirit was its own self-evidence.

This is not happening for Aswapati all the time. It is happening rarely, occasionally, from time to time, '*In rare and lucent intervals of hush*'. An interval is a space or a rest between two periods of action. There are '*Intervals of hush*', periods of silence. They are '*rare*' and '*lucent*': full of light. In those intervals Aswapati's consciousness could '*soar*', flying very, very high, like a powerful bird, '*into a signless region*', a place where there are no signs. There are no signs at all, but it is not empty. Sri Aurobindo and Mother have told us

that sometimes when the seeker enters this '*signless region*' the mind is so stunned by its inability to recognise any of its usual reference points that it feels as if it has entered an emptiness, a void, '*shunya*' the Buddhists say; but in fact this region is not empty: this is where everything has come from, this region is '*packed*', it is crammed, it is absolutely full of all '*the deep contents of formlessness*', all the infinite potentialities, just a few of which get expressed in the unfolding manifestation. There all that we experience here as world is seized, '*rapt*', drawn '*into a single being*'. We came across this word '*rapt*' earlier, and said that it suggests being seized and carried away. There are birds called '*raptors*' that swoop down and seize their prey and carry it off; similarly a higher consciousness can sometimes come and seize you and carry you away into a state of '*rapture*'. When Aswapati reaches this '*signless region*' he feels that the whole created world has been seized and drawn back into one single being. In that single being, everything is known by '*the light of identity*', in the way that we know our essential selves. Sri Aurobindo tells us that if we want to reach these higher levels of consciousness we have to extend, enlarge, our sense of self. We have to widen and heighten it until we can know things directly in the same way that we know ourselves, through knowledge by identity. This is what Aswapati is experiencing now; and in that state nothing needed to be proved because '*Spirit was its own self-evidence*', the spirit experienced everything directly, by identity, as itself.

The Supreme's gaze looked out through human eyes
And saw all things and creatures as itself
And knew all thought and word as its own voice.

When this gaze is then turned towards the world, Aswapati experiences the consciousness of the Supreme looking out through

his human eyes, seeing '*all things and creatures as itself*' and knowing all thoughts and words as expressions of itself, '*as its own voice*'.

There unity is too close for search and clasp
And love is a yearning of the One for the One,
And beauty is a sweet difference of the Same
And oneness is the soul of multitude.

Here we are struggling for unity, for human unity, or union with the divine; we search for that and try to '*clasp*', to embrace and hold things close; but in the state which Aswapati is experiencing, the oneness is so complete that there is no longer any need or possibility for searching and clasping; there is just one single all-embracing consciousness. In it, what now would be love reaching out to another person or object is felt as the One single being '*yearning*', longing for, its own oneness; here things that are outside the being are seen as beautiful: there instead, '*Beauty is a sweet difference of the Same*'; there all is oneness. There is one single same being, but within it there are differences which are delightful; and '*oneness is the soul of multitude*': although the infinite possibilities of the One are expressed by '*multitude*', in many individual forms and beings, still '*oneness is the soul of multitude*'; all are expressions of the same single being, the One.

There all the truths unite in a single Truth,
And all ideas rejoin Reality.

Here in the manifestation, the one '*single Truth*' has expressed itself in many, many different forms and there are clashes and conflicts between different truths; but there they are all gathered back again and unite in a single Truth. All the many, many ideas that are expressed independently in the manifestation come back together into the one Reality which is the origin of them all.

There knowing herself by her own termless self,
Wisdom supernal, wordless, absolute
Sat uncompanied in the eternal Calm,
All-seeing, motionless, sovereign and alone.

In that state of silent self, the supreme Wisdom which is '*supernal*', supreme, '*wordless*', beyond words, and '*absolute*', eternal, perfect, complete, unlimited, knows herself '*by her own termless self*'. '*Termless*' means 'without end': there is no limit to her vast, infinite self. Knowing herself, she sits, '*uncompanied in the eternal Calm*'. She is '*uncompanied*', all alone, '*All-seeing, motionless, sovereign and alone*': '*sovereign*' means 'ruling'; Aswapati sees the Supreme Mother in her form of Wisdom, '*Wisdom supernal*'.

There knowledge needs not words to embody Idea;
Idea, seeking a house in boundlessness,
Weary of its homeless immortality,
Asks not in thought's carved brilliant cell to rest
Whose single window's clipped outlook on things
Sees only a little arc of God's vast sky.

On this level of consciousness, ruled by '*Wisdom supernal*', '*knowledge needs not words to embody Idea*'. There, knowledge is simply known; it does not need any words to formulate what is known, to give it a body. Knowledge is held in the form of '*Idea*', pure thought-form, which as it descends to the level of the thought mind, may be expressed in an infinite number of thoughts and ideas which in our minds get formulated or embodied in words. But Sri Aurobindo tells us that at this high level '*Idea*' is not looking for '*a house*', a limited thought construction where it can stay, as if it might feel tired, '*weary*' of wandering in Infinity, in '*boundlessness*'; it does not ask for a place to rest in 'thought', which he describes as a '*carved brilliant cell*'. A '*cell*' is usually a very small plain room, for a

prisoner or a hermit to stay in; but the 'cell' of thought is 'carved' and 'brilliant', which suggests that the power of thought which inhabits this small room has made many intricate decorations on the walls, on the ceiling, maybe even on the floor. Perhaps it has been chipping away at the stone walls of ignorance and creating intricate carvings, with many facets or surfaces that reflect the light that is coming through its one window so that, reflected from these carved surfaces, the little light that comes in looks very bright, brilliant, shining; but it is a reflected light. The cell has just one window, and that window does not have a wide view; it gives a very restricted view, a '*clipped outlook*' showing only '*a little arc of God's vast sky*', a small section of the boundlessness. Sometimes, it seems, Idea might want to enter into thought and find there a home, a place to rest; but on the level of the supreme Wisdom which Aswapati is experiencing now, Idea is enjoying its '*homeless immortality*', in which it is boundless, free to spread itself everywhere; it does not need to rest or imprison itself in a small cell of thought. In the fourth line of this sentence, the '*not*' negates the previous two lines also; '*Idea*' is the subject of the sentence: it is not weary of boundlessness, it is not looking for a home, it is not asking to rest in '*thought's carved brilliant cell*'.

The boundless with the boundless there consorts;
While there, one can be wider than the world;
While there, one is one's own infinity.

That state is beyond all boundaries: '*The boundless with the boundless there consorts*'. 'To consort with' someone means to be friendly with them, to share companionship with them. There, what is boundless communicates with, is in relationship with, everything else that is boundless. As long as one is there in that state, '*one can be wider than the world; / While there, one is one's own infinity*'.

His centre was no more in earthly mind;
A power of seeing silence filled his limbs:
Caught by a voiceless white epiphany
Into a vision that surpasses forms,
Into a living that surpasses life,
He neared the still consciousness sustaining all.

At the beginning of this canto Sri Aurobindo wrote about Aswapati as '*a thinker*': he was centred in the mind; but now he has gone far beyond that: '*His centre was no more in earthly mind*'; this change has affected his awareness of his body: '*A power of seeing silence filled his limbs*'. '*Limbs*' are the parts of the body. A wonderful silence is filling his whole body, a silence that has the power of vision, that is clear-sighted. Earlier we had the word '*rapt*'; here we have the word '*caught*' which has a similar meaning: Aswapati is seized '*by a voiceless white epiphany*'. '*Epiphany*' is a word from Greek that has a similar meaning to our Indian word '*darshan*': a revelation of divinity, a moment or state when divinity is revealed or perceived. In the Christian church there is a festival called '*Epiphany*' which falls twelve days after Christmas; it marks the moment when three kings or rishis from the East, the Magi, recognised the baby Jesus as the Avatar, the Messiah; the festival of Epiphany commemorates the day on which the divinity embodied in that little newborn child was seen and recognised. Here an epiphany, a revelation of the Divine, seizes Aswapati: it is '*voiceless*', silent, and '*white*', pure and integral, and it carries him to another level of consciousness where he experiences a vision that goes beyond forms, and a living that is beyond what we know as life. In this way he is brought very close to the '*still consciousness*' which is supporting everything. '*Sustaining*' means '*holding up*' or '*supporting*'.

The voice that only by speech can move the mind

Became a silent knowledge in the soul;
The strength that only in action feels its truth
Was lodged now in a mute omnipotent peace

Our thoughts very often come to us as a voice in the mind, in the form of words, of speech; that is often the way that we think, or come to know things; but in the state that Aswapati is now in, the voice of knowledge, which normally can only move the mind through speech, through words, becomes instead '*a silent knowledge in the soul*'. Sri Aurobindo told us earlier that knowledge does not need words to embody Idea; the knowledge is simply there, embodied in the soul. In the same way, the energy that normally wants to express itself in action, '*the strength that only in action feels its truth*', now becomes '*lodged*', housed and held firmly in a '*mute*', silent, all-powerful peace.

A leisure in the labour of the worlds,
A pause in the joy and anguish of the search
Restored the stress of Nature to God's calm.

There is a '*pause*', an interval of rest. In the world everything is engaged in effort, struggle, and attempt, but Aswapati now experiences '*leisure*', a state of ease and comfort and rest; the hard '*labour of the worlds*' is no longer felt, there is '*a pause in the joy and anguish*', the joy and the intense pain of '*the search*' for truth, for knowledge, for fulfilment: all that stops. The '*stress*', the tension and effort that is in Nature, is restored to the underlying calm of God which is its origin.

A vast unanimity ended life's debate.

It is as if in life an endless argument is going on: different points of view are being presented, supported, disagreed with, debated, as politicians debate in parliament. Now suddenly all that ends, in '*a*

vast unanimity'. A 'unanimous' agreement comes when everybody without exception agrees; the literal meaning of the word '*unanimity*' is 'oneness of soul'.

Now we have reached one of the longest sentences in *Savitri*; it is seventeen lines long, and gives a list of things that are characteristic of our world but which for Aswapati, all stop, cease, in this pause, this leisure, this '*vast unanimity*'.

The war of thoughts that fathers the universe,
The clash of forces struggling to prevail
In the tremendous shock that lights a star
As in the building of a grain of dust,
The grooves that turn their dumb ellipse in space
Ploughed by the seeking of the world's desire,
The long regurgitations of Time's flood,
The torment edging the dire force of lust
That wakes kinetic in earth's dullard slime
And carves a personality out of mud,
The sorrow by which Nature's hunger is fed,
The oestrus which creates with fire of pain,
The fate that punishes virtue with defeat,
The tragedy that destroys long happiness,
The weeping of Love, the quarrel of the Gods,
Ceased in a truth which lives in its own light.
His soul stood free, a witness and a king.

We shall take them one by one. First, '*The war of thoughts*': there was a Greek thinker, not so much a philosopher as a mystic, named Heraclitus; Sri Aurobindo has written about him. The teachings of Heraclitus have come down to us in the form of a few mysterious and suggestive aphorisms. Heraclitus saw the clash of forces struggling to prevail which gives rise to forms and to everything we

know in the world, and he expressed it by saying: '*War is the father of all things.*' Here Sri Aurobindo speaks of '*the war of thoughts that fathers the universe*', suggesting that the universe we live in has been born from a clash of conflicting thoughts; that '*war of thoughts*' is one of the things that cease for Aswapati in this experience or realisation.

There is not only a war of thoughts, there is also '*a clash of forces struggling to prevail*': each force, each stream of energy, wants to be stronger than the others, to come out on top. Sri Aurobindo says that this clash of forces, of energies, is happening in '*the tremendous shock that lights a star*', and it is also happening in '*the building of a grain of dust*'; at every level from the cosmic to the atomic, this clash or struggle of forces is going on; but in the '*vast unanimity*', that clash ceases.

And then he speaks about '*grooves*': we used to have gramophone records, disks covered in a single spiral groove; to listen to what was recorded on the disk you would set the needle of the gramophone in the groove at the outer edge of the disc and start the machine, so that the record would go round and round and the music would be heard until the needle, following the groove, would reach the centre of the disk, where it stopped. Here Sri Aurobindo speaks about '*the grooves that turn their dumb ellipse in space*'; this makes us think of the orbits of the planets and maybe even of galaxies: they are all moving, as if on tracks, in grooves; their paths are not exactly circular, but describe an '*ellipse*', an elongated curve. Sri Aurobindo says that the grooves in space along which everything is moving have been '*ploughed*'; as a farmer ploughs his field, these grooves or furrows have been '*ploughed by the seeking of the world's desire*': a constant urge of desire, a force of attraction and search, is creating these huge elliptical movements of the planets

and stars and galaxies. Now for Aswapati, those too stop.

Now, *'The long regurgitations of Time's flood'*: it is as if Time is a great river or sea that swallows things up in its flood, and then after some time vomits them back out again; 'to regurgitate' means 'to vomit'; the flood of Time swallows things up, and then, after a long time, they reappear again, to be swallowed once more and again reappear; these *'long regurgitations'* also cease.

Then the poet speaks of the intense pain, the *'torment'* which is there, like the sharp edge of a knife, in the terrible *'force of lust'*; *'lust'* is an extreme, intense form of desire, of craving, that wakes up *'kinetic'*, which means moving, dynamic, *'in earth's dullard slime'*. The characteristic of earth, of matter, is inertia. How is anything going to wake up in that inertia, in that dullness, in that heaviness of earth? It gets woken up by *'the dire force of lust'*, intense need and craving; but that is very painful, *'dire'*, dreadful. It needs to be painful in order to wake up the *'dullard slime'* of matter; a *'dullard'* is a stupid sleepy person, but here Sri Aurobindo uses the word as an adjective to characterise the inertia of matter. It is interesting that he uses this word *'slime'*; slime is the kind of loose mud that forms when clay is mixed with water: it becomes smooth and *'slimy'*, unpleasant to touch. Some biologists say that life may have first emerged in the form of slimes; they believe that it must have happened in mud which had the right properties to allow the formation of the complex molecules required to manifest life. Here Sri Aurobindo says that the dire force of lust wakes up in this *'dullard slime'* of earth, in this inert matter, and *'carves a personality out of mud'*. The action of the evolutionary force can be very painful, but it does give rise to individuality, to personality. This *'torment'* too ceases.

The poet then lists five more things which cease in this universal pause:

'The sorrow by which Nature's hunger is fed': describing the action of material nature, the Upanishad says: *'The eater eating is eaten'*; there seems to be a universal hunger underlying the movement of Nature, which feeds on death, destruction and sorrow; now this *'sorrow'* is suspended.

'The oestrus', the creative urge, *'which creates with fire of pain'*: driving the evolutionary movement forward is a constant urge to new creation; the process can be very painful, like passing through fire, but fire is purifying, and gives rise to new forms. This creative *'oestrus'* also pauses.

Then, there seems to be a fate or destiny which *'punishes virtue with defeat'*. You may do your best to be good, to do the right thing, but then something comes along and prevents you, even seems to punish you, defeat you, while others who seem less virtuous may appear to be much more successful or fortunate. But this too is suspended in the *'vast unanimity'* ending life's debate.

'The tragedy that destroys long happiness'; *'The weeping of love'*: love can bring happiness, but it also often ends in tears; love in the form of compassion can almost only express itself in tears; these things are typical of our world experience.

And then there is *'the quarrel of the gods'*: the great cosmic powers we call gods rule the universe, but they are not in harmony with each other; each one is struggling to prevail, to dominate over the others, just like the material forces we read about at the beginning of the sentence.

Now for Aswapati, all those things *'ceased in a truth which lives in its own light'*. All these conflicts and quarrels are reconciled in a perfect light and harmony of truth that brings about *'a vast unanimity'*. When Aswapati experiences the ceasing of all those conflicts and

sufferings through the light of truth, it brings about the release of his soul: *'His soul stood free, a witness and a king'*: his soul can stand back and observe, be a witness, but it is also a king, it has the power to rule and control all the movements of nature.

Absorbed no more in the moment-ridden flux
Where mind incessantly drifts as on a raft
Hurried from phenomenon to phenomenon,
He abode at rest in indivisible Time.

'Flux' means *'flow'*. Aswapati is no longer absorbed in the flow of time, the stream on which the moments ride; on the flow of the river or ocean of time *'mind incessantly drifts as on a raft'*: a *'raft'* is not a boat which you can steer where you want to go, it is a simple platform of bamboo or reeds which is very difficult to direct, it just gets carried along by the currents in the flow, drifting here and there *'incessantly'*, without a stop. The flow is strong, so the mind gets hurried from one phenomenon to another, from one thing or one event or movement to the next. That is our normal experience of time: our minds are carried along by it, drifting from one event to the next; but Aswapati was no longer absorbed in that flow. Instead he *'abode'*, he remained *'at rest in indivisible time'*. Earlier we read about *'undivided time'*: Aswapati could see past, present and future as undivided; but now he has gone beyond that: in the state he is now in, time can no longer be divided into these aspects; it is *'indivisible'*: he experiences it as a whole, and he is no longer being swept along by the flow: he can remain above and beyond the flow of Time, at rest.

As if a story long written but acted now,
In his present he held his future and his past,
Felt in the seconds the uncounted years
And saw the hours like dots upon a page.

These lines expand on the idea of '*indivisible time*'. Aswapati can see his future and his past held in his present experience, like a story that is known from beginning to end. He is acting it out in the present, but he is carrying the whole story in his consciousness. Time is passing second by second, but in each second he can feel all the endless series of years, '*the uncounted years*'. As the hours pass, it is as if he is looking at a page in a book where he sees one dot after another, each dot representing one of the passing hours. He can see them all at a glance.

An aspect of the unknown Reality
Altered the meaning of the cosmic scene.
This huge material universe became
A small result of a stupendous force:

This experience that he is having, of silence and timelessness and calm, is '*an aspect of the unknown Reality*'; it is not the whole of the unknown Reality but an aspect of it, which changes '*the meaning of the cosmic scene*'. As long as we are in mind, we see '*the cosmic scene*', the appearances of the universe, in a certain way. Aswapati has come into another state of consciousness. He experiences this aspect of the unknown Reality, and sees the whole meaning of the universe altered. In particular, the material aspect of it looks very small; he perceives it as '*a small result of a stupendous force*'. To us the material universe seems vast, immeasurable, but Aswapati now sees it as one very small output of a huge and powerful force.

Overtaking the moment the eternal Ray
Illumined That which never yet was made.

'*The eternal Ray*', a single ray from the everlasting light, overtakes the moment: a ray of the supreme consciousness shines down and lights up for Aswapati all kinds of possibilities that have never yet been manifested, '*that which never yet was made*': this material

universe is only a small result of that stupendous force, and so much more is possible.

Thought lay down in a mighty voicelessness;
The toiling Thinker widened and grew still,
Wisdom transcendent touched his quivering heart:
His soul could sail beyond thought's luminous bar;
Mind screened no more the shoreless infinite.

The result of all this experience is that the power of Thought lies down '*in a mighty voicelessness*': it became '*mighty*' and fell silent. The active mind, '*the toiling thinker*', grew wider and stopped moving, became quiet: it '*widened and grew still*'. Then the very highest wisdom, '*Wisdom transcendent*', touched his heart, '*his quivering heart*'. His soul is no longer involved in the cosmic movement of Nature: '*his soul stood free*' as we read earlier; and because it is free, it could now '*sail beyond thought's luminous bar*'. Two words here, '*sail*' and '*bar*', convey an image: in the days of sailing boats it was very important to have sheltered harbours with a strong enclosing wall jutting out into the sea to protect the boats inside from the strong winds and waves of the ocean; that harbour wall is called the '*bar*'; When a ship sails out of the harbour, it crosses '*beyond the bar*', it is no longer protected inside the sheltered harbour. As long as we remain centred in mind we are in a protected harbour which shelters us from the fiercest forces of the universe; Aswapati's soul is now strong and free, it can sail beyond the '*luminous bar*' of thought, out into the vastness, the openness. Mind brings us some light, but it is still a bar, a limit; for Aswapati now '*Mind no longer screened the shoreless infinite*.' His soul could move out beyond the bar of limiting mind into the open shoreless expanse, the unlimited ocean of Infinity.

Across a void retreating sky he glimpsed

Through a last glimmer and drift of vanishing stars
The superconscient realms of motionless Peace
Where judgment ceases and the word is mute
And the Unconceived lies pathless and alone.

Moving out beyond the bar of thought into the ocean of Infinity, he has a wide view '*across a void retreating sky*', an empty sky that seems to be expanding further and further away; in that sky there are a few stars, but they are vanishing, fading and drifting away. Beyond that '*last glimmer and drift of vanishing stars*' he gets a glimpse, a brief sight of '*the superconscient realms of motionless peace / Where judgment ceases and the word is mute*'. Judgment and words belong to mind, but in those realms beyond the mind judgment ceases and the words fall silent; there is a state of motionless peace: no movement, no sound, pure peace. There '*the Unconceived lies pathless and alone*'. '*The Unconceived*': that which Mind cannot grasp or conceive because it is beyond all thought. These are '*superconscient realms*' which lie far beyond the reach of our normal consciousness.

There came not form or any mounting voice;
There only were Silence and the Absolute.

In those realms beyond the reach of mind, there was no form, no voice or word, no call or prayer coming up from the lower levels: there were only Silence and the Absolute.

Out of that stillness mind new-born arose
And woke to truths once inexpressible,
And forms appeared, dumbly significant,
A seeing thought, a self-revealing voice.

This stillness and absoluteness is not permanent for Aswapati. It is like a wonderful bath of silence; after some time the mind emerges

out of that stillness again, '*new-born*', and wakes up to an awareness of truths that it could never have expressed before; it perceives new forms or sees forms in a new way: the forms themselves are '*dumbly significant*', full of meaning although they do not speak; mind wakes up to '*a seeing thought*' that has a power of vision, and to the awareness of a voice which reveals itself, which gives knowledge. A new kind of mind emerges from the Silence and Absoluteness which he experienced as '*an aspect of Reality*'.

He knew the source from which his spirit came:
Movement was married to the immobile Vast;
He plunged his roots into the Infinite,
He based his life upon eternity.

Having that experience, he is aware of the source of his spirit: out of that Silence and that Absolute his spirit has come; this universe of ceaseless movement is married to, united with, that vast immobile silence. His whole sense of his own being is changed. His roots were no longer in the inconscience of Matter; they plunged deeply into the Infinite, and he felt his whole life '*based upon eternity*'.

End of Section 2

Section 3, lines 437 to 574

Only awhile at first these heavenlier states,
These large wide-poised upliftings could endure.

To '*Endure*' means 'to last'. At first, when Aswapati began to experience these '*heavenlier states*', these higher states of consciousness, '*these large wide-poised upliftings*', which brought him into a wider and higher 'poise' or state, lasted only a short time, '*awhile*'. This is a general experience, and Sri Aurobindo will tell us why this happens:

The high and luminous tension breaks too soon,
The body's stone stillness and the life's hushed trance,
The breathless might and calm of silent mind;
Or slowly they fail as sets a golden day.

This is a general experience in the spiritual life: we aspire, we concentrate and receive some wonderful experience where we are in a state of '*high and luminous tension*'; but soon it breaks, and we come back to the ordinary consciousness. In that state of concentration, the body was still, unmoving, like a stone, all the life-forces were as if in a '*hushed trance*'; the mind too was silent: a '*breathless might and calm of silent mind*' was felt; but too soon it breaks: suddenly we are back to normal; or perhaps the experiences just slowly fade away: '*Slowly they fail as sets a golden day*', like some beautiful sunset slowly fading into twilight. Suddenly or gradually Aswapati too would come down out of those '*large wide-poised upliftings*'.

The restless nether members tire of peace;
A nostalgia of old little works and joys,
A need to call back small familiar selves,

To tread the accustomed and inferior way,
The need to rest in a natural pose of fall,
As a child who learns to walk can walk not long,
Replace the titan will for ever to climb,
On the heart's altar dim the sacred fire.

This happens because '*the restless nether members*', the lower parts of our being, are restless and need to move; our body, our life parts, our mind, get tired of peace. They feel '*nostalgia*', remembrance and longing for a familiar state that they are missing. Some parts of the being remember '*old little works and joys*', all their normal activities and pleasures, and they want to go back to them. There is a need to call back our '*small familiar selves*' and to walk along the way that we are used to, the '*accustomed*' way, even though it is '*inferior*', and not as wonderful as those higher, uplifted states. Something in us wants to get back to what feels normal; we need '*to rest in a natural pose of fall*', for when we rest, we lie down flat as if we had fallen – it feels natural to us to rest like that, lying down. This happens when we first begin to have spiritual experiences: they do not last long; Sri Aurobindo compares us to a little child learning to walk: it cannot walk all day long; it often needs to rest, and just lets itself fall down flat. All these movements, these needs, this nostalgia, replace the strong will, the powerful aspiration that would like to go on climbing and climbing forever; the '*sacred fire*' of aspiration, of Agni, which has been lit on the altar of the heart, gets dimmed, it no longer burns so strongly and brightly.

An old pull of subconscious cords renews;
It draws the unwilling spirit from the heights,
Or a dull gravitation drags us down
To the blind driven inertia of our base.

Often it is subconscious movements that pull us down. We are still

tied to the subconscious by strong '*cords*', strings or ropes, which pull us down from the higher states; the spirit would like to stay up on the heights, but the pull of the subconscious draws '*the unwilling spirit*' down from the heights it was enjoying; there is also the pull of gravity that holds us to the earth, that makes us feel heavy and prevents us from flying weightlessly up into the heavens; this '*dull gravitation*', the pull of the earth, drags us down '*to the blind driven inertia of our base*'. Our base is matter and the characteristic of matter is inertia; inert matter is driven blindly by subconscious forces.

This too the supreme Diplomat can use,
He makes our fall a means for greater rise.

The Lord is '*the supreme Diplomat*'. He makes use even of this need to fall back from the heights to our ordinary level. It is natural that, at first, we cannot always remain at the highest heights of our experience; we are like small children learning to walk; we cannot walk all the time; but he will make use of this. '*He makes our fall a means for greater rise*': he uses it as a way of helping us to progress further, to rise even higher. The Lord is a '*diplomat*' who finds a way to take advantage of all circumstances and makes them serve his purpose.

For into ignorant Nature's gusty field,
Into the half-ordered chaos of mortal life
The formless Power, the Self of eternal light
Follow in the shadow of the spirit's descent;

When our spirit is dragged back down from the heights, '*the formless Power, the Self of eternal light*' follow it down, they come down with it '*into the half-ordered chaos of mortal life*', the disorder and confusion and ignorance that we live in. The higher Consciousness and Force follow the spirit as it falls back into this '*ignorant Nature's gusty field*', this field of ignorance which is full of

strong winds that blow us about, and often off course. When the spirit is drawn back to earth, pulled down by the '*nether members*' which have become tired of the higher peace because they feel nostalgia for their ordinary activities and need to rest, the consciousness and power from the heights '*follow in the shadow of the spirit's descent*'.

The twin duality for ever one

Chooses its home mid the tumults of the sense.

'*The twin duality for ever one*' who are '*the formless Power*' and '*the Self of eternal light*', the One in the twin form of Shakti and Chit, chooses to live amidst all the stormy disturbances of the senses, here in our ordinary life.

He comes unseen into our darker parts

And, curtained by the darkness, does his work,

A subtle and all-knowing guest and guide,

Till they too feel the need and will to change.

He, the One who is also the '*twin duality*', the supreme Diplomat, '*comes unseen into our darker parts*'; we are not aware of him coming into our lower subconscious parts, but he does his work there '*curtained by the darkness*'. A curtain is a cloth that we hang at the window to keep out the light, or to prevent people from seeing into the room from outside; here Sri Aurobindo uses it as a verb; the Lord is hidden by the darkness as if by a curtain so that we are not aware of what he is doing. He goes on doing his work behind the curtain, acting as a '*subtle and all-knowing guest and guide*' within us. Although we do not know that he is there, he goes on doing his work and guiding us, until all our parts, even the darker ones, also begin to feel '*the need and will to change*'.

All here must learn to obey a higher law,

Our body's cells must hold the Immortal's flame.

All of us, every part, must learn to obey, to be ruled by a higher law than our present nature; even the cells of our body must learn to hold the '*Immortal's flame*' of Power and Consciousness.

Else would the spirit reach alone its source

Leaving a half-saved world to its dubious fate.

Otherwise, if this did not happen, if the Lord did not do his work secretly in our darker parts so that they could learn to obey the higher law, if it were not possible for everything here to learn to obey the higher law, then the spirit would escape from the world here and get back to its origin and reunite with its source, but it would have to go alone and abandon the world in order to do so; it would leave the world unchanged and unsaved; having reached the mental level it would go higher, leaving the world as it is, '*to its dubious fate.*' If it were like that, we would not know what fate, what destiny is awaiting the world. It is only because we are certain that the Lord is constantly working on the world to awaken it to its higher destiny that we can be sure, as Sri Aurobindo has told us, that the supramental transformation of the world is a thing 'decreed and inevitable.'

Nature would ever labour unredeemed;

Our earth would ever spin unhelped in Space,

And this immense creation's purpose fail

Till at last the frustrate universe sank undone.

This is what would happen if the higher consciousness and power did not come down into '*Nature's gusty field*' to help everything here to obey a higher law. Nature would just go on forever with its toil and its labour '*unredeemed*', unsaved. 'Redeemed' is a word with a Christian connotation; it literally means 'bought back'. When you

need money for a special purpose and give some gold ornaments to the bank to get a loan, in order to get the gold back, you have to repay the loan and the interest to 'redeem' your property. Christianity teaches that the sacrifice of Christ has saved the whole world, has bought the whole world back for the Divine. The Lord has to come down into all the darker parts of nature and work on them until they feel the need and the will to learn to obey the higher law, so that this fallen Nature can be redeemed, saved; if Nature could not be redeemed, then our earth would just go on spinning helplessly through Space, and the purpose for which this great creation has been made would fail, *'till at last the frustrate universe sank undone'*: a universe that has gone wrong somehow, that is *'frustrate'*, prevented from fulfilling its purpose and its destiny, will eventually dissolve. But Sri Aurobindo tells us that this is not going to happen: the supreme Diplomat is secretly working, he is bringing those higher forces to work here in the darkness, even when we seem to fail and fall.

Even his godlike strength to rise must fall:
His greater consciousness withdrew behind;
Dim and eclipsed, his human outside strove
To feel again the old sublimities,
Bring the high saving touch, the ethereal flame,
Call back to its dire need the divine Force.

Even though Aswapati represents the power of tapasya and aspiration and has achieved a *'godlike strength'*, he too has to go through this process of falling in order to rise higher so that his nature can be fully transformed. His *'greater consciousness withdrew behind'* and his outer human parts felt as if their sun of consciousness and power had been *'eclipsed'* and darkened. Whenever this happened, his surface being, *'his human outside'* made

an effort, '*strove*'; it struggled to feel again the high uplifted states, the '*wide-poised upliftings*' that it had experienced; it made an effort to call back that '*high saving touch*' and the flame which belongs to the subtler and higher '*ethereal*' realms. His outer being felt an intense need, and tried to '*call back to its dire need the divine Force.*'

Always the power poured back like sudden rain,
Or slowly in his breast a presence grew;
It clambered back to some remembered height
Or soared above the peak from which it fell.

These falls are not permanent: they are a temporary necessity, and when the lower nature and the '*human outside*' call with an intense aspiration, there is always a response: either the power pours back like a sudden shower of rain, or there grows slowly, imperceptibly, in his heart the sense of the Divine presence; then the consciousness either '*clambered back*' ('clambering' means climbing with difficulty) to a height that it has reached before and remembers, or sometimes like a bird it '*soared above the peak from which it fell*': it flies even higher, as if effortlessly, far above the highest point it had reached before it fell back down to earth.

Each time he rose there was a larger poise,
A dwelling on a higher spirit plane;
The Light remained in him a longer space.

This process of rising and falling was progressive: each time that he rose again after a fall, he reached '*a larger poise*': a wider balance, a steadiness, and a greater vastness; and he could dwell, he could remain settled for some time '*on a higher spirit plane*', a higher level of consciousness. '*The Light remained in him a longer space*': each time the higher experience lasted longer before he fell back again into the darker state.

In this oscillation between earth and heaven,
In this ineffable communion's climb
There grew in him as grows a waxing moon
The glory of the integer of his soul.

There is a repeated process of rising and falling and rising again. This is called '*oscillation*': a repeated alternation between different states, like the needle on a gauge that moves from one side to another as it measures change. Aswapati was experiencing an '*oscillation*', an alternation, '*between earth and heaven*' and back again; and that oscillation, that movement of rising and falling, was progressive: each time that he rose he could go higher and remain longer, so it was also a '*climb*', an ascent; and the climb was also a growing '*communion*', an increasing contact and communication between his heights and his depths. Sri Aurobindo describes that communion as '*ineffable*': it could not be expressed or put into words, but it was happening. Through all these experiences something within him was growing, becoming larger and brighter, like the moon. The moon '*waxes*': from the faint crescent of the new moon each evening it grows bigger and brighter until full moon, and then it starts to '*wane*' again until we cannot see it at all. Within Aswapati a light is '*waxing*', growing stronger and brighter; that light is '*the glory of the integer of his soul*'. An '*integer*' is a whole number. Through this process, the wholeness of his soul is becoming stronger and brighter and more glorious.

A union of the Real with the unique,
A gaze of the Alone from every face,
The presence of the Eternal in the hours
Widening the mortal mind's half-look on things,
Bridging the gap between man's force and Fate
Made whole the fragment being we are here.

This is the experience which is growing within him: first '*a union of the Real with the unique*': he experiences that which is ultimately Real, the Supreme Reality, united with all the many '*unique*' things, the many different things in the evolving manifestation; through all the many different faces which he sees, he experiences the '*gaze of the Alone*', the one divine Self; he experiences '*the presence of the Eternal in the hours*', in time. We think of the Eternal as being beyond time, but Aswapati is experiencing '*the presence of the Eternal in the hours*', in time. All these experiences were '*widening the mortal mind's half-look on things*'. Our mortal minds see things in a limited and distorted way, a '*half-look*'; but for Aswapati, through these experiences of the higher consciousness, that '*half-look*' of the mortal mind gets widened, and a bridge, a connection, is made '*between man's force and Fate*' which is determining the course of things. All these things begin to make him whole. That is why Sri Aurobindo has used the word '*integer*', a whole number, a unity. Here we are all fragment beings; we only know a fragment of ourselves, a little bit at a time; but with this widening experience and view Aswapati becomes aware of the whole and sees a bridge across the gap between our limited human strength and the force of Fate, of Destiny; and he himself becomes gradually more complete.

At last was won a firm spiritual poise,
A constant lodging in the Eternal's realm,
A safety in the Silence and the Ray,
A settlement in the Immutable.

After all those oscillations between the heights and the deeps, reaching great heights and falling back into '*a natural pose of fall*', eventually Aswapati gets established in '*a firm spiritual poise*', '*a constant lodging in the Eternal's realm*', so that at last he is able to remain permanently in the realm of the Eternal and Immutable; he

experiences '*a safety in the Silence and the Ray*'; there is no risk or danger of him falling back again. He gains '*a settlement in the Immutable*' and becomes firmly established in the higher consciousness.

His heights of being lived in the still Self;
His mind could rest on a supernal ground
And look down on the magic and the play
Where the God-child lies on the lap of Night and Dawn
And the Everlasting puts on Time's disguise.

The higher parts of his being live '*in the silent Self*', in the still, unmoving, unchanging Oneness. '*His mind could rest*' there on that higher level, that '*supernal ground*', and look down on our world, on the creation here, this world of magic and play, this world where '*the God-child*', the growing Divinity, '*lies on the lap of Night and Dawn*'. Like two sisters, the Night and the Dawn nurture the growing child. The '*God-child*' is the Divine dwelling in his creation and evolving with it, the Hiranyagarbha, the Golden Embryo, the indwelling Divine who is growing up, manifesting himself more and more fully as the material creation evolves and becomes more and more fulfilled in this world where the Everlasting has disguised himself in the forms of Time and Space.

To the still heights and to the troubled depths
His equal spirit gave its vast assent:
A poised serenity of tranquil strength,
A wide unshaken look on Time's unrest
Faced all experience with unaltered peace.

Once Aswapati has achieved this '*firm spiritual poise*' the effect is a vast equality. The spirit is equal: it sees the Oneness everywhere, experiences the Oneness everywhere. So his '*equal spirit gave its vast assent*', saying 'yes' equally to the wonderful silent heights and to

the most troubled depths of nature. To 'assent to' something means to accept it, to say 'yes' to it. His equal spirit gains '*a poised serenity*', a state which is peaceful, balanced, calm, quiet, tranquil, smiling. Aswapati's '*poised serenity*' and '*tranquil strength*' give him '*a wide unshaken look on Time's unrest*'. In the world of space and time, everything is always moving, there is no silence, no peace, no rest; but for Aswapati now, the troubles and the disturbances and confusions do not shake his peace; he can look at all that and remain undisturbed; he can face '*all experience with unaltered peace*'. This is a state which Sri Aurobindo asked his disciples to cultivate. My dear mentor, Amal Kiran, pointed out these lines to me as describing a state that he was always aiming for: '*a wide unshaken look on Time's unrest*'.

Indifferent to the sorrow and delight,
Untempted by the marvel and the call,
Immobile it beheld the flux of things,
Calm and apart supported all that is:
His spirit's stillness helped the toiling world.

Because of this '*poised serenity*' all the dualities and oppositions of our experience no longer affect Aswapati deeply; he is '*indifferent*' to them. He does not respond either to the sorrow or to the delight; he is not tempted or attracted by '*the marvel and the call*' of the universal appearances; his spirit remains '*immobile*', unmoving. It '*beheld the flux of things*'; 'to behold' means 'to see'. He saw the way that everything is flowing, moving and changing. His spirit, '*calm and apart supported all that is*'; it has not turned away from the world; it is giving its equal assent to everything; it is not disturbed by anything, it remains '*calm and apart*' but is supporting everything. The stillness and calm steadiness of his spirit '*helped the toiling world*'. In fact, Mother and Sri Aurobindo tell us that it is only when we can be still

and centred in our true being that we can really help anybody or anything in the world.

Inspired by silence and the closed eyes' sight
His force could work with a new luminous art
On the crude material from which all is made
And the refusal of Inertia's mass
And the grey front of the world's Ignorance
And nescient Matter and the huge error of life.

Now Aswapati himself is able to consciously participate in the work of transformation. Earlier something was going on within, of which he was perhaps only partially aware; but now that he has reached this firm spiritual poise, *'his force could work with a new luminous art'*: a new art, full of light, could work on the lower nature. He works on *'the crude material from which all is made / And the refusal of Inertia's mass'*. There is a power of Inertia in the material world which does not want or is not able to move, but Aswapati can now work on that crude material, on the refusal and resistance of the inertia of Matter. He also works on *'the grey front of the world's Ignorance'*, extending the boundaries of the ignorance; he works on *'nescient Matter'*: Matter is *'nescient'*, without knowledge, unknowing; and he works on *'the huge error of life'*: on all the trouble and distortion and even falsehood that is here on the life level. He can do all this because he is *'inspired by silence and the closed-eyes' sight'*: in concentrated inner silence he can receive inspiration; with the subtle sight which comes when the physical eyes are closed, he can see things as they truly are; this enables him to use his great force with *'a new luminous art'* on all these things that need to be transformed in himself and in the world around him.

As a sculptor chisels a deity out of stone
He slowly chipped off the dark envelope,

Line of defence of Nature's ignorance,
The illusion and mystery of the Inconscient
In whose black pall the Eternal wraps his head
That he may act unknown in cosmic Time.

He is working on '*the crude material from which all is made*', and he works as a sculptor. When a sculptor is making the figure of a deity, a god, out of stone, it is as if he has a vision of the figure that is waiting in the stone to be released into form; he slowly has to chip and chisel away the stone that is covering the figure of the god. Similarly Aswapati has to remove everything which does not correspond to the growing godhead within himself; so he is slowly chipping off the '*dark envelope*' which is the '*line of defence*', protecting the ignorance of the lower Nature. That '*dark envelope*' is formed by '*the illusion and mystery of the Inconscient*'; the Inconscient is like a black cloth, a '*pall*', the cloth that is draped over a coffin at a funeral, a heavy dark covering that does not let any light through. The Eternal wraps his head in that black covering of inconscience so that his working cannot be recognised, so that he can '*act unknown*', incognito, without being recognised '*in cosmic Time*'. For Aswapati the time of that unconscious working has passed, so he has to start removing the black pall, the dark envelope which is Nature's line of defence against radical change.

A splendour of self-creation from the peaks,
A transfiguration in the mystic depths,
A happier cosmic working could begin
And fashion the world-shape in him anew,
God found in Nature, Nature fulfilled in God.

This is a process of transformation: '*a splendour of self-creation from the peaks*' – from the very highest levels of himself – combines with '*a transfiguration in the mystic depths*' to begin '*a happier cosmic*

working that will '*fashion the world-shape in him anew*', transforming universal nature in him. The word '*transfiguration*' has a Christian connotation: it is used when forms or beings reveal or express their true inner divinity and are changed in a way that expresses their higher nature. It is not quite the same as '*transformation*'. There is an episode in the New Testament called '*the transfiguration on the mountain*', when Christ and two of his disciples are seen on the mountain top in glorious divine forms, but then they come down the mountain again and resume their normal human appearance; transfiguration is not necessarily permanent. Through these two processes, from the peaks and in the depths, in Aswapati '*a happier cosmic working could begin*': a change of nature. It is happening in him, but it has an effect in the universe as a whole. Every one of us is an individual expression of the universe. When this change happens in Aswapati, universal nature in him can begin working in a happier way, and in him '*the world-shape*' gets fashioned anew, it gets changed. It gets changed into the ideal condition where God is found in Nature and Nature gets fulfilled in God. We often say '*It's just nature*' meaning all the apparently unconscious working that goes on in us and around us which is not decided by our conscious choice; for us, that is the force of nature. In truth, Nature is an expression of the conscious force of the Divine: at the highest level the two come together.

Already in him was seen that task of Power:
Life made its home on the high tops of self;
His soul, mind, heart became a single sun;
Only life's lower reaches remained dim.

'God found in Nature, Nature fulfilled in God': this state, which will be the fulfilment of evolution, the full achievement of the Creation, gives a first glimpse of itself in Aswapati: '*Already in him was seen*

that task of Power'. In him Life was lifted up to its higher levels; it *'made its home on the high tops of Self*', on the summit of Being; his soul, his mind, and his heart *'became a single sun*', one unified light; but the lower levels of life still remained *'dim*': there was not much light there yet.

But there too, in the uncertain shadow of life,
There was a labour and a fiery breath;
The ambiguous cowed celestial puissance worked
Watched by the inner Witness's moveless peace.

But even on the lower levels that are still dim, still *'in the uncertain shadow of life*' something is working energetically: *'there was a labour and a fiery breath*'; a fiery breath brings heat and energy, and some purification is going on. *'The ambiguous cowed celestial puissance worked*': *'puissance*' means power: there is a power at work. It is *'cowed*'. A *'cowl*' is the hood of a cloak, so that power is working in disguise and what it is doing is not obvious. The power itself is *'ambiguous*'. When something is ambiguous, we are not sure what it means, what its significance is, we cannot tell. It is difficult to judge what that power is doing, but it is working *'in the uncertain shadow of life*', and watching it is *'the inner Witness's moveless peace*'. Some work of purification and transformation is being done on the lower levels, and the Witness consciousness is quietly watching and supporting that work.

Even on the struggling Nature left below
Strong periods of illumination came:
Lightnings of glory after glory burned,
Experience was a tale of blaze and fire,
Air rippled round the argosies of the Gods,
Strange riches sailed to him from the Unseen;
Splendours of insight filled the blank of thought,

Knowledge spoke to the inconscient stillnesses,
Rivers poured down of bliss and luminous force,
Visits of beauty, storm-sweeps of delight
Rained from the all-powerful Mystery above.

Even in the lower reaches, on the '*struggling Nature*' left below in the shadow when the soul and mind and heart have become a single sun, '*strong periods of illumination came*'; even they were filled with intense light at times: '*lightnings of glory after glory burned*' and '*experience was a tale of blaze and fire*': they experienced intense energy, the light and heat of purification and aspiration. '*Air rippled round the argosies of the Gods*': '*argosies*' were old sailing ships that carried rich and precious cargos; these '*argosies*' come from the Gods, the cosmic powers, and they bring precious gifts: '*strange riches sailed to him from the Unseen*'. When thought is silenced '*splendours of insight*' come. Knowledge from the heights speaks to the dark unconscious depths, '*the inconscient stillnesses*', the lower silences. '*Rivers poured down of bliss and luminous force*': for the Vedic rishis, rivers were symbols of streams of energy; the aim of the rishis was to deliver the hidden Sun within, and when that was liberated then the rains and rivers of divine energy would flow down from heaven. Those rivers of bliss and luminous force pour down on Aswapati, and he experiences '*visits of beauty, storm-sweeps of delight*': the delight that comes is intense and powerful like a violent storm. All this is pouring down '*from the all-powerful Mystery above*', and all these experiences are coming down even into the '*struggling Nature left below*'.

Thence stooped the eagles of Omniscience.
A dense veil was rent, a mighty whisper heard;
Repeated in the privacy of his soul,
A wisdom-cry from rapt transcendences

Sang on the mountains of an unseen world;
The voices that an inner listening hears
Conveyed to him their prophet utterances,
And flame-wrapped outbursts of the immortal Word
And flashes of an occult revealing Light
Approached him from the unreachable Secrecy.

'Thence' means 'from there'. From *'the all-powerful Mystery above'* these eagles, powerful birds with wide wings, golden eagles come down. As mentioned before, the word 'stoop' is applied to the sudden downwards movement of powerful birds of prey who drop down out of the sky and seize their prey. These birds are *'the eagles of Omniscience'*; they swoop down and bring their power of All-Knowledge to Aswapati. So the *'dense veil'*, the thick dark covering of unconsciousness, *'was rent'*: torn apart. A whisper is heard, but it is *'a mighty whisper'*, full of power. *'In the privacy of his soul'*, deep within him is repeated *'a wisdom-cry from rapt transcendences'*, a voice of wisdom from superconscious levels of consciousness, from beyond the manifestation, which is being sung *'on the mountains of an unseen world'*: deep within the private spaces of his soul Aswapati hears the echo of a cry of wisdom from transcendent states of rapture. There are voices that cannot be heard by our physical ears but only by *'an inner listening'*. Aswapati hears them speaking to him and he can understand what they are saying. They *'conveyed'*, communicated to him their *'prophet utterances'*. An *'utterance'* is something spoken. The utterances of these voices are prophetic. A prophet is a seer who can communicate what will happen in the future; these *'prophet utterances'* tell Aswapati what can or will be in the future. He also hears *'flame-wrapped outbursts of the immortal Word'*. The immortal Word is the Word of Creation, the Word of command that gives rise to new creations; Aswapati experiences that immortal Word expressing itself in *'flame-wrapped outbursts'* like

the flares from the surface of the Sun which astronomers have photographed. He also experiences '*flashes of an occult revealing light*'. The words '*outbursts*' and '*flashes*' both suggest brief and very powerful experiences. All these experiences '*approached him*', came near to him, from the '*unreachable Secrecy*' above.

An inspired Knowledge sat enthroned within
Whose seconds illumined more than reason's years:
An ictus of revealing lustre fell
As if a pointing accent upon Truth,
And like a sky-flare showing all the ground
A swift intuitive discernment shone.

Using the power of our reason, it may take us years and years of study and struggle to find some knowledge; but with Inspiration that knowledge can come to us in seconds. Now for Aswapati that inspired knowledge is throned within him, like a king; in just a second, a moment of insight, more knowledge comes to him from within than could be gained by the reason after years of effort. When that happens, '*an ictus of revealing lustre fell*'. The word '*ictus*' comes from a Latin word meaning 'a blow', but in poetry it means stress on a particular word or syllable; to mark the rhythm of the line of verse, that kind of stress or accent may be marked with a sign over the word or syllable that is to be accented. Here Sri Aurobindo seems to be saying that in Aswapati's experience, from time to time, something would be pointed out to him as if by a ray of light, '*a revealing lustre*', coming from above and pointing out some hidden Truth. And '*like a sky-flare*', like a rocket or flare going up into the dark sky and bursting into light and showing '*all the ground*' below, he experiences a sudden '*intuitive discernment*'. '*Discernment*' is the capacity of seeing how things really are. This discernment comes suddenly, swiftly, like a flash of bright light in

the darkness. As a result of that discernment

One glance could separate the true and false,
Or raise its rapid torch-fire in the dark
To check the claimants crowding through mind's gates
Covered by the forged signatures of the gods,
Detect the magic bride in her disguise
Or scan the apparent face of thought and life.

'One glance could separate the true and false': this is the meaning of *'discernment'* which is the capacity of being able to distinguish what is genuine from a fake or forgery, what is real and valuable from a cheap copy. Aswapati now has that capacity of discerning with one glance, one short look. Or his discerning glance can hold up its *'rapid torch-fire'* in the darkness of the Subconscious or the Inconscious, to check *'the claimants crowding through mind's gates'* wanting to enter. Ideas and suggestions are claiming the right to enter through the gates of the mind; they have permits, which seem to carry *'signatures of the gods'*, the higher powers, but these are *'forged'*, they are not genuine, not really signed by gods. Ideas and impulses come claiming the right to enter his mind, as if they are recommended by a heavenly authority, but that may not be so; Aswapati's discerning glance can immediately see whether they really come from the higher powers or not. As in a fairy-tale, *'the magic bride'* may be in disguise, she may not look like a princess, she may not look like a bride at all; but whatever disguise she appears in, his discernment can recognise her even though she looks like a poor old beggar-woman; *'the magic bride'* must be a soul-power who will be of great help to him if he unites with her. His discernment can *'scan the apparent face of thought and life'*, look at the appearance, the *'apparent face'* whether of thought or of life, and find the truth behind. This discernment is a wonderful gift of the spirit, *viveka*: the

capacity to distinguish the true from the false, to see through the appearances to the Reality within.

End of Section 3

Section 4, lines 575-786

We have been reading about the great change of consciousness that comes to King Aswapati, how he gets settled in it and develops a power of spiritual discernment that enables him to see the truth of things behind their appearances.

The next thing that Sri Aurobindo describes is the power of inspiration. We know that all these descriptions are based on experiences that he had himself. He has written about how he experienced four goddess powers, of Inspiration, Intuition, Revelation and Discrimination¹⁵ which came to him associated with significant names and presences. Later on in Pondicherry when he was studying the Vedas, he found those names mentioned there, and that gave him the clue to the inner psychological symbolism in the language of the Vedas, the first key that helped him to unlock that symbolism. At the end of the previous section we read about the power of discernment or discrimination which came to Aswapati. In the rest of this section the powers of these four goddesses which represent four faculties of the Truth-consciousness, each with their distinctive action, seem to be brought together in a single being, who is not named, but simply referred to as 'she' or 'the inspiring goddess'. Perhaps this is the reason why the poet has not given any capital letter to the word 'inspiration' in the first line here: because it is not the name of the goddess, but only one of her functions. First he tells us about the power of inspiration, which in the Veda is represented by a goddess named Saraswati.

¹⁵... four goddesses representing the four faculties of the Ritam or Truth-consciousness, — Ila representing truth-vision or revelation, Saraswati truth-audition, inspiration, the divine word, Sarama intuition, Dakshina the separative intuitional discrimination. (*The Secret of the Veda*, CWSA volume 15, p. 73).

Oft inspiration with her lightning feet,
A sudden messenger from the all-seeing tops,
Traversed the soundless corridors of his mind
Bringing her rhythmic sense of hidden things.

Inspiration is a quality that creative people are always searching for. The artist, the poet, the musician, or anybody who has to create anything, will try to get in touch with the power of inspiration. The ancient Greeks imaged the power of inspiration as a series of goddesses, one for poetry, and one for music, dance and so on. These divine powers are the Muses. If you are aspiring for inspiration, you must try to get into a state of 'muse'; you have to be in a receptive state before one of those goddesses will come down and help you. The great poets each had their favourite muse, whom they knew by name. The English epic poet Milton worshipped a muse called Urania, 'the one who brings the light'.

In what Sri Aurobindo writes here, we can see that a female power is visiting Aswapati; he mentions '*her lightning feet*', which implies that she comes quickly, like a flash of light. She comes as a messenger from '*the all-seeing tops*', the highest levels of consciousness where everything is seen, where there is a power of all-vision. She '*traversed*', crossed or passed through '*the soundless corridors of his mind*'. Aswapati's mind is completely silent, so inspiration can enter it. She brings '*her rhythmic sense of hidden things*', inspiring rhythms which may be expressed in music or poetry, or in the lines of a sculpture or a painting. This happened to Aswapati often: '*oft*' is a poetic short form of the word 'often'.

A music spoke transcending mortal speech.
As if from a golden phial of the All-Bliss,
A joy of light, a joy of sudden sight,
A rapture of the thrilled undying Word

Poured into his heart as into an empty cup,
A repetition of God's first delight
Creating in a young and virgin Time.

These are effects of visits by the goddess of inspiration: '*a music spoke transcending mortal speech*'; music can convey meanings and significances which are not verbalized in the form of human speech. Inspiration came to him like that: '*a music spoke*', a music that 'transcends', that goes beyond our '*mortal speech*'. The effect of hearing that music is an experience of extreme delight: '*a joy of light, a joy of sudden sight*' enters his heart, as if poured from '*a golden phial*'; a '*phial*' is a small beautiful bottle used to hold something very precious, a medicine or a perfume; this phial contains bliss, delight. When inspiration comes, she comes on '*lightning feet*'; of course it suggests that she comes very quickly; but she also brings flashes of light, and her light carries joy and '*sudden sight*': in the light that inspiration brings, Aswapati suddenly sees things never seen before, and this thrills him with delight pouring into his heart, bringing a touch of the ananda, the All-bliss, the '*rapture*', the intense delight '*of the thrilled undying Word*'. Through the meaningful music and the light and delight that Inspiration brings, as a messenger from '*the all-seeing tops*', the creative Word comes to Aswapati, the highest Will expressing itself in a rhythmic vibration. When Sri Aurobindo mentions the Word with a capital 'W' he means the creative Word, as when the Lord says 'Let it be' and the universe comes into existence. That act of creation brings a thrill of delight; something of that intense delight of creation is pouring into Aswapati's heart. His heart is like an empty cup. Not only is his mind silent, his heart is also receptive. Perhaps the greatest delight we can know is to be touched by the creative power and feel that something is being expressed through us. Aswapati experiences that intense thrill as '*a repetition of God's first delight / Creating in a*

young and virgin Time': the delight the Creator must have felt when he first conceived this manifestation and said 'Let it be', in the very beginning of time when everything was fresh and new and pure. Aswapati feels that same thrilled delight repeated in him at the touch of the goddess of inspiration.

In a brief moment caught, a little space,
All-Knowledge packed into great wordless thoughts
Lodged in the expectant stillness of his depths
A crystal of the ultimate Absolute,
A portion of the inexpressible Truth
Revealed by silence to the silent soul.

Inspiration may come just for a moment, a little space of time; but in that *'brief moment'*, in that *'little space'* he is able catch *'All-Knowledge'*. It is as if all the infinite Knowledge of the Supreme has been brought together and *'packed'* into *'great wordless thoughts'* which *'transcend mortal speech'*, and are expressed in music, in rhythms that convey a meaning beyond words. These great wordless thoughts containing the *'All-Knowledge'* form *'a crystal'*, a shining form like a gemstone. This crystal comes from *'the ultimate Absolute'*, the supreme Reality, and is *'a portion of the inexpressible Truth'*. The Truth of the ultimate Absolute, which is the source of all the truths we seek for and believe in, can never be fully expressed, it is *'inexpressible'*; but a portion of it, in the form of this crystal which contains *'All-Knowledge packed into great wordless thoughts'*, gets *'lodged in the expectant stillness of his depths'*. In order to receive inspiration, Aswapati had to become deeply silent, deeply still and unmoving – not just on the surface of his being, as we may sit without speaking, trying to meditate, to concentrate, but all the time thoughts and feelings and sensations are buzzing away beneath the surface; he has become deeply still. His mind is silent, his heart is

like an empty cup, his soul is silent, receptive, aspiring for some great gift from above; and into the '*expectant stillness of his depths*' comes this crystal which by the power of silence reveals a portion of the inexpressible Truth to the silence of his soul. It gets '*lodged*' in his depths: it remains there, and does not go away.

The intense creatrix in his stillness wrought;
Her power fallen speechless grew more intimate;
She looked upon the seen and the unforeseen,
Ungessed domains she made her native field.

Now it is as if the creative goddess of inspiration, '*the intense creatrix*' has come right into his consciousness, into the stillness of his being; now she is not just visiting, coming with her lightning feet just for a moment; now she is entering into him and starts to work within him. We have had this word '*wrought*' earlier, and I mentioned that it is a part of an old verb that conveys work, effort, action. The '*intense creatrix*', the dynamic creative power, is working within Aswapati, preparing something in his stillness. Her power does not express itself in words, in speech, it has '*fallen speechless*'; but it has become '*more intimate*'; when you are '*intimate*' with someone, there can be a silent understanding between you which does not need to be expressed in words. Within Aswapati, or from within him, the creative goddess looks '*upon the seen and the unforeseen*': she sees what he sees, but also she sees things that were not expected, things that were not foreseen, not seen approaching in advance, before they happened. She masters '*ungessed domains*', realms of consciousness that Aswapati had never guessed existed, and makes them '*her native field*' as if she had been born there and it is completely familiar and natural and easy for her to move and work there.

All-vision gathered into a single ray,

As when the eyes stare at an invisible point
Till through the intensity of one luminous spot
An apocalypse of a world of images
Enters into the kingdom of the seer.

Aswapati has already gained the power of seeing everything at a single glance – past, present and future, the inner and the outer worlds. Here that power of vast '*All-vision*' gets concentrated, almost like a laser beam. Sri Aurobindo says that it is like when we practice the special form of meditation called *tratak*: concentrating all our thought and power of vision on a single spot, perhaps the glowing tip of an incense stick; or sometimes the aspirant will focus his attention and his vision on '*an invisible point*', beyond the end of the nose, concentrating intensely '*Till through the intensity of one luminous spot / An apocalypse of a world of images / Enters into the kingdom of the seer*'. '*Apocalypse*' is a Greek word which means 'revelation'. The aspirant has been concentrating all his attention on an invisible point, and that intensity of concentration breaks through the veil so that he becomes able to see a whole world of images that were invisible before. That world of images '*enters into the kingdom of the seer*.' It becomes part of the realm over which he commands the power of vision, part of what he has the power to see. Aswapati had this experience too. Perhaps here Sri Aurobindo is referring to the action of the goddess Ila representing truth-vision or revelation.

A great nude arm of splendour suddenly rose;
It rent the gauze opaque of Nescience:
Her lifted finger's keen unthinkable tip
Bared with a stab of flame the closed Beyond.

This experience of opening up a new realm of subtle vision comes to Aswapati through the action of the goddess. It is as if she raises her

arm and tears apart the veil of 'Nescience', of not knowing. 'To rend' means to tear. This '*great nude arm of splendour*' suddenly appears and tears apart '*the gauze opaque of Nescience*'. The state of 'not knowing' is like a veil that one cannot see through. '*Gauze*' is a very fine kind of cloth which we ought to be able to see through; but this gauze is '*opaque*'. Normally we can see through glass, but if the glass is opaque, we cannot see through it. The goddess lifts her finger. The tip is '*keen*', sharp like the point of a knife. The power of her finger is '*unthinkable*', beyond the power of thought. She uses it to reveal to Aswapati '*the closed Beyond*': all that was unknown to him, 'beyond his ken', is suddenly revealed, laid bare, lit up as if by a flaring flame, a torch.

An eye awake in voiceless heights of trance,
A mind plucking at the unimaginable,
Overleaping with a sole and perilous bound
The high black wall hiding superconscience,
She broke in with inspired speech for scythe
And plundered the Unknowable's vast estate.

Here is another way in which the goddess helped Aswapati, as '*an eye awake in voiceless heights of trance*': in trance, a person is often said to be in a kind of sleep, because they seem unaware of what is happening around them or even to their bodies; but they may be awake and seeing things on higher levels, silent levels of spirit. She acts like '*a mind plucking at the unimaginable*': a mind that is trying to get hold of something that lies beyond imagination. Both these are ways of striving for something unknown, unseen. She is pictured leaping over '*the high black wall hiding superconscience*' in a single daring leap, '*a sole and perilous bound*'; that high black wall is hiding the '*superconscience*', the highest levels of consciousness far above and beyond us. Like a thief she breaks into '*the Unknowable's vast*

estate', the private domain of the Supreme Being. She gathers some of the precious grains of Truth growing there. She gathers them using '*inspired speech for scythe*'. A '*scythe*' is a tool used in the old days for harvesting; it has a curved blade attached to a long wooden handle; the sharp cutting edge that the goddess uses to '*plunder*', to steal as much as she can from '*The Unknowable's vast estate*', is her power of '*inspired speech*': the power of mantra, of revelatory speech, that can catch hold of high truths and make them communicable. It is a wonderfully powerful image for the action of the goddess, leaping over the high black wall that hides the superconscient state and from there gathering rich harvests to share with the aspiring rishi Aswapati.

A gleaner of infinitesimal grains of Truth,
A sheaf-binder of infinite experience,
She pierced the guarded mysteries of World-Force
And her magic methods wrapped in a thousand veils;

Here Sri Aurobindo continues and expands the image of harvesting. The goddess acts as a '*gleaner*'. Gleaners were poor people who were allowed to go behind the harvesters to pick up every dropped grain. She gathers those tiny little grains of Truth that would otherwise be overlooked. '*Infinitesimal*' means 'extremely small'. She also acts as a '*sheaf-binder*'. The harvesters would work with their scythes to cut down the stalks of wheat, and behind them people would gather the stalks up into bundles called '*sheaves*', tied skilfully so that as little as possible would be lost; the bundles would be piled together to be collected and carted away to the threshing grounds. The goddess picks up even the tiniest grains of truth and gathers together bundles, sheaves of '*infinite experience*'. Like a little harvest mouse, she can penetrate even the most secret places: she will bore her way into '*the guarded mysteries of World-*

Force, the secrets of the creative power, the Creatrix of the World, and find out *'her magic methods wrapped in a thousand veils'*. The World-Force keeps her methods a secret; they are guarded, they are magical, occult, *'wrapped in a thousand veils'*, but the power of intuition can penetrate them and share them with Aswapati.

Or she gathered the lost secrets dropped by Time
In the dust and crannies of his mounting route
Mid old forsaken dreams of hastening Mind
And buried remnants of forgotten space.

Another action of the goddess is to go back into the past; there she is able to gather *'lost secrets'* from the past that have been dropped by Time in the course of evolution, and have fallen into *'the dust and crannies of his mounting route'*. *'Crannies'* are little cracks and corners where things can get lost and be overlooked. As evolution winds upwards, important helpful truths have been forgotten, but they are still lying there in the dust and cracks of the path that time has followed. She can go back and find them where they are lying *'mid old forsaken dreams of hastening Mind'*. Mind is always *'hastening'*, in a hurry, eager to move forward, and it leaves things behind, things it no longer values: *'old forsaken dreams'* that have been abandoned and dropped as Mind hurries forward. Along with the forsaken dreams are *'buried remnants of forgotten space'*: in the past there have been civilisations and worlds that we know nothing about; the continents have moved around over millions of years, everything has changed and the *'remnants'* or remains of those spaces have been buried and forgotten. The *'lost secrets dropped by Time'* are lying there amongst *'forsaken dreams'* and *'buried remnants'*, the remains of spaces that existed once but have been lost and forgotten. The goddess finds those secrets and brings them back to light for Aswapati. Here we may perhaps see the action of Sarama, the power of intuition.

A traveller between summit and abyss,
She joined the distant ends, the viewless deeps,
Or streaked along the roads of Heaven and Hell
Pursuing all knowledge like a questing hound.

The goddess has '*lightning feet*': she can travel great distances in an instant and connect things that are widely separated. She can travel between the '*summit*', the highest level of consciousness, and the '*abyss*', the deepest depths. In her movement, she can join '*the distant ends*', the faraway fulfilment of things and '*the viewless deeps*', those unseen and invisible origins from which they have started. Or like a hunting dog, a hound, she travels at great speed through all the worlds, the high paradisaal worlds and the dreadful hellish worlds. She can go everywhere, very quickly, like a streak of lightning, in pursuit of knowledge. This is one of the important functions of intuition. In the old Vedic legend of the Angirases, when the rishis are searching for 'the lost herds of the Sun', the cows of light and consciousness that have been stolen and hidden by the powers of division and darkness, Sarama, the goddess of intuition, like a hunting dog on the scent, finds out the cave where they have been hidden. Aswapati experiences this action of hers, '*like a questing hound*'.

A reporter and scribe of hidden wisdom talk,
Her shining minutes of celestial speech,
Passed through the masked office of the occult mind,
Transmitting gave to prophet and to seer
The inspired body of the mystic Truth.

Another thing which she does is to listen in to the gatherings of the higher powers, their consultations: she listens to what they say, their '*hidden wisdom talk*' and notes down their '*celestial speech*', like a reporter or a secretary whose job is to prepare reports of what is

said at a meeting. A *'scribe'* is a person whose work is to write things down. Then she passes on those *'minutes'*, those records of what has been said, through the inner mind, *'the masked office of the occult mind'*, to the prophet and the seer, the rishi, communicating, transmitting, *'the inspired body of the mystic Truth'* in the form of mantric speech.

A recorder of the inquiry of the gods,
Spokesman of the silent seeings of the Supreme,
She brought immortal words to mortal men.

In this way she records the discussions, the deliberations, *'the inquiry of the gods'* and acts as a *'spokesman'*, the person who is authorised to speak on behalf of a group; she is the *'spokesman of the silent seeings of the Supreme'* whose task is to convey *'immortal words to mortal men'*: giving inspiration to prophets and seers, she also shares with Aswapati the words of the gods and *'the silent seeings of the Supreme'*.

Now we see Aswapati opening up to the next level. Above the higher mind that receives inspiration and intuition, there is a power of revelation which reveals things on a larger and freer scale.

Above the reason's brilliant slender curve,
Released like radiant air dimming a moon,
Broad spaces of a vision without line
Or limit swam into his spirit's ken.

Reason is the highest power that we normally have access to in our mentality. Here Sri Aurobindo images it as a moon, the thin moon in its last phase in the eastern sky in the very early morning before sunrise. Above the *'brilliant slender curve'* of mind, new spaces open up: *'broad spaces of a vision without line or limit'*. It seems as if they have been *'released'*, set free from the darkness surrounding the

moon, and their brightness, their radiance makes the moon, which was '*brilliant*', seem dimmer: '*like radiant air dimming a moon*'. There seems to be no horizon, no '*limit*' to these '*broad spaces*' that are opening up. Those bright spaces '*swam into his spirit's ken*'. Our '*ken*' is what we know; things that are '*beyond our ken*' are things that we do not know yet, things that we do not know and do not understand. Here Sri Aurobindo is not talking about the mind's knowing but about the spirit: Aswapati's spirit is becoming aware of these new spaces, as if they are swimming into his awareness.

Oceans of being met his voyaging soul
Calling to infinite discovery;
Timeless domains of joy and absolute power
Stretched out surrounded by the eternal hush;
The ways that lead to endless happiness
Ran like dream-smiles through meditating vast:
Disclosed stood up in a gold moment's blaze
White sun-steps in the pathless Infinite.

This is the description of some of the broad spaces that Aswapati can see with this new vision. First of all, '*Oceans of being met his voyaging soul*', limitless seas of '*being*', of pure existence. When we stand in front of the ocean and look out on the vastness, we may feel drawn to go and see what is out there; similarly, when he becomes aware of those '*oceans of being*' his soul, which is '*voyaging*', travelling, feels that they are calling him '*to infinite discovery*': he feels invited to go on exploring those limitless oceans of existence forever. He also sees '*timeless domains*'. '*Domains*' are countries, kingdoms, territories. These are '*timeless domains of joy and absolute power*', which are '*stretched out surrounded by the eternal hush*', the silence of eternity. There are '*ways*', paths or roads. He sees '*the ways that lead to endless happiness*', curving '*like dream-smiles through*

meditating vasts'. If we stand on a high place and look down we can see paths and roads running below us through the landscape. The roads are not straight, they curve, in the same way that lips curve in a smile. The '*ways*' that Aswapati sees look like '*dream-smiles*'. There are beautiful images of the Buddha in meditation with eyes closed in concentration or trance and the lips curved in a slight smile; those '*dream-smiles*' must look something like that. Aswapati also sees spaces that are like '*steppes*', the vast open grasslands of central Asia which seem limitless, never-ending, stretching out widely, on and on; but these are not ordinary grasslands: these are '*white sun-steppes*', blazing with the pure white light of divine consciousness. Aswapati sees them just for a moment, '*disclosed*', which means '*revealed*', '*in a gold moment's blaze*'. Just for a moment there is intense light and he glimpses those rolling '*sun-steppes in the pathless Infinite*'. A vast new power of truth-vision has come to him.

Along a naked curve in bourneless Self
 The points that run through the closed heart of things
 Shadowed the indeterminable line
 That carries the Everlasting through the years.

'*Bourneless*' means limitless; a 'bourne' is a border or limit. The Self there is unlimited; within the limitless space of Self runs '*a naked curve*' formed by '*the points that run through the closed heart of things*'. We are reading just now in *The Life Divine* about the timeless and spaceless consciousness of the Transcendent. Sri Aurobindo says that the infinite and eternal supreme Consciousness is as if concentrated. When that supreme Consciousness manifests itself as World, as the Creation, it spreads itself out, extends itself as Time and Space, equally; and then there is some concentration into points, individual seeds from which come all the forms that we experience in our universe, all the movements of forces and events

all come out of those seeds. Here he speaks about '*the points that run through the closed heart of things*': in the core, the Origin, there are infinite numbers of tiny points; when it extends and expresses itself in Space and Time and individual souls, these points get spread out, as '*the Everlasting*', the eternal Being and Consciousness, expresses himself in Time and is carried '*through the years*'. Those points, in the succession of time, one after the other, trace a line, an '*indeterminable line*': it is impossible to say where it begins or where it ends, what its dimensions are, but that line carries the Everlasting through the whole process of evolution in time. When we study geometry in school we are taught that a point has no dimensions and that a line is a succession of points, so it is also infinite. Aswapati gets a kind of pictorial vision of that: it is as if all these points were positioned along '*a naked curve*', a very plain and simple curve within the infinite self, and the succession of them '*shadowed the indeterminable line / That carries the everlasting through the years.*' Time allows an extension of experience: we do not experience all happenings at once: things get spaced out, spread out in space and distributed in time and we experience past, present and future, distance, events and individual existences.

The magician order of the cosmic Mind
 Coercing the freedom of infinity
 With the stark array of Nature's symbol facts
 And life's incessant signals of event,
 Transmuted chance recurrences into laws,
 A chaos of signs into a universe.

There is a magician here, somebody who does magic. And this particular magician is '*the cosmic Mind*'. The English word 'magic' is connected with the Sanskrit word '*maya*', the power of creating appearances and forms. Now Aswapati is seeing how the cosmic

Mind creates a magical order in the universe. Beyond the manifestation there is '*the freedom of infinity*': anything can happen, unlimited by time or space or possibility; but the magician Mind puts phenomena into an order. Sri Aurobindo says that the cosmic Mind, the power of Mind acting on the universal level, '*coerces*', it forces, obliges the '*freedom of infinity*' to form this '*stark array of Nature's symbol facts*': the vast arrangement of appearances in the universe that are '*Nature's symbol facts*'. Sri Aurobindo tells us that every appearance, whether it is a chair, a table, a person or anything at all, is a symbol for some truth on another level: these are all '*Nature's symbol facts*'. Another side of this '*array*', this fixed arrangement, is all the events that happen in life, '*life's incessant signals of event*'. '*Incessant*' means '*endless*', never-ending. Events that happen are '*signals*', not just random chance happenings; everything that happens has a significance if we can see what it is pointing to. Cosmic Mind forces the freedom of infinity to become fixed into this '*stark array*' arranged in time and space. '*Stark*' means '*unadorned*', without any ornamentation or decoration; but it can also mean '*harsh*' or '*pitiless*': we cannot escape from this '*stark array*'; it is something very strong and dominant. The cosmic magician Mind also '*transmuted chance recurrences into laws*'. To '*transmute*' means to change; it changes '*chance recurrences*', things that happen again and again by chance, into laws, so that things will always happen in that way in future. Also, by that magician order of cosmic Mind, the unrelated collection of signs, which would be a chaos if there were no unifying consciousness holding them together in a harmony, gets ordered and arranged so that the freedom of infinity is expressed not by chaos but by cosmos, the harmony and order of a universe.

Out of the rich wonders and the intricate whorls
Of the spirit's dance with Matter as its mask

The balance of the world's design grew clear,
Its symmetry of self-arranged effects
Managed in the deep perspectives of the soul,
And the realism of its illusive art,
Its logic of infinite intelligence,
Its magic of a changing eternity.

This describes another aspect of the knowledge that is coming to Aswapati. The forms and appearances of the universe are the effect of *'the spirit's dance with Matter as its mask'*: the spirit is dancing, wearing the mask of Matter; its dance is complex, producing *'rich wonders'* and *'intricate whorls'*. *'Whorls'* are the spiral forms found in seashells or in our ears. As he sees the masked dance of spirit producing the varied forms and movements of the universe, *'the balance of the world's design grew clear'*; he perceives that there is *'symmetry'* in the *'self-arranged effects'* of this universal dance. *'Symmetry'* implies a balanced arrangement, for example in our bodies, where the left and right sides mirror each other: we have two similar ears, two eyes and the nose in the middle; we have two arms and legs, with similar right and left hands and feet. When we see symmetry in art or nature we feel a sense of stability and balance; while *'asymmetrical'* forms look more dynamic, unbalanced, as if moving in one direction or another, where there is symmetry it is as if they can remain in that poise forever because it is stable. Aswapati sees that the world has a *'symmetry of self-arranged effects'*; it arranges itself into a balanced design, just as an artist might aim for a balanced composition in a painting or sculpture. But this symmetry is not apparent on the surface: to see it, Aswapati has to perceive how it is *'managed in the deep perspectives of the soul'*. A painting is two dimensional, and to achieve symmetry, a balance of forms and colours, the artist will try to see that the forms and colours on one side of his painting are balanced by those

on the other side, or that the upper part is balanced by the lower part. But the soul has many dimensions and directions. When an artist makes a painting or drawing he may want to arrange it in such a way that when we look at it we see depth; he can give a sense of depth on a two-dimensional surface by making some things look smaller to show that they are further away; that is because when we look into the distance we see lines converging; even though they are actually parallel lines, we see them coming together at the horizon; artists have worked out rules to achieve the appearance of depth on a flat surface, so that some things in the picture appear further away than others; those are the rules of 'perspective'. The balance of the world's design, the symmetry of the world, becomes clear to Aswapati when he can look into the depths of the soul. All '*the rich wonders and the intricate whorls*' of the universe are arranged not on a flat surface, but in deep vistas or '*perspectives*'. This '*illusive art*'; this art of illusion, of maya, of the cosmic Mind, convinces us that the appearances of the world are real. In the arrangement of the world there is an '*infinite intelligence*' which imposes its '*logic*', one thing justifying another in a way that we can understand, that makes sense; but there is another aspect which is not '*logic*' but '*magic*'. Magic always seems to defy logic: it makes us think or say 'Oh, that's not possible! How can it be like that?!' In the '*spirit's dance with Matter as its mask*' which produces all the forms and movements in the world, there is '*the magic of a changing eternity*'. These are different aspects of '*the world's design*' which become clear to Aswapati.

A glimpse was caught of things for ever unknown:
The letters stood out of the unmoving Word:
In the immutable nameless Origin
Was seen emerging as from fathomless seas
The trail of the Ideas that made the world,

And, sown in the black earth of Nature's trance,
The seed of the Spirit's blind and huge desire
From which the tree of cosmos was conceived
And spread its magic arms through a dream of space.

Aswapati even caught '*a glimpse*', a brief vision, '*of things for ever unknown*'. There are great mysteries that perhaps can never be wholly known; certainly they cannot be known by our minds; but he is granted a glimpse of some of them. Here Sri Aurobindo lists three things that are '*for ever unknown*'. Perhaps these three things are like the individual letters or elements that together make up '*the unmoving Word*': the immobile, ever-unchanging Word of command that has created the world and is supporting it, allowing it to be and to move towards its fulfilment; that Word is expressed for us by the sound 'OM'; we are told that the sound 'OM' is made up of three letters or syllables: A, U and M, and that each of them has a symbolic meaning. Aswapati sees something emerging in the Origin, the source and beginning of everything, which is '*nameless*', beyond all names and '*immutable*'. From the Origin, as if '*from fathomless seas*', vast oceans too deep to be measured, he sees emerging '*the trail of the Ideas that made the world*'. These '*Ideas*' with a capital 'I', lie at the origin of the manifestation. Aswapati sees their '*trail*', the traces and tracks they have left behind them as they emerged from the Origin. He also sees '*the seed of the Spirit's blind and huge desire / From which the tree of cosmos was conceived*': a mysterious desire of the Spirit has produced a seed, a seed which has been '*sown in the black earth of Nature's trance*'. Black earth is considered to be very fertile, things will grow very well in it; but black is also the colour of unconsciousness, of night and death and darkness of all kinds; the fertile black earth is the substance formed by the trance, the indrawn concentration of Nature; into it has been sown the seed which expresses a '*huge desire*' of the Spirit; that seed

has sprouted, and from it has grown this whole universe, which is often imaged as a tree with deep roots and many branches and leaves and fruits and flowers, all the related but diverse forms of the creation. Spirit and Nature are the father and mother of this universe, this manifestation. He says that this '*tree of cosmos*' has grown up and '*spread its magic arms through a dream of space*'. The arms of the tree are its many branches; but these are '*magic arms*' and they are spreading through a space that is a dream, which suggests that it is not entirely real, or not real in the sense which we normally use the word.

Immense realities took on a shape:

There looked out from the shadow of the Unknown

The bodiless Namelessness that saw God born

And tries to gain from the mortal's mind and soul

A deathless body and a divine name.

But now Aswapati sees something that is real: '*Immense realities took on a shape*', a form which he can perceive. Sri Aurobindo gives a list of these '*immense realities*' and evokes them for us. First '*the bodiless Namelessness that saw God born*'; this seems to be the Origin: That which is eternal, beyond all form and name, That which has seen the birth of what we call 'God'. Aswapati sees it looking out '*from the shadow of the Unknown*', as if from behind a dark cloud or mist; and he sees that '*the bodiless Namelessness*' is trying to gain '*a deathless body and a divine name*.' Perhaps this is the Spirit, and this is its desire. To fulfil its desire, the universe has been created: because that nameless bodiless Existence wants to gain the fulfilment of its desire '*from the mortal's mind and soul*', through the intermediary of human beings. Although we are in the grip of Death and Ignorance, the eternal Spirit wants to gain through us, for itself, '*a deathless body and a divine name*'. Perhaps this is the whole meaning of the

manifestation, and the reason why we are here.

The immobile lips, the great surreal wings,
The visage masked by superconscient Sleep,
The eyes with their closed lids that see all things,
Appeared of the Architect who builds in trance.

Then Aswapati sees '*the Architect who builds in trance*': the builder of the manifestation. He sees lips, wings, a face, closed eyes ... who is this great being who is creating in trance, in a state of '*superconscient Sleep*'? The lips are '*immobile*', they do not move. The wings are '*surreal*', literally '*more real than reality*'. This '*visage*', the face that Aswapati sees, is '*masked by superconscient Sleep*': this Architect belongs to a realm that is far beyond our mental grasp. The eyes are closed, but they see everything. Indrawn into superconscient trance, this great being is envisioning and building the prototypes of the manifestation.

The original Desire born in the Void
Peered out; he saw the hope that never sleeps,
The feet that run behind a fleeting fate,
The ineffable meaning of the endless dream.

Aswapati also sees '*the original Desire*', the primal divine desire which was born in the Void, in the emptiness when nothing had yet come into existence. He sees it peering out at him, looking out as if from behind a curtain or veil; and he sees its counterpart in the manifestation, the unsleeping hope, the running feet that are always pursuing some great fulfilment that is forever '*fleeting*', running away, avoiding being caught. Perhaps that ever-pursued, never-seized fate which is being sleeplessly hoped for, forever chased, is in fact '*the ineffable meaning of the endless dream*', the significance of this endless dream of universal existence, whose aim and purpose cannot be put into words because its significance is '*ineffable*':

beyond all expression.

Hardly for a moment glimpsed viewless to Mind,
As if a torch held by a power of God,
The radiant world of the everlasting Truth
Glimmered like a faint star bordering the night
Above the golden Overmind's shimmering ridge.

Aswapati even gets a brief glimpse, just for a moment, of something that cannot be seen by Mind: '*The radiant world of the everlasting Truth*', the Supramental World. This is his first glimpse of that world, and he hardly glimpses it, just for a moment. He sees it 'glimmering', glowing faintly, '*like a faint star*'. He sees the Overmind plane like a shining golden mountain range. '*Shimmering*' suggests a movement of light, of atmosphere, as we see hot air above a road or a bare field quivering and glowing: shimmering. Above that '*shimmering ridge*' of the Overmind there is darkness, like the night sky or the darkness of outer space, and on the edge of it, this faint star, '*as if a torch held by a power of God*'. This is the first time that the supramental world is mentioned in the poem. Aswapati glimpses it just for a brief moment, '*like a faint star*', it is so far away; what we see as a faint star may be a vast galaxy of suns but we can hardly see it, because it is so far away that only a little of its light reaches us.

Even were caught as through a cunning veil
The smile of love that sanctions the long game,
The calm indulgence and maternal breasts
Of Wisdom suckling the child-laughter of Chance,
Silence, the nurse of the Almighty's power,
The omniscient hush, womb of the immortal Word,
And of the Timeless the still brooding face,
And the creative eye of Eternity.

After all those other wonderful things that Aswapati has been shown, here are five more: they are seen as if '*through a cunning veil*'. '*Cunning*' means clever or skilful; a skilfully-made veil is hiding these things. First of all: '*the smile of love that sanctions the long game*'. This word '*sanctions*' is unusual because it can mean two completely opposite things. Nowadays we often hear this word on the television or read it in the newspapers, because the United Nations is being asked to authorize '*sanctions*' against this or that country as a kind of punishment: these sanctions are a sign of disapproval, an attempt to get a government to change its policies, by saying 'We do not approve of what you are doing, so we will not import goods from your country, we will not allow you to export your products', putting a kind of barrier around that country as a sign of disapproval and an attempt to force them to change their policies; but the same word is also used to express approval: when we ask the Mother to give her '*sanction*' to some idea or wish that we have, we are asking her to say '*yes*' and give us her blessing and her help. The word appears several times in *Savitri*, always with the positive sense of granting permission or approval. Here Sri Aurobindo is telling us about the smile of love on the very highest levels that is looking down at the world, seeing everything that happens here, and saying '*yes*' to '*the long game*', the evolutionary play of the Supreme manifesting Himself in the universe through the play of positive and negative forces, consciousness and unconsciousness, approving all this with a loving smile. Aswapati also sees the Mother in her aspect of supreme Wisdom, nursing a child: '*Indulgence*' is the characteristic attitude of a mother to her infant child. She will not scold her child while it is still a baby. When he is a little bit bigger she might have to scold him, but when he is very small she just wants to look after him, to nurse him, indulge him: whatever he wants she would like to give to him. Here the supreme

Wisdom that is ordering the whole world is '*suckling*', feeding, giving nourishment, as the mother feeds her small baby. She is feeding '*Chance*', the play of chance, as if it were the playfulness of a very small child. When the scientists look at our world they say that everything is random, everything is just happening by chance; from another point of view we can say that everything is already predetermined and fixed, or at least that it is determined by cause and effect. Here Sri Aurobindo shows the supreme Mother in her aspect of Wisdom nourishing and indulging the play of forces that is always introducing the unpredictable, the unexpected: the play of Chance which is like the laughter of a child playing. We know the image of Lord Vishnu as a baby lying on a peepal leaf, playing with his own toes and laughing as babies do. Aswapati sees the Mother in her supreme Wisdom smiling at that expression of the Divine and encouraging it, feeding and nourishing it. And then there is the supreme Silence, which is also nourishing, '*the nurse of the Almighty's power*'. Out of the Silence beyond manifestation comes the creative power of the Almighty, the Omnipotent; in that sense, Silence is the nurse, the one who feeds the Almighty's power and helps it to grow; it is an '*omniscient hush*' in which all knowledge is contained and which gives birth to '*the immortal Word*', the undying word of Creation that brings everything into existence and sustains the entire manifestation. Aswapati also sees a face, the face of '*the Timeless*': the face of the One who is beyond Time and Space and Manifestation; the Unmanifest does not have a face, but looking towards the creation the Supreme puts on a face; Aswapati gets a glimpse of that '*still, brooding face*'. The word '*brooding*' evokes the image of the hen with her eggs, who sits on her nest in a sort of trance for many days and will hardly leave them to go for food or water; she is looking after her brood: the eggs will hatch and the little chicks will emerge; we also see people brooding: their

attention is not with us, they are indrawn, their concentration is focussed somewhere within; eventually something will be born and emerge from that brooding state. 'Musing' is similar: we may say that somebody is 'in a muse'; but the word 'muse' is connected with the Muses, the Goddesses who bring us inspiration; so when we are in a muse, as yet there are no fully formed thoughts in our mind; we are in an empty receptive state. When we are 'brooding' something has already been conceived; it is in formation, it needs to be protected, brooded on, until it is ready to hatch, to be born. Aswapati glimpses '*the still brooding face of the Timeless*' conceiving the creation; and '*the creative eye of Eternity*': the eye of creative vision that sees and wills and says 'Let it be', so that what has been seen and willed comes into existence. Aswapati is given a precious glimpse of these '*immense realities*'.

The inspiring goddess entered a mortal's breast,
Made there her study of divining thought
And sanctuary of prophetic speech
And sat upon the tripod seat of mind:
All was made wide above, all lit below.

Earlier '*the inspiring goddess*', was coming and going; but now she enters Aswapati's breast and makes it '*her study*', the place where she does her work of '*divining thought*' – perhaps we can call it intuitive knowledge. She sits there '*upon the tripod seat of mind*'. The image is of the priestess in the ancient Greek temple at Delphi, which is still a very special place; it was sacred to Apollo, the God of the Sun for the ancient Greeks; he was also the god who looks after the Muses. Delphi is situated on the side of a mountain called Parnassus, and it is said that if you drink from the river that flows down the mountain past Delphi then you will become a poet; it means that the stream of energy coming down there carries the

power of artistic creation. Apollo invented the lyre, the musical instrument which the ancient Greeks used to accompany their poetry. In order to rule and inhabit that place Apollo had to fight a great battle. Delphi, the ancient Greeks believed, stands at the 'navel', the very centre of the earth, marked by a huge strange stone, the Omphalos, the navel stone, which can still be seen. That place was controlled by a very powerful spirit, the Python, a vast constricting serpent. In order to take possession of the place and its powers, Apollo, the god of the Sun, had to conquer the Python. Already in the time of the Python's rule there was a cave in the mountainside, and in the cave sat a priestess called the 'Pythia'. This priestess gave 'oracles'. An oracle, as you know, is a channel by which we can receive higher wisdom; in ancient Greece there were several oracles but the one in Delphi was the most important one. To ask your question you had to go down into the cave where the priestess sat upon a three-legged stool, a '*tripod*'. Those tripods were used to hold offerings to the gods; when she sat upon the tripod she would go into a trance; questions would be put to her, she would make mysterious sounds which a priest would interpret and write down, giving the answer to the inquirer. Here Sri Aurobindo pictures '*the inspiring goddess*' sitting upon '*the tripod seat of mind*'. Our mind has three feet or legs, three elements or strands: the physical mind, the vital mind and the mental mind proper, the reason. In Aswapati's mind, supported on these three legs, these three kinds of mind, the goddess sits and shares her inspired knowledge with him. As a result, for Aswapati '*All was made wide above, all lit below*': higher levels of consciousness widened out above his mind, and everything below, all the lower levels of being, were lit up.

In darkness' core she dug out wells of light,
On the undiscovered depths imposed a form,

Lent a vibrant cry to the unuttered vasts,
And through great shoreless, voiceless, starless breadths
Bore earthward fragments of revealing thought
Hewn from the silence of the Ineffable.

This describes another action of the goddess. In the very heart, the 'core', of the lower darkness, the darkness of the subconscious, the Inconscient, she dug out 'wells of light'; a 'well' is a hole dug in the earth to find water; Inspiration dug down into the darkness of the Inconscient and finds 'wells of light', hidden sources of consciousness. The 'undiscovered depths' of the subconscious seem formless; but she is able to impose an organised form on them, so that they can be grasped and understood. She even 'lends a vibrant cry' to things which have never been expressed and to vast spaces that are 'unuttered'. When we 'utter' something it means we give voice to it, we speak it out or we make a sound; when something is very painful we might give utterance to our pain in the form of a cry or a groan. To those 'unuttered vasts' Inspiration lends a voice so that they can utter 'a vibrant cry': a sound that comes vibrating with meaning. And there are not only deep places and vast spaces: there are also 'breadths', a noun from the adjective 'broad' meaning 'wide'. Those 'breadths', those broad, wide spaces, are 'shoreless'; the shore is the frontier between land and sea; those breadths have no shore, no borderline; they have no voice, they are silent; there is not even a tiny light, no star, they are 'starless'. They must represent some vast superconscience. From those broad starless spaces, the goddess carries to earth 'fragments', tiny little pieces, 'of revealing thought'; when these 'fragments' of thought reach Aswapati, they bring him revelations, vast visions of the Truth. Those fragments have been 'hewn', from the verb 'to hew' meaning 'to cut', to cut strongly as a sculptor cuts stone from the quarry: it suggests a very hard, difficult cutting process; they have been 'hewn from the silence of the Ineffable'.

It is as if '*the silence of the Ineffable*' is like rock, absolutely solid, but the goddess hews off small pieces from that eternal inexpressible Reality and gives them to Aswapati in the form of '*revealing thought*'.

A Voice in the heart uttered the unspoken Name,
A dream of seeking Thought wandering through Space
Entered the invisible and forbidden house:
The treasure was found of a supernal Day.

Here we have the word '*uttered*' again. In his heart Aswapati hears a Voice. That Voice communicates a divine Name; although the Name is '*unspoken*', it is '*uttered*' and he hears it in his heart. And there is '*a dream of seeking Thought*': an aspiring Thought that is seeking for something, '*wandering through Space*'; that '*seeking Thought*' is able to enter '*the invisible and forbidden house*': a house that is kept secret, veiled so that it is not seen, one is not supposed to enter it, it is '*forbidden*'. But when it enters the secret house it finds treasure: '*the treasure of a supernal Day*'. '*Supernal*' means something like '*supreme*'.

In the deep subconscious glowed her jewel-lamp;
Lifted, it showed the riches of the Cave
Where, by the miser traffickers of sense
Unused, guarded beneath Night's dragon paws,
In folds of velvet darkness draped they sleep
Whose priceless value could have saved the world.

The previous sentence, together with this one, reminds us of the Vedic myth of the Angirasas, a parallel myth to that of Satyavan and Savitri. The Vedas seem to be built around and refer to a series of symbolic myths, and one of these is the story of the Cave. The Rishis know that there is a cave in which the herds of the Sun are hidden; the herds of the Sun are the rays of light of the supreme

consciousness; they called them 'cows' because the word for 'cow' and the word for 'light' are the same in Vedic Sanskrit. The Rishis have to find those cows, those rays of the supreme light of Consciousness, and get them out of the cave. They cannot do it alone. The first one who helps them is Sarama, the goddess of intuition; she takes the form of a hound, a hunting dog; she follows her nose and traces the cows. Following her, the Rishis realise where the cows are hidden in the Cave, but they cannot get them out so easily; they ask for the help of Indra, the divine Mind, the king of Mind. I think he utters a great noise, a cry that shatters the mountain and breaks open the cave: then all the light-cows, the golden Herds of the Sun, are released. When they are freed, bringing the light of Knowledge, of full consciousness, then rivers of divine energy pour down from the heavens. The goddess has shown Aswapati the way to the Cave that has been forbidden and made invisible by the hostile powers; it is in the '*deep subconscious*'. She holds up '*her jewel-lamp*', and Aswapati can see all the treasures that are hidden in that deep Cave of the subconscious. This sounds something like the story of Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves from *The Arabian Nights*, which must be a symbolic story too. Many such ancient stories have a deep symbolic meaning. There are forty thieves: forty is a symbolic number; in many languages, 'forty' means 'more than we can count', an indefinite number. In the biblical story of the great flood, we are told that it rained for forty days and forty nights, for a very long time. Those thieves have stolen the treasures of the Supreme, and they are keeping them hidden in the Cave. In the Vedas those thieves are called the Panis and the Dasyus, the misers and dividers. Here Sri Aurobindo speaks about '*the miser traffickers of sense*'. These are the Panis. They live in us as long as we are limited by our sense-mind and see everything through our physical senses; it is as if our senses are

misers, keeping hidden and holding on to all the experiences that should be part of the divine Delight, instead of offering them to the Divine. A miser is a person who has some wealth but will not spend or share it; he just holds on to it, he is not ready to make the sacrifice, the exchange that the Oneness demands. These misers are also '*traffickers*': they are dealing, exchanging these riches for gain; not for the divine purpose but for selfish gain. So those wonderful treasures are '*unused*': they are '*guarded beneath Night's dragon paws*'. In almost all the stories about dragons, they live in caves lying on heaps of treasure. All this goes back to the Vedas. This dragon is Night, the Night of the Inconscient. It is guarding the divine treasures. They are '*draped*', covered up, '*in folds of velvet darkness*' and they are asleep. These are psychological treasures. It is not a treasure of diamonds and gold and things like that, those are just symbols. The '*priceless value*' of these treasures '*could have saved the world*'; and when, with the help of the divine Light and Force, they are found and brought out of the cave of the Inconscient, they will save the world.

A darkness carrying morning in its breast
 Looked for the eternal wide returning gleam,
 Waiting the advent of a larger ray
 And rescue of the lost herds of the Sun.

A '*herd*' is the word we use for a group of cows or goats or horses. These '*lost herds of the Sun*' are the rays of divine Light that have been lost, stolen. Inside the cave there is '*a darkness*', a symbol night; and every night carries within it the possibility of morning; even in the deepest darkness there is hidden a light which is going to emerge eventually. Aswapati sees that the deep darkness of unconsciousness is '*carrying morning in its breast*'; the darkness itself is waiting for some new dawn to come, it is looking for the '*eternal*

wide returning gleam', of the divine Dawn and it is '*waiting for the advent*', the coming, the arrival of '*a larger ray*': a ray of divine Light that is brighter and stronger than any that has so far come into the manifestation, the ray that will enable all these imprisoned lights, the '*lost herds of the sun*' to be rescued and all the treasures to be brought out into the light and used for the transformation of the world.

In a splendid extravagance of the waste of God
Dropped carelessly in creation's spendthrift work,
Left in the chantiers of the bottomless world
And stolen by the robbers of the Deep,
The golden shekels of the Eternal lie,
Hoarded from touch and view and thought's desire,
Locked in blind antres of the ignorant flood,
Lest men should find them and be even as Gods.

How have these treasures come into the Cave? As the creation proceeds, great psychological riches, wonderful achievements, are made; but then they get dropped in a '*splendid extravagance of the waste of God*': as if the Divine in the course of '*creation's spendthrift work*' carelessly drops some of his treasures. A '*spendthrift*' is just the opposite of a '*miser*'. A miser holds onto riches, treasures. The Divine is not miserly, he generously and unstintingly pours out all his riches, in a '*splendid extravagance*', a way that may seem to us careless and wasteful. Some of those riches are dropped and forgotten: '*left in the chantiers of the bottomless world*'. '*Chantier*' is a French word meaning a construction site. The world is getting built, the work of creation is going on, things get dropped and forgotten, and then the '*robbers of the Deep*', those thieves mentioned in the Vedas, steal them and keep them hidden in the cave. Among these riches, '*the golden shekels of the Eternal lie*'. A '*shekel*' is a gold coin. It

is a Hebrew word which is found in the Bible. Misers love to collect golden shekels. But these riches actually belong to the *'Eternal'*. They have been stolen. Gold is precious because it is incorruptible; it does not rust or get spoiled, so it is a symbol for Immortality and the Truth-consciousness of Supermind. In the cave of the subconscious the shekhels are gathered and kept unused: *'hoarded from touch and view'* and even from *'thought's desire'*: no-one knows or dreams that they are there, so we cannot even think about them or want them; they are locked away *'in blind antres of the ignorant flood'*. *'Antre'* is another word for a cave. The treasures are hidden in *'blind antres'* in the *'ignorant flood'*: the ocean of Inconscience. The treasures have been *'hoarded'*, gathered and kept so that human beings should not find them. The *'robbers of the Deep'* do not want human beings to have all these riches, for if we found them we would be able to fulfil our divine destiny, and become *'even as gods'*. They want to prevent that.

A vision lightened on the viewless heights,
A wisdom illumined from the voiceless depths:
A deeper interpretation greatened Truth,
A grand reversal of the Night and Day;
All the world's values changed heightening life's aim;
A wiser word, a larger thought came in
Than what the slow labour of human mind can bring,
A secret sense awoke that could perceive
A Presence and a Greatness everywhere.

A power of vision grows brighter *'on the viewless heights'*, on the higher levels of consciousness that we cannot see, and at the same time Aswapati is illumined by *'a wisdom ... from the voiceless depths'*; together these two lights reveal to him *'a deeper interpretation'* of the Truth: he had been understanding it in a certain way, but these two

lights, from above and below, give him a new and greater understanding which brings about '*a grand reversal of the Night and Day*': as if day turns to night and night turns to day, all values are completely reversed: '*all the world's values changed heightening life's aim*'. The Mother has spoken about this 'reversal of values' more than once. It can happen that we suddenly find all our values reversed: what had seemed important becomes unimportant, and vice versa. This reversal of values heightened '*life's aim*': it gave a much greater dimension to the aim of life. By the action of the goddess, '*a wiser word, a larger thought came in / Than what the slow labour of human mind can bring*': swiftly and powerfully it reveals much more than the human mind can achieve with its '*slow labour*'. Along with it, '*a secret sense awoke*', by which Aswapati could '*perceive a Presence and a Greatness everywhere*'.

The universe was not now this senseless whirl
 Borne round inert on an immense machine;
 It cast away its grandiose lifeless front,
 A mechanism no more or work of Chance,
 But a living movement of the body of God.

As a result of this reversal of values Aswapati sees things in a completely new way: the '*the universe*' lost its appearance of a '*senseless whirl*'. A '*whirl*' is a circular movement such as an eddy or whirlpool; '*senseless*' has a double meaning: 'without senses', insensible, without the capacity to feel; and also 'meaningless', without significance. For a long time to our mind, to our perception, the universe may look like a '*senseless whirl / Borne round inert on an immense machine*', being carried around helplessly on some huge meaningless machine; Krishna in the Bhagavad Gita speaks of the entire material world being carried around by Nature, as if on a machine. Now, to Aswapati's new way of seeing things, the

universe '*cast away its grandiose lifeless front*', lost its appearance of being lifeless, yet huge, grandiose, magnificent to look at. When we see the wonderful photographs that are made through telescopes looking out into Space, the universe appears amazingly beautiful, but lifeless; Sri Aurobindo says that this is just a '*front*', a first appearance; it is not the inner truth of the universe. For Aswapati now that '*front*', that appearance is thrown away. The universe no longer appears like '*a mechanism*' that is driven purely by the laws of physics, or a '*work of Chance*'. The strict materialist view tells us that everything has happened mechanically and by chance; but now Aswapati sees it all as '*a living movement of the body of God*'. This entire vast material universe is a living movement of the body of the Supreme Divine.

A spirit hid in forces and in forms
Was the spectator of the mobile scene:
The beauty and the ceaseless miracle
Let in a glow of the Unmanifest:
The formless Everlasting moved in it
Seeking its own perfect form in souls and things.

Within this living body of God there is '*a spirit*' hidden in all the '*forces*' and '*forms*' of this moving universe. That '*spirit*' is a '*spectator*', observing and enjoying '*the mobile scene*'. Everything in the universe is moving, and the spectator spirit is enjoying '*the beauty and the ceaseless miracle*' of this never-ending movement. Now Aswapati perceives that this movement is no longer just a beautiful material spectacle; instead it '*let in a glow of the Unmanifest*'. The '*Unmanifest*' is the transcendent Divine, free and unlimited by the universal movement, but dwelling within it and filling it with the glow of his supporting presence. Aswapati now sees the '*glow*' of the unmanifest divine presence in all the ceaseless miracle and

beauty of the moving universe; he sees the '*Everlasting*', the eternal, moving in the manifestation. In the movements of the '*forces*' and '*forms*' of the universe, the Everlasting Unmanifest is '*seeking its own perfect form in souls and things*'. Perhaps it is this seeking presence of the '*Unmanifest*', '*the formless Everlasting*' which is driving the evolutionary process. What a beautiful way to see the universe!

Life kept no more a dull and meaningless shape.

In the struggle and upheaval of the world

He saw the labour of a godhead's birth.

So long as we do not see the universe like that, life can often seem '*dull and meaningless*': what are we here for? There does not seem to be any higher meaning to many of the things that we have to do. But for Aswapati now it is not like that any longer. In all the '*struggle*', all the difficulty, the clash, the conflict, the '*upheaval*', the constant change that seems so often to bring disorder and destruction, and things that make us think, 'Oh, it should not be like this', Aswapati could see that the '*struggle and upheaval*' is the expression of '*the labour of a godhead's birth*': the Divine is being born in the world, in life, in more and more perfect forms. In that birth a great effort is involved. The word '*labour*' means two things: it means hard work and it also means the pains that a mother goes through when giving birth to a child. The whole of Nature is giving birth to that divine child. When Aswapati saw that, life no longer appeared dull and meaningless but was filled with a marvellous significance and purpose, '*heightening life's aim*'.

A secret knowledge masked as Ignorance;

Fate covered with an unseen necessity

The game of chance of an omnipotent Will.

Human beings live in a state of ignorance; but Aswapati sees now that this '*Ignorance*' is a mask for '*a secret knowledge*' that lies behind

and within all the struggle and upheaval in life. The word 'mask' is usually a noun, and is sometimes used in the adjectival form '*masked*': 'a masked face'; here Sri Aurobindo has used it as an active verb in the past tense: the '*secret knowledge*' is playing in disguise, hidden by its mask of '*Ignorance*'; this is an unusual way of using the word. Aswapati also sees that '*Fate*', which appears to be inescapable destiny, is really covering '*the game of chance of an omnipotent Will*'. There is an all-powerful '*Will*', the will of '*the formless Everlasting*', the will of the Creator; it is all-powerful but it has chosen to play a '*game of chance*', like the game of dice that the kings play in the old stories: when you throw the dice, you do not know what the outcome be; so in some respects what happens in the universe has not been fully predetermined: it is as if the all-powerful Will has said, 'Let us set up this set of conditions and see what happens'. The dice are thrown and you see what happens – it seems to be a game of chance; but behind the play of chance, there is an omnipotent will, and also an '*unseen necessity*': there is a reason and a choice behind, even though we cannot see why things happen the way they do. They are the outcome of '*the game of chance of an omnipotent Will*'.

A glory and a rapture and a charm,
The All-Blissful sat unknown within the heart;
Earth's pains were the ransom of its prisoned delight.

Aswapati has seen the aspect of Consciousness in the form of a '*secret knowledge*' masking itself as '*Ignorance*', and an '*omnipotent Will*' expressing itself in a '*game of chance*'; now he sees the aspect of Bliss, sitting '*unknown within the heart*' of everything as a hidden '*glory and a rapture*', an intense delight and '*a charm*', a quality of attraction. '*Earth's pains*', all the sufferings of this world are seen to be '*the ransom of its prisoned delight*'. The '*All-Blissful*' is imprisoned

in the inertia of matter and has to be set free. Pirates or terrorists or kidnappers will take someone hostage in order to ask for a '*ransom*', for something to be done or paid in return for freeing their captive. In order for '*the All-blissful*', the supreme Delight which is at the heart of everything in the universe, to be freed from this imprisonment, this stone-grip of matter and unconsciousness, all this has to wake up, and the first awakening is painful; then it becomes a mixture of pleasure and pain, and as it goes further the pleasure and pain become revealed as the mask of the All-Blissful divine presence dwelling within everything. The pain and suffering we experience in the material world are the price that has to be paid to release the ananda at the heart of the manifestation.

A glad communion tinged the passing hours;
The days were travellers on a destined road,
The nights companions of his musing spirit.

Because of that awareness, all the hours of Aswapati's days become coloured. If we wash white clothes with red ones the white clothes may get '*tinged*' pink: some colour will come to them; for Aswapati now the ordinary atmosphere of life gets coloured by this '*glad communion*', this communication with the spirit behind and within everything. He experiences the days as '*travellers*', one after another travelling '*on a destined road*'; he can see the road that time is following, the goal becomes clear, he is aware that there is a destiny towards which all the days are moving; they are not just wandering at random, they are moving towards a chosen goal. He experiences '*the nights*' as '*companions of his musing spirit*'. At night all the business of the day quietens down, it is time to go within; his '*spirit*' muses, it is at peace, it is in communion, communicating with the quiet darkness that is preparing to give birth to a new day.

A heavenly impetus quickened all his breast;

The trudge of Time changed to a splendid march;
The divine Dwarf towered to unconquered worlds,
Earth grew too narrow for his victory.

Aswapati experiences '*A heavenly impetus*': an '*impetus*' is a drive, a dynamic urge to movement. From the higher levels of consciousness some new energy is coming into his life-force which '*quicken**ed all his breast*'. To '*quicken*' means to make quicker, in both senses: to make it move faster, and also to make it more alive, alert and sensitive. Aswapati's '*breast*', his heart, the centre of his emotional being, gets speeded up and made more intensely alive by this '*heavenly impetus*', this push or urge that is coming to him from above; this changes '*the trudge of Time to a splendid march*'. To '*trudge*' means to walk slowly, with difficulty, heavily putting one foot in front of the other. Time sometimes seems to move slowly and in a dull, heavy, tired way. Now for Aswapati, because of that '*heavenly impetus*', the new energy that has come to him, the slow passage of time changes '*to a splendid march*': each hour, each day, moves forward with eager enthusiasm on its wonderful journey. '*The divine Dwarf towered to unconquered worlds, / Earth grew too narrow for his victory.*' Here is an allusion to the traditional story about one of the ten Avatars of Vishnu – Vamana, the divine dwarf. The Lord comes to the earth in the form of a dwarf, dressed as a Brahmin; he approaches the king and asks for a boon: he asks to be given some land, as much space to rule as he can cover with three steps. The king sees that little dwarf and says, 'Is that all? Yes, surely you can have it'. With his first step the dwarf covers all the earth; with his second step he covers all the sea and the sky; then he asks, 'Where can I put my third step?' The king bows down and says, 'Put it on my head', surrendering to the Lord. This '*divine Dwarf*' is perhaps the individual Divine within us, said to be no bigger than the thumb of a man. When he reaches his full stature, he has not only

conquered the earth and the heavens, he is looking for '*unconquered worlds*'; he is no longer a tiny thumb-sized figure: he towers, he becomes immense, huge. Similarly for Aswapati '*Earth grew too narrow for his victory*'; his greatened being is looking for more worlds to conquer.

Once only registering the heavy tread
Of a blind Power on human littleness,
Life now became a sure approach to God,
Existence a divine experiment
And cosmos the soul's opportunity.

As Aswapati gains this new consciousness, he perceives Life differently too. At one time Life might have seemed to be only '*registering the heavy tread / Of a blind power on human littleness*'. 'To register' means to note, to keep a record. Life may seem to be no more than a record of the movements of '*a blind Power*': there does not seem to be any consciousness behind the movements of Nature, things just happen; it is very powerful no doubt, but there does not seem to be any consciousness in it; and here are we tiny little human beings – what can we do to resist or withstand that '*heavy tread*' of unconscious Nature? But now Aswapati sees it completely differently: he sees that all the movements of life are '*a sure approach to God*'; he becomes certain that in all the movements of life we are moving nearer and nearer to the goal of full consciousness and full realisation; so '*Existence*', the very fact of existing, is seen as '*a divine experiment*', and '*cosmos*', the entire universe including not only the material world but all the subtle worlds and planes, becomes the field of '*the soul's opportunity*', where the soul can experience many opportunities for self-expression, self-discovery and self-development, enjoying itself and its world. In this view life becomes full of meaning and value.

The world was a conception and a birth
Of Spirit in Matter into living forms,
And Nature bore the Immortal in her womb,
That she might climb through him to eternal life.

Aswapati sees the world as '*a birth*': first there is '*a conception*' and then '*a birth of Spirit in Matter into living forms*'. '*Nature*' is not a blind power at all: she is a great conscious Force who is carrying '*the Immortal in her womb*' as a mother carries her child, so that by giving birth to the godhead being born in all the forces and forms in the world, she herself can climb '*through him*', through his many births, '*to eternal life*'. From the inertia of Matter to '*living forms*', then through mental forms and still higher ones, Nature is climbing, developing, evolving towards '*eternal life*'. When Aswapati sees all this, his experience of himself also changes:

His being lay down in bright immobile peace
And bathed in wells of pure spiritual light;
It wandered in wide fields of wisdom-self
Lit by the rays of an everlasting sun.

This becomes his self-experience, '*his being*'. First of all comes '*peace*': he can lie down '*in bright immobile peace*' and bathe '*in wells of pure spiritual light*'. A '*well*' is a place where pure water comes up from the depths, but these are wells of '*pure spiritual light*' in which Aswapati can immerse himself entirely. His being can move freely and easily, '*wandering*', moving here and there '*in wide fields of wisdom-self*': he is surrounded by a sense of self that is vast and full of wisdom. Those '*wide fields*' are '*lit by the rays of an everlasting sun*': not our material sun which has been born and which will die; these are '*the rays of an everlasting sun*' of consciousness and power, force and delight. This is his whole state now. A change comes to the body too:

Even his body's subtle self within
Could raise the earthly parts towards higher things
And feel on it the breath of heavenlier air.

We are based in the gross physical body, but we would not be living beings unless there were also a subtle body inhabiting and enlivening the physical body. Aswapati's '*subtle self*', the more conscious and flexible subtle physical being, becomes able to '*raise the earthly parts towards higher things*' and to '*feel on it the breath of heavenlier air*': the prana, atmosphere and life-force of a diviner plane.

Already it journeyed towards divinity:
Upbuoyed upon winged winds of rapid joy,
Upheld to a Light it could not always hold
It left mind's distance from the Truth supreme
And lost life's incapacity for bliss.
All now suppressed in us began to emerge.

Under the influence of all the wonderful experiences that Aswapati has been granted, the subtle self of the body is already journeying, travelling towards the divine fulfilment. It is '*upbuoyed*': a 'buoy' is a signal that floats on the sea, usually to show where things are dangerous; or fishermen may buoy up the edges of their nets so that they can find them and draw them in. The subtle self of the body is buoyed up on '*winged winds of rapid joy*': there is an intensity of delight coming into the body and keeping it light and lifted up towards higher things; '*Winged winds of rapid joy*', are holding it up to a '*Light*' with a capital 'L', the rays of the everlasting Sun. The body, even in its subtle self, cannot always hold that Light; but at least it is surrounded, held up into it so it can come into a new state. Our mind is so far away from the supreme Truth, but Aswapati's subtle being, through all these experiences, is enabled to come much

closer: '*it left mind's distance from the Truth supreme*'. Life is meant for delight, ananda, but our ordinary life here in the ignorance is not capable of feeling the pure divine ananda; now Aswapati's being '*lost life's incapacity for bliss*'. We simply are not capable of feeling bliss, it is too intense for us; if some little touch comes, immediately we lose consciousness or feel pain because it is too intense for us. But through these experiences, this new knowledge, this new consciousness, the subtle self of Aswapati's body lost that incapacity and became capable of '*bliss*'. In this way all the deeper possibilities that are lying hidden and '*suppressed*' in human beings began to emerge in him.

Sri Aurobindo has described all this in the past tense, all the verbs we have been reading are in the past tense. This indicates that all this is part of King Aswapati's story. We can notice this wherever we read in *Savitri*: the story, whether Aswapati's story or Savitri's story, will be told in the past tense; then from time to time Sri Aurobindo uses the present tense, which indicates that he is speaking about something that is generally true and applies to all of us. Now he keeps the past tense, but he says '*All now suppressed in us began emerge*.' These capacities are in us too, but they are suppressed, pressed down and covered up by material appearances and limitations. In Aswapati all these wonderful things '*began to emerge*', and Sri Aurobindo reminds us that these possibilities are in us as well.

End of Section 4

Section 5, lines 787 to 824

Thus came his soul's release from Ignorance,
His mind and body's first spiritual change.
A wide God-knowledge poured down from above,
A new world-knowledge broadened from within:
His daily thoughts looked up to the True and One,
His commonest doings welled from an inner Light.

'Thus': in the way that Sri Aurobindo has described throughout this canto, by the stages which he has shown us, the soul of King Aswapati has been released from *'Ignorance'*. This *'Ignorance'* with a capital 'I' is not simply ignorance in the sense of not being well-educated or not having much knowledge about the world; the Ignorance from which Yoga releases the soul is the fundamental sevenfold ignorance that all human beings suffer from: we do not know who we truly are, we do not know why we are here, we do not understand our universe, and we do not understand our own psychology because our view is so limited. It is limited by the fact that we have a physical body and brain; physically, we are evolutionary animals that have emerged from the inconscience of material Nature and we are limited for the purposes of the evolution. For the time being we are caught in a narrow egoistic viewpoint: each of us sees ourselves as the centre of the universe, we see the world around us, we try to create whatever harmony we can in our own being and in our own life, but we do not have the larger view that true Knowledge brings. The soul within us is also limited in its expression by these limitations of our nature, identified with the way that we are now. To go beyond this ego-centred way of seeing and experiencing things the soul has to become free. That is what has happened to Aswapati through all the

experiences that we have been reading about: his soul has been released from Ignorance. This release brings about his '*first spiritual change*'. When his soul is no longer identified with all the limitations of the present human nature, a '*first spiritual change*' comes about which affects both mind and the body. The mind receives '*a wide God-knowledge*' pouring down from above, and '*a new world-knowledge*' widening out, '*broadened*' from within; as a result, '*his daily thoughts looked up to the True and One*', towards what is True, towards the One in whom everything and everyone exists; and because his daily thoughts are doing that, even his '*commonest actions*', all the everyday things he has to do, eating and brushing the teeth and getting dressed and dealing with people, are welling '*from an inner Light*', spontaneously flowing from the Light within.

Awakened to the lines that Nature hides,
Attuned to her movements that exceed our ken,
He grew one with a covert universe.

Now Aswapati is '*awakened to the lines that Nature hides*'. In the ignorance we see the surface appearances that Nature shows us and are unaware of what lies behind them; Nature is hiding certain things from us; she is hiding '*lines*' of development, the flow of forces. We do not see all that. By the release of his soul and this '*first spiritual change*' Aswapati has awakened and become aware of all those movements going on beyond the surface, and he is '*attuned*' to them, in harmony with the secret movements of Nature that '*exceed our ken*', lie beyond our knowledge and awareness. Our '*ken*' is what we know; what lies beyond our ken exceeds our knowledge and we do not know anything about it. Nature has all kinds of movements; there are things going on in the subtle worlds that we know nothing about, they '*exceed our ken*' and because of that we may not be in tune with them: We may be trying to achieve something, and

cannot understand why we are always experiencing obstacles and difficulties, why there are accidents, why things do not seem to be working out as they should. It is because we are not '*attuned*' with Nature's secret movements. They '*exceed our ken*': they are beyond what we know. Now Aswapati is aware of those things and '*attuned*' with them; as a result, '*He grew one with a covert universe*': he felt his oneness with the hidden universe of all the subtle planes of existence. '*Covert*' means covered, hidden, secret.

His grasp surprised her mightiest energies' springs;
He spoke with the unknown Guardians of the worlds,
Forms he descried our mortal eyes see not.

'*His grasp*': 'to grasp' means to get hold of, whether with our hands or our minds. Now Aswapati's '*grasp*', his capacity to understand and control, '*surprised*' the '*springs*' of Nature's '*mightiest energies*': her most powerful forces. In clockwork or engines there are '*springs*': parts that store energy and release it to make the other parts move; if you can get hold of the right spring and control it you can direct the movement of the other parts; now Aswapati is able to do that; he can grasp and control the most powerful energies of Nature: he can feel the right thing to be done at the right moment so that things go in the right way. Also he is in contact and communication with '*the unknown Guardians of the worlds*': the high divine powers which are protecting all the different planes and their worlds and guiding the manifestation towards its fulfilment. He '*descried*' forms that our physical eyes cannot see. To '*descry*' means to see, to be able to make out details that can be seen only with difficulty. With his new vision and knowledge, Aswapati can see forms that our ordinary eyes cannot see, the forms and beings of the subtle worlds.

His wide eyes bodied viewless entities,

He saw the cosmic forces at their work
And felt the occult impulse behind man's will.

When Sri Aurobindo says '*wide eyes*', it might mean 'open eyes', implying that Aswapati could descry subtle forms even with his physical eyes open, giving forms to '*entities*' which are '*viewless*' or invisible; it can also mean – and it is good to be aware of both the shades of meaning at the same time – that his eyes have such a wide range of vision that they can see not only physical objects but also those '*entities*' and forms that are normally '*viewless*' to us. He can also see '*the cosmic forces at their work*'; this is the conscious vision that can discern how things work in the universe; and he '*felt the occult impulse behind man's will*'. We use the will to decide that something must be done; if we are asked why it should be done we may give all kinds of reasons, but very often it is because something from the hidden worlds has given us a little push, an '*occult impulse*' that makes us think 'Oh, it has to be like that!' and we may even be ready to fight for it, without realising that our will has been influenced by an '*occult impulse*' from behind. If we could see where that impulse came from we would be much wiser. Aswapati can now clearly observe the hidden '*impulse behind man's will*'.

Time's secrets were to him an oft-read book;
The records of the future and the past
Outlined their excerpts on the etheric page.

Aswapati now also has access to another kind of knowledge: '*Time's secrets were to him an oft-read book*', a book that he has read many times. '*Oft*' is a poetic abbreviation of the word 'often'. All the secrets of time were '*an oft-read book*' that was very familiar to him. We learn history at school and read about the past, but there is so much of the past that we human beings do not know anything about, so much has been forgotten and lost; but Sri Aurobindo and

Mother have told us that a record of everything that has ever happened on earth is registered somewhere. Occultists refer to this complete and indelible record as the 'akashic' or 'etheric' record. Nowadays physicists, the scientists who study matter, do not believe in 'ether', they think that they have proved that it does not exist; but Sri Aurobindo has continued to use the word 'ether' as the equivalent of the Sanskrit word *akash* meaning the subtlest form of substance; and the Mother has said that in the etheric realm, these subtle records are kept in a place that is like a great library; if you know how to go there you can access them and find whatever you need to know. Aswapati can access the records not only of the past but also of the future; he sees them outlined '*on the etheric page*' in the form of an '*excerpt*'. An '*excerpt*' is a short passage out of a book; Aswapati does not need to be told the whole story in full detail: he sees an excerpt, and from that he can understand everything he needs to know.

One and harmonious by the Maker's skill,
The human in him paced with the divine;
His acts betrayed not the interior flame.

Because of the process of this '*first spiritual change*' which we have been reading about in this canto, Aswapati's whole being has become '*One and harmonious by the Maker's skill*'. That is not yet true of us. The first thing that we notice if we begin to try improve ourselves, is that we have many different parts and they all want different things. One part of us can say, 'Yes, I choose the way of aspiration, I want to follow Sri Aurobindo and the Mother', but there will be other parts that say, 'No, I am not interested in that; I want to rest, I want to eat, I want to enjoy, I want to spend time with my friends; all this is very boring, it is too hard for me.' The Mother has told us that when we really want to make progress the

first thing is learn to observe all the different parts of ourself, and then begin to educate them all to follow our highest will, our psychic will if we can contact that. Aswapati has done all that work, his whole being is now '*one and harmonious*' because he has had help from the Supreme, the '*Maker*'. We read earlier that the '*Maker*' was shaping Aswapati's nature out of '*half-hewn blocks of natural strength*', like a sculptor. '*The Maker's skill*' has made him completely '*one and harmonious*'. All the human parts, the body, the sensations and emotions, the mind and the way the brain works, the nerves, can move at the same speed as his divine parts and can keep up with his inner divinity: '*the human in him paced with the divine*'. That is a really great change. For us, at the moment, our divine being is behind the veil; it is trying to guide us, protect us, lead us in the right way; but it has to deal with all the human parts and what they want and how they behave. If they come to the point that they can keep up the same pace, move with the same speed, as the divine parts, then much more can be done. As a result of this great change, '*His acts betrayed not the interior flame*': Aswapati's actions do not betray '*the interior flame*': the inner flame of aspiration and will. Because all the parts of his being are in harmony with that inner flame, his actions do not betray it. Our human parts often betray our psychic aspiration, act in opposition to it instead of supporting it, because they are not attuned with it.

This forged the greatness of his front to earth.
A genius heightened in his body's cells
That knew the meaning of his fate-hedged works
Akin to the march of unaccomplished Powers
Beyond life's arc in spirit's immensities.

'*This*', Aswapati's '*first spiritual change*' and all that it means in all the different parts of his being, '*forged the greatness of his front to*

earth.' 'Forged': the process of working with metal is called 'forging'. The word has another meaning which does not apply here: a 'forger' is a person who makes false money or fake antiques or works of art; that is a secondary meaning of the verb 'to forge'. Its primary meaning is 'to work with iron', to make a strong, durable, and lasting material; a 'forge' is a workshop where people work with iron or metals in general. The Maker has brought about the first spiritual change that forged a strong and durable form of Aswapati: *'the greatness of his front to earth'*. He is facing the world and carrying within him all the 'greatness' brought about by the mind and body's first spiritual change. Part of that change is in the body consciousness: *'a genius'*, a living spirit, *'heightened'*, grew stronger and more intense in the cells of his body; that *'genius'* in the body's cells was conscious: it *'knew the meaning of his fate-hedged works'*, his actions. In a sense, all of our human actions and efforts are *'fate-hedged'*, limited by fate, by destiny. We may have great aims and ideals but there are limits to what we can achieve because we are limited by the destiny of the body or the vital or the mind or all three of them together. Aswapati is still a human being, inhabiting a human body; his *'works'* are *'fate-hedged'* in the sense that there is a hedge, a limit of fate around all that he is doing. But in another sense we can say that he is carrying a higher destiny within him, so that the work that he is doing is determined by fate in another way: his actions have a high significance which is coming from above; and in his body itself, there is a *'genius'*, an indwelling conscious spirit, which is aware of the significance behind whatever he does in the human body. It knows that the *'works'* which Aswapati is doing here are *'akin to the march of unaccomplished Powers'*: closely related to the forward movement of Powers that are at work in the universe, whose work is not yet completed, still *'unaccomplished'*: it is going on but it is not yet finished, and Aswapati's actions are closely

connected with that forward movement. Those '*Powers*' are marching forward '*beyond life's arc in spirit's immensities*'. An '*arc*' is part of the circumference of a circle. The '*arc*' of human life is quite limited, but beyond that limited '*arc*' are the unlimited '*immensities*' of the spirit. In those wide vastnesses '*unaccomplished Powers*' are moving forwards; and Aswapati's actions, his '*works*', are connected with that forward movement. Since his body-consciousness is aware of that, it can collaborate with it much better than our poor unconscious bodies can with our soul's mission.

Apart he lived in his mind's solitude,
A demigod shaping the lives of men:
One soul's ambition lifted up the race
A Power worked, but none knew whence it came.

As we are reading this last section of Canto Three, especially from these lines onwards, we cannot help being reminded of Sri Aurobindo himself. '*Apart he lived in his mind's solitude*': there he was, secluded in his room, '*a demigod*', divine in his consciousness, human in his form, '*shaping the lives of men*'. Sri Aurobindo lived upstairs in his room, seeing all the significant events that were going on in the world; when he applied his spiritual force to them, things would change. Above all, the '*ambition*' of his individual soul was to lift up the whole of humanity. The other day I was reading some of his letters about his efforts to reach the Supermind, where he said something like this: 'For myself I do not need anything; I am doing this because I want the Supermind to bring a whole new order and possibility into the earth life. That is why I am doing it': '*One soul's ambition lifted up the race*'. '*A power*' was working, miraculous things were happening, but nobody knew how or why. He was living '*apart in his mind's solitude*': only a very few people had any idea what he was doing, and even they did not really know

what was going on.

The universal strengths were linked with his;
Filling earth's smallness with their boundless breadths,
He drew the energies that transmute an age.

Here is Aswapati, an individual in a human body but with a universal consciousness through which he is '*linked*' with the mighty '*universal strengths*' as well as with our human sphere. He is able to fill the '*smallness*' of the earth and our human life with the '*boundless breadths*' of those '*universal strengths*'. He can draw '*the energies that transmute an age*'. To '*transmute*' means to change into another form. An entire age of human history has been changed by the '*energies*' that Sri Aurobindo has drawn.

Immeasurable by the common look,
He made great dreams a mould for coming things
And cast his deeds like bronze to front the years.

People would look at him and see of course a very majestic figure, but '*the common look*', the ordinary human way of seeing outer appearances – how his face looks, what he is wearing – could not at all measure what he was in his being. He was making his '*great dreams*' for the future of the earth and humanity into '*a mould*'. Earlier we saw that a sculptor prepares a '*mould*' as one stage in creating a statue; the mould determines the shape of the sculpture. Those who dream great dreams help them to become realities here in the material world in the future; their dreams become '*a mould for coming things*'. Sri Aurobindo was always thinking about the future, the future of India, the future of the human race, the future of the whole world. Once the mould is made the sculptor can '*cast*' a statue out of '*bronze*'. Bronze is a mixture of metals that can last for thousands of years. Aswapati's deeds were like that, Sri Aurobindo's deeds are like that: they '*front the years*', the passage of

time; they stand and continue to have their influence and effect.

His walk through Time outstripped the human stride.

Lonely his days and splendid like the sun's.

'*Outstripped*': when several people are running a race, one of them will go ahead, he 'outstrips' the others, he runs faster than they do. Aswapati is not running, he is walking, pacing majestically '*through Time*', but that pace of his goes far beyond the ordinary '*human stride*'. A '*stride*' is the longest step you can take; but our human stride is very limited compared with that wonderful pacing: '*His walk through Time outstripped the human stride*'. '*Lonely his days and splendid like the sun's*': The sun is '*lonely*' in the sense that it stands alone in the solar system; it supports itself, all its energies come from within itself and flow out and affect all the little bodies circling around it; and of course the sun is the symbol of the full and free divine Consciousness and Presence and Action. Aswapati's days were '*lonely and splendid like the sun's*'.

While these lines remind us of Sri Aurobindo's majestic presence and action, we should be clear that they were not written about himself. He is telling the symbolic story of Aswapati and Savitri and Satyavan and Death, which is supposed to have happened in some far-back time near the beginnings of human history. He shows Aswapati as a great developed soul, a great rishi. The experiences which he describes Aswapati having are of course based on his own experiences; and just as when Sri Aurobindo describes Savitri in the poem we are often reminded of our beloved Mother, in the same way, and especially here, when he describes Aswapati's achievements and their significance, we cannot help being reminded of the Master himself, and feel that we can apply these lines to him. All gratitude to Sri Aurobindo!

End of Canto Three

Canto Four

The Secret Knowledge

Section 1, lines 1-126

The canto that we are embarking upon now is one that can be taken separately from the rest of the poem and read by itself as a 'Sri Aurobindo Upanishad', for it contains the essence of the knowledge on which the entire poem is based, the 'Secret Knowledge' which underlies the whole development of Sri Aurobindo's mantric epic.

On a height he stood that looked towards greater heights.

This first line refers to King Aswapati, and it is the only line in the whole canto which does so. Throughout the rest of this canto Sri Aurobindo is outlining a view of the world: the Secret Knowledge which has been revealed to Aswapati by the powers of Truth-consciousness which have brought about the release of his soul and '*his mind and body's first spiritual change*', which was shown in the previous canto. Now, making a link with the preceding canto, the poet says that Aswapati has reached a certain height, and that, as often happens to people who are climbing in the mountains, having reached that height, he sees the yet higher peaks that still lie ahead of him.

Then the poet speaks about human beings in general. He tells us that when we first turn towards the Divine and Infinite, we may have wonderful and inspiring experiences:

Our early approaches to the Infinite
Are sunrise splendours on a marvellous verge
While lingers yet unseen the glorious sun.

In the early morning, before dawn, when the sun has not yet risen above the horizon, we may see beautiful colours in the sky as the world around us is touched by a magical dawn light, '*sunrise splendours*' that come as the Savitri sun approaches, the sun that has

not yet risen above the horizon. We see the first signs of it, the first dawns of it '*on a marvellous verge*', on the horizon; glorious early experiences in the spiritual life are '*sunrise splendours*', very happy and wonderful times, when we are on the brink of something wonderful and feel the first touch of the Divine. Yet, '*What now we see is a shadow of what must come*': they are only '*sunrise splendours*'; when the full sun is seen there will be so much more light, so much more power and energy. To '*linger*' means to take time, to move slowly: the divine Sun is still lingering unseen below the horizon.

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 earth's uplook*': we can think of our earth looking up to the sky and out into space, towards a '*remote Unknown*' that is very far away; that upward look of our material nature is the very first step of a long journey, only a '*preface*'. A '*preface*' is an introductory text at the beginning of a book: before you start to read the main body of the book there are a few words to encourage you and give you some idea of what lies ahead; similarly that first uplook towards a remote Unknown is the first preparatory step in an '*epic climb*', the huge ascent which will take the human soul '*from its flat earthly state*', from its starting point on the surface of the earth, tied to matter, through a long journey '*to the discovery of its greater self*' and '*an eternal Light*' which is now seen only as a '*far gleam*' in the distance; to reach that Light, an '*epic climb*', an immense upward journey lies ahead.

This world is a beginning and a base
Where Life and Mind erect their structured dreams;

An unborn Power must build reality.

This material world is '*a beginning and a base*': a foundation. When we start to construct a building we need a base, a foundation; on the foundation of the material world, Life and Mind are building '*their structured dreams*'; but to build '*reality*' an '*unborn Power*' is needed, one that has not yet been born on earth.

A deathbound littleness is not all we are:

Immortal our forgotten vastnesses

Await discovery in our summit selves;

Unmeasured breadths and depths of being are ours.

The limited human being that we are now, this '*deathbound littleness*', is not all we are: there is much more to us, which we have forgotten: our immortal vastnesses are waiting for us to discover them '*in our summit selves*'. The '*summit*' is the top of a mountain. When we reach the top of our mountain, the many successive levels of our being, we shall find the '*unmeasured breadths and depths of being*' that belong to '*our summit selves*'.

Akin to the ineffable Secrecy,

Mystic, eternal in unrealised Time,

Neighbours of Heaven are Nature's altitudes.

'*Nature's altitudes*', the higher levels of Nature, are '*akin to the ineffable Secrecy*'; '*akin to*' means 'closely related to'; the higher levels of Nature are closely connected to the '*ineffable*' secret which cannot be expressed; they are '*mystic*' and '*eternal*'; they have not yet been realised, they exist in '*unrealised Time*', the time that has yet to unfold itself; and they are '*neighbours of Heaven*'. A neighbour is one who lives close to you. '*Nature's altitudes*' are '*neighbours of Heaven*', the higher levels of consciousness.

To these high-peaked dominions sealed to our search,

Too far from surface Nature's postal routes,
Too lofty for our mortal lives to breathe,
Deep in us a forgotten kinship points
And a faint voice of ecstasy and prayer
Calls to those lucent lost immensities.

Australia, Canada and South Africa were '*dominions*' or self-ruling nations within the old British Empire; here the word is used to mean '*realms*' or '*kingdoms*'. Nature's altitudes are '*high-peaked*' domains lying far up in the mountains; when we look for them, we cannot find them, for they are '*sealed to our search*'; they are too far away from our everyday nature, from '*surface Nature's postal routes*'; postal routes go along the main highways and do not reach far up into the Himalayas, into the highest peaks: up there, there are no post offices; if you go high enough, no letters and no telegrams will reach you; also, when you go up into the high mountains you have difficulty breathing, the air is different from the air that we are used to breathing down here; it is the same with '*Nature's altitudes*', the higher levels of Nature: we find it difficult to stay up there long; we cannot breathe properly up there. But something in us is always pointing to them: '*deep in us a forgotten kinship points*'; we have forgotten about our '*kinship*', our close connection with those high levels; but something in us always feels connected to them, so it is pointing to them and calling us to look up at them. Its voice is very '*faint*'; the voice of our soul is not loud and strident; our desires and bright ideas have louder voices, compared to the quiet voice of the soul which is a voice of '*prayer*' and of '*ecstasy*', intense delight; it is calling to those high '*immensities*', those vast levels; we have lost touch with them, but something in us still feels a connection with '*those lucent lost immensities*', the higher levels of ourselves, full of light, which we have forgotten.

Even when we fail to look into our souls
Or lie embedded in earthly consciousness,
Still have we parts that grow towards the light,
Yet are there luminous tracts and heavens serene
And Eldorados of splendour and ecstasy
And temples to the godhead none can see.

Even when we forget completely, even when we do not take the trouble to look into our souls and remain '*embedded in earthly consciousness*' like stones stuck in the mud, still we have parts that are always growing towards the higher light; those '*luminous tracts*', those areas that are full of light, those serene heavens, calm, quiet, smiling, undisturbed, still exist whether we are conscious of them or not; there are '*Eldorados of splendour and ecstasy / And temples to the godhead none can see*'. '*Eldorado*' is a Spanish word which means 'The Golden One'; it was a name given by the Conquistadors, the Spanish colonisers who conquered South America, to a city they were looking for, a city built of pure gold; the word has passed into English, meaning a wonderful golden dream or goal that you are always looking for but never find. But here Sri Aurobindo says that those golden places really do exist, those '*Eldorados of splendour and ecstasy*': not cities built of material gold, but realms and countries of pure golden light and Truth-Consciousness; they are there and one day we shall find them. Whether we are aware of them or not, there are temples, '*shrines*' to the inner godhead whom nobody sees; even if we forget all about Him, still His temple is there, still He is being worshipped, His power is still ruling.

A shapeless memory lingers in us still
And sometimes, when our sight is turned within,
Earth's ignorant veil is lifted from our eyes;
There is a short miraculous escape.

Deep within us '*lingers*', remains, a '*shapeless memory*': it does not have a distinct form, but it remains lingering within us and does not go away. When we do look inside, '*when our sight is turned within*', it may happen that suddenly the '*ignorant veil*' of matter is removed and we experience a '*short miraculous escape*' into freedom, into clear sight. I would say that this is the psychic memory, the memory that is aware of divinity. It is because we have that '*shapeless memory*' within us that when Sri Aurobindo and Mother tell us these things we believe them; because that memory is in us, we recognize the truths that they remind us of; not all of our parts share that memory, so there may not be a full immediate recognition, but part of us knows, 'Yes, it is like that.' What happens when we experience '*a short miraculous escape*'?

This narrow fringe of clamped experience
We leave behind meted to us as life,
Our little walks, our insufficient reach.

We leave behind this limited life-experience that is measured out to us, '*meted*' out: it means 'measured in very small doses'; our earthly nature only allows us a little bit of experience at a time, just what we can receive; what is measured out to us as life is a just a '*narrow fringe*', a thin border, we are living on the outskirts of something much bigger; there is so much more, much richer experience waiting for us: what we experience while we are under the domination of matter is a '*narrow fringe of clamped experience*'. '*Clamped*' means 'held tight', unable to move freely. We have our little walks, we go here and there, and sometimes we may try to reach higher things, but we cannot reach far enough, our reach is limited, '*insufficient*'; but in those exceptional moments of escape when '*earth's ignorant veil is lifted from our eyes*' we can leave all that behind, our souls can enjoy a much freer range of experience.

Our souls can visit in great lonely hours
Still regions of imperishable Light,
All-seeing eagle-peaks of silent Power
And moon-flame oceans of swift fathomless Bliss
And calm immensities of spirit space.

These '*regions*' are heavens or altitudes of Nature. The soul can escape, and enjoy '*great lonely hours*', visiting '*still regions of imperishable Light*', quiet, calm places full of Light that will not fade because it is '*imperishable*'. An example of such regions is the '*All-seeing eagle-peaks of silent Power*'; eagles are powerful birds that live up in the high mountains and have very strong eyesight; when our souls visit those high peaks of consciousness, they can soar like eagles, experience '*silent Power*' and become '*All-seeing*'. They can also visit oceans, vast expanses full of '*moon-flame*', flickering with moonlight; in India the moon is associated with ecstasy, bliss, delight, *soma*; these are oceans of '*swift, fathomless bliss*', moving rapidly, but so deep that we can never reach the bottom of them; and there are '*calm immensities of spirit space*' like wide clear open skies.

In the unfolding process of the Self
Sometimes the inexpressible Mystery
Elects a human vessel of descent.

'In the unfolding process of the Self': as we evolve and develop, as the Self in us and in the universe unfolds and discovers itself, the '*inexpressible Mystery*', the '*ineffable Secrecy*', the '*remote Unknown*', may choose to descend into a human being. To '*elect*' means to choose. That human being then becomes a '*vessel*' into which the inexpressible Mystery pours as much of itself as the vessel can hold. This is another kind of peak experience, the feeling that some very high, mysterious power is pouring into you. What happens then?

A breath comes down from a supernal air,
A Presence is born, a guiding Light awakes,
A stillness falls upon the instruments:
Fixed, motionless like a marble monument,
Stone-calm, the body is a pedestal
Supporting a figure of eternal Peace.

A breath of life comes down into us from the supernal air which we cannot normally breathe, and '*a Presence is born*', '*a guiding Light awakes*'; then everything in the human vessel becomes quiet: '*a stillness falls upon the instruments*'. Even the body becomes fixed, motionless like stone, like '*a marble monument*', as if it is carved out of '*marble*', stone that is very cool and pure and strong; the body becomes '*stone-calm*' and forms '*a pedestal*': a strong base for a statue or a building; this pedestal is '*supporting a figure of eternal Peace*'.

Or a revealing Force sweeps blazing in;
Out of some vast superior continent
Knowledge breaks through trailing its radiant seas,
And Nature trembles with the power, the flame.

This is also a descent, but of a different kind; instead of peace, '*a revealing Force sweeps blazing in*': a force which gives knowledge pours into the human vessel with immense energy. '*Out of some vast superior continent*' Knowledge breaks through the barrier of matter. A '*continent*' is a huge, solid mass: an ocean is vast, unlimited, but fluid, liquid, flowing; a continent is solid, and usually below our feet; but this is a '*superior continent*': although it is '*superior*', above us, it is a vast solid mass of substance; from there '*Knowledge breaks through trailing its radiant seas*': like a comet with its glowing tail, Knowledge pours down from above, with wide seas of radiating light following it as it comes. When that '*revealing Force sweeps blazing*' into the human vessel '*Nature trembles*', because the

intensity of '*the power, the flame*' is so difficult to bear.

A greater Personality sometimes
Possesses us which yet we know is ours:
Or we adore the Master of our souls.

Sometimes '*a greater Personality*' comes and takes hold of us, '*possesses us*'; we may recognise it as our own, so that we feel 'Oh yes, this is my true self'; or we may adore it as '*the Master of our souls*': a different way of experiencing and receiving the descent.

Then the small bodily ego thins and falls;
No more insisting on its separate self,
Losing the punctilio of its separate birth,
It leaves us one with Nature and with God.

If one of these wonderful peak experiences comes to us, our sense of our little limited ego, connected to our self-contained small body, becomes thin and may fall away completely; it loses its sense of limited individuality; it stops insisting on its separateness, it is ready to feel part of something much vaster; it loses '*the punctilio of its separate birth*'. The word '*punctilio*' comes to us from Italian and Spanish and is used about people who are very particular about small details, especially details that have to do with their status, their dignity and honour: they want everyone to recognize that they are very important and must be treated properly; but the origin of the word is the Latin word '*punctum*' which means 'a point'. That is the way that our ego behaves: it is really nothing but a tiny point, but it thinks that it is very important; it wants the whole universe to take notice and behave properly towards it; but when one of those wonderful experiences comes the little ego loses its '*punctilio*': it loses its sense of being a little point, and at the same time it loses its sense of being very important and needing to be respected. When that sense of separateness falls away, suddenly we can feel that we

are *'one with Nature and with God'*.

In moments when the inner lamps are lit
And the life's cherished guests are left outside,
Our spirit sits alone and speaks to its gulfs.

These are special moments. If we can manage to get a moment like that and light the inner lamps, shut out all the distractions of life, then the *'spirit sits alone and speaks to its gulfs'*: it communicates with its own depths, its deeper parts.

A wider consciousness opens then its doors;
Invading from spiritual silences
A ray of the timeless Glory stoops awhile
To commune with our seized illumined clay
And leaves its huge white stamp upon our lives.

When we are quiet like that, when we speak to our *'gulfs'*, *'a wider consciousness opens then its doors'* and from the spiritual silences *'a ray of the timeless Glory stoops awhile'*: it bends down to touch us, to communicate with us, or like a great bird of light it swoops down and *'communes'*, communicates, with the body, with our *'clay'*, the substance of our physical body. The body is *'seized'* and *'illumined'*, filled with the light of the ray that seizes it. That experience leaves a mark even after the ray has gone; that mark will remain as a *'huge white stamp upon our lives'*. The Mother tells us that if we have such an experience it is important to remember its *'stamp'*, because the memory of it will help us to come back into communication again and again with the Power that seized us then.

In the oblivious field of mortal mind,
Revealed to the closed prophet eyes of trance
Or in some deep internal solitude
Witnessed by a strange immaterial sense,

The signals of eternity appear.

Our mortal mind is a field of forgetfulness: there is so much that we are unaware of, we are '*oblivious*', we do not know what is going on; but when some communication like that comes, the eyes of the mind close in trance and we see things that otherwise we would not see, things that prophets see; or deep within, in '*some deep internal solitude*' where we are all alone, '*a strange immaterial sense*' that is not our normal sense of vision or hearing or touch, becomes aware of '*the signals of eternity*'. All these peak experiences are '*signals of eternity*' that may come to us even in '*the oblivious field of mortal mind*'.

The truth mind could not know unveils its face,
We hear what mortal ears have never heard,
We feel what earthly sense has never felt,
We love what common hearts repel and dread;

These are different ways in which '*signals of eternity*' may appear: as a revelation of '*the truth mind could not know*', as if it '*unveils its face*'; removing its veil, it shows itself and gives us some revelation or insight; or we may experience subtle hearing: '*we hear what mortal ears have never heard*'; our physical ears, which belong to this body which must die, have a certain capacity of hearing; but there is also an inner hearing, a subtle hearing. Or we may feel something. We have physical senses, our '*earthly sense*': one of them is our sense of touch by which we feel things, but it is a limited physical touch; in that special state we may '*feel what earthly sense has never felt*'; we might feel something touching us, or fragrances may be experienced, or a special taste. The effect of these inner experiences changes our values: '*we love what common hearts repel and dread*'; in the ordinary consciousness people do not like being alone, they want to be with other people, they want to have lively and

entertaining exchanges; when we begin to prefer to be quiet and silent, alone, it is a sign of the awakening of our inner being. But this might also apply to other things: sometimes we see very painful, ugly, hateful things or happenings; but if we are awake inside we can look through the appearances and see them in a deeper way and feel a great understanding and love and compassion. Sometimes the Divine Love brings us experiences which our ordinary nature would like to push away; it is only when the inner being is awake that we can feel, 'Oh yes, this for my good' and respond with acceptance and even gratitude. These are some of the experiences that can come when '*our spirit sits alone and speaks to its gulfs*'.

Our minds hush to a bright Omniscient;
A Voice calls from the chambers of the soul;
We meet the ecstasy of the Godhead's touch
In golden privacies of immortal fire.

Our minds '*hush*', they fall silent, and instead of their normal churning there is a consciousness full of light in which it is felt that everything is known. Or a Voice calls to us from the secret depths of our soul, '*the chambers of the soul*'. Or in some golden private place full of '*immortal fire*', of undying intensity and purity, we might feel '*the ecstasy of the Godhead's touch*': a touch of the divine Presence with all the intense delight that it brings.

The description of these special experiences started at line 40 and now we have reached line 85; Sri Aurobindo has devoted 45 lines to evoking some examples of what are sometimes called 'peak experiences', spiritual experiences. Now he will tell us what they mean.

These signs are native to a larger self
That lives within us by ourselves unseen;

Only sometimes a holier influence comes,
A tide of mightier surgings bears our lives
And a diviner Presence moves the soul;

All these experiences are '*signs*' which are '*native*', natural and inborn, to a '*larger self*' which is living within us '*by ourselves unseen*'; we are not usually aware of it because it is a subtle self. Only sometimes we may experience some sign of it; when it comes it brings '*a holier influence*', a sense of something sacred; or it may bring a great wave of energy, '*a tide of mightier surgings*'; in our surface being we contain a certain amount of vital prana that carries our lives along; but in these exceptional moments, huge waves of energy may come and carry our lives, and the soul feels lifted up and moved by '*a diviner Presence*'.

Or through the earthly coverings something breaks,
A grace and beauty of spiritual light,
The murmuring tongue of a celestial fire.

'*Through the earthly coverings something breaks*': something from behind the veil breaks through the outer physical coverings and we experience an unearthly light, '*a grace and beauty of spiritual light*' which brings a wonderful intensity: '*the murmuring tongue of a celestial fire*'. A flame looks like a tongue; the poet says that this tongue of '*celestial fire*' is '*murmuring*', making a sound, giving a message, communicating something. The heavenly fire of aspiration, the fire of higher will, is burning within us, and it breaks through '*the earthly coverings*' of our dense physical matter.

Ourself and a high stranger whom we feel,
It is and acts unseen as if it were not;
It follows the line of sempiternal birth,
Yet seems to perish with its mortal frame.

This refers to the '*something*' which breaks through the earthly coverings: it is ourself, but also '*a high stranger whom we feel*'. Sri Aurobindo has recounted an experience he had in his first year after his return to India: he was riding in a horse carriage in a crowded street when the horse got frightened and bolted. It was a moment of great danger: there could have been a serious accident. In that moment he felt a '*high stranger*' who was himself, a divine presence above his head, seeing and controlling everything. When the incident was over, the sense of that presence was gone, everything was the same as before; he says '*Only that deathless memory I bore.*'¹⁶ That Presence exists, '*It is*', and it is acting, but it is acting and existing unseen by our surface being, as if it did not exist. That Something, that Presence '*follows the line of sempiternal birth, / Yet seems to perish with its mortal frame*'. The word '*perish*' means to decay and spoil or eventually to die. There is something in us that seems to die when we die. We even say 'It is because the soul has left the body – that is why we die'. But the soul does not die, it goes on, it is born again, it follows the line of many, many, many births; the eternal process of its birth is repeated over and over unendingly in time. We can say that this '*something*' is what Sri Aurobindo calls our psychic being.

Assured of the Apocalypse to be,
 It reckons not the moments and the hours;
 Great, patient, calm it sees the centuries pass,
 Awaiting the slow miracle of our change
 In the sure deliberate process of world-force
 And the long march of all-revealing Time.

The psychic being is absolutely sure of the final revelation of the Divine in everything, '*the Apocalypse*', the fulfilment; so it is not

¹⁶*Collected Poems*, CWSA volume 2, p. 607

counting the moments and the hours, it is not counting so many past lives, so many more to come; it is patient: *'Great, patient, calm it sees the centuries pass'*. It is always waiting and working for the *'slow miracle of our change'*: our gradual change from this earthly being to the full manifestation of our true self. That slow miracle is sure to happen; the poet says that it is definitely going to happen *'in the sure deliberate process of world-force'*. The word *'deliberate'* has two connotations: if you do something deliberately it means that you have thought about it and decided to do it; but it can also mean that you take your time to do it very carefully; here both those meanings are present: *'in the sure deliberate process of world-force'* the creative *'world-force'* takes all the time needed to see that every detail is just as it intended to be; she is not concerned about how long it takes. The other factor is *'the long march of all-revealing Time'*: Time is gradually unrolling and revealing all the possibilities that have been put into this manifestation; they will all be revealed in the long slow *'march of all-revealing time'*.

It is the origin and the master-clue,
A silence overhead, an inner voice,
A living image seated in the heart,
An unvalled wideness and a fathomless point,
The truth of all these cryptic shows in Space,
The Real towards which our strivings move,
The secret grandiose meaning of our lives.

These lines all refer to the divine Presence that is growing within us: *'the origin'*, the source of all the rest of our instrumentation, our life, mind, body and capacities: they have all emerged from that original Divine consciousness, that seed of Divinity. It is *'the master-clue'* which shows us the way, a sign or a light or a thread that we follow to find our way. If we are in a winding twisty labyrinth or maze,

where we cannot find our way out, if someone or something gives us a clue, we have a thread that we can follow; the inner divine Presence is that '*master-clue*', the master sign. If we can just get hold of the thread of that power, that Presence, that Divinity within, it will guide us through the most difficult circumstances. We may experience it as a silence in the higher levels of our consciousness. We may experience it as an inner voice, or as '*a living image seated in the heart*'. Another way of experiencing it is as '*an unwallled wideness*' with no wall or limit, and as '*a fathomless point*'; a point so deep that the end of it can never be reached. In whatever way that '*something*' reveals itself, it is '*the truth of all these cryptic shows*'. '*Cryptic*' means puzzling, mysterious, difficult to understand. All the '*shows*', the forms and shapes that we perceive in Space, are '*cryptic*', their deeper meaning and significance is mysterious; within them all lies the truth of that Presence. All our efforts and strivings are moving towards the experience of the Real, the ultimate Reality, because that Truth and that Reality is '*the secret grandiose meaning of our lives*'. Why are we here? What are we up to? What does it all mean? Sri Aurobindo and Mother tell us that there is a secret meaning to our lives and it is not something small and insignificant, but '*grandiose*': it has a great and noble significance, which is revealed to us by the indwelling divine Presence.

A treasure of honey in the combs of God,
A Splendour burning in a tenebrous cloak,
It is our glory of the flame of God,
Our golden fountain of the world's delight,
An immortality cowed in the cape of death,
The shape of our unborn divinity.

We find honey in the honeycombs that bees make. The sweetness of honey is the symbol of delight, bliss, ananda. That Presence, that

secret truth of our lives, is '*a treasure of honey in the combs of God*': these '*cryptic shows*', all the appearances of the world, are containers that God has created to hold his delight, his honey. His Presence within them is '*a Splendour*', radiating light and power and beauty; it is '*burning*' but its flame is covered up by '*a tenebrous cloak*' of shadows formed by our physical body and our ignorant surface consciousness. That Presence is '*our glory of the flame of God*': each of us has this glory of the flame of God hidden within our cloak of shadows, and it is '*our golden fountain of the world's delight*': from it pours the energy and delight that keep us alive, without which we would just disintegrate; because this '*golden fountain of the world's delight*' is within us, we go on through even the greatest difficulties, the greatest sufferings. The divine Presence within us is '*an immortality cowed in the cape of death*'. A 'cowl' is the hood of a cloak which covers the head so that the face cannot be seen. The immortality within us has hidden its face within this dark cloak or '*cape*', the disguise of death, of mortality. That Presence is '*the shape of our unborn divinity*'. It is '*unborn*' in two senses: first, that it has not yet fully manifested itself; it is within us as a seed and a flame, waiting to be born; when it takes birth in us fully that will be the psychic realisation and transformation; it is also '*unborn*' and will never die because it is an eternal portion of the Supreme Reality.

It guards for us our fate in depths within

Where sleeps the eternal seed of transient things.

That Presence is keeping safe deep within us our '*fate*', our true destiny. Sometimes people think that fate means the bad things that happen in our life, but Sri Aurobindo says that our fate is the goal that our soul has chosen. The divine Presence within us is keeping that fate safe for us: our fate is sleeping deep within us '*where sleeps the eternal seed of transient things*': there is an eternal seed which

gives birth to all the '*transient things*' that exist in the universe, which are not eternal but unfold and disappear in time, which come and go; there is an eternal seed deep within us which is giving birth to all the temporary happenings and circumstances of our lives; and all these things are meant to help us towards our ultimate fate, the destiny our soul has chosen.

Always we bear in us a magic key
Concealed in life's hermetic envelope.

We are carrying within us '*a magic key*' to the mysteries of existence; but it is '*concealed*', hidden in '*life's hermetic envelope*'. When something is 'hermetically sealed' nothing can get in at all: no air, no water, nothing. Sometimes this is important in manufacturing; a hermetic seal is needed that will be absolutely watertight and airtight, tight to everything; but the word '*hermetic*' carries another suggestion too: it can mean '*occult*', secret, in the sense that a special initiation is needed to penetrate it. There is a secret to '*all these cryptic shows in space*': that is the Secret Knowledge which Sri Aurobindo will be sharing with us in this canto. Now he is introducing us to it gradually.

A burning Witness in the sanctuary
Regards through Time and the blind walls of Form;
A timeless Light is in his hidden eyes;
He sees the secret things no words can speak
And knows the goal of the unconscious world
And the heart of the mystery of the journeying years.

The '*something*' within us is not only a Presence, not only a flame, a power: it is a consciousness, a consciousness which is watching: '*a burning Witness*'. In the '*sanctuary*', the safe and sacred place deep within us, he is always watching. His eyes are hidden from us by '*life's hermetic envelope*', but there is a Light of consciousness in them

which is not limited by time, it is '*timeless*'. He is looking through Time, he is looking through '*the blind walls of Form*', all the physical appearances; '*he sees the secret things no words can speak*' and knows where the world is going to, '*the goal of the unconscious world*'. The world does not know where it is going, but the Witness knows; he is aware of '*the heart of the mystery of the journeying years*'. The unconscious world is travelling, time is travelling and carrying deep within it a mystery, a secret, and only that Witness consciousness is aware of the secret. We are all carrying that consciousness within us and all our aspirations, all our higher movements come from there. They come from the soul and are pure and noble and beautiful in their origin; as they pass through the ignorant outer layers of our being they get distorted, twisted this way or that way; but the original impulse is always coming from our innermost soul-need to move forward on the universal journey.

End of Section 1

Section 2, lines 127-341

In the first section of this canto Sri Aurobindo showed us that human beings sometimes have wonderful experiences which are signs of '*a greater self*' which lives within us but which we are not normally aware of; that '*greater self*' is always growing towards the light and guarding our fate, our goal: it has a higher knowledge and a consciousness which is aware of the goal of the manifestation that we are part of. It is a very beautiful section, very often read and quoted; but now, in the second section, he shows us the other side of the picture: all the unconsciousness which conceals the awareness of the greater self, and what is going on within that darkness.

But all is screened, subliminal, mystical;
It needs the intuitive heart, the inward turn,
It needs the power of a spiritual gaze.

In the first section Sri Aurobindo was telling us that within us, behind the veil, there is '*a burning Witness*' who sees '*the secret things no words can speak*' and is aware of where the world is going; but to see that, the '*power of a spiritual gaze*' is needed. For us at present everything is '*screened*', hidden, '*subliminal*', below the threshold of our consciousness; it is '*mystical*' and '*needs the intuitive heart*' to perceive it. Our surface mind cannot see all those things, but sometimes '*the intuitive heart*' gets a glimpse of it; some '*inward turn*' is needed before we can have any of those wonderful experiences that Sri Aurobindo showed us in the previous section. Intuition is the power in us that is most able to access this secret knowledge; it is the way that the higher knowledge hidden within us manifests itself, and most commonly for us it manifests through the heart. It may come as a sudden flash of light if the mind is receptive and silent, but the heart is more intuitive and has a greater power of

direct knowledge.

Else to our waking mind's small moment look
A goalless voyage seems our dubious course
Some Chance has settled or hazarded some Will,
Or a Necessity without aim or cause
Unwillingly compelled to emerge and be.

If we do not have that '*spiritual gaze*' and that intuitive '*inward turn*', as long as we have to rely on '*our waking mind's small moment look*' we can only see things as they appear at a particular moment in time, at a particular point in space; our understanding is very limited. To our ordinary waking mind, when we ask 'Why are we here and where are we going?' unless we have Sri Aurobindo to tell us, we do not know the answer: '*a goalless voyage seems our dubious course*'. It seems as if we are being carried through life on a ship lost in a vast ocean, on a journey which does not seem to have any purpose or direction; our course is '*dubious*', doubtful, we cannot be sure of what lies ahead. It seems to us as if we are here by Chance: as if our '*course*', our journey, has been decided randomly, by Chance. That is what materialistic science tells us: that all this is random, it has just happened by chance. Sometimes we may feel that there is '*some Will*' behind that has set us off on our life-journey; but perhaps that Will has just made an experiment, taken a risk, '*hazarded*', made an attempt without being sure of the outcome. People gamble, they try their luck; or they set off on an adventure without knowing what the outcome may be; these things are hazardous, risky. Or perhaps some '*Necessity*' is governing our lives and the way that things are in the world; it does not seem to have an aim and we cannot say what is the cause of that '*Necessity*', of all the laws of physics and biology, of all the determining factors that have brought us to where we are here and now. The world seems to

have been '*unwillingly compelled to emerge and be.*' All mental theories about who we are, why we are here, are like this: '*dubious.*' This is the way that '*our waking mind's small moment look*' sees things. Maybe if we go deeper into our inner mind or into a trance state we can understand things differently, but our ordinary waking mind sees it like this.

In this dense field where nothing is plain or sure,
Our very being seems to us questionable,
Our life a vague experiment, the soul
A flickering light in a strange ignorant world,
The earth a brute mechanic accident,
A net of death in which by chance we live.

'*This dense field*' is the material universe. Matter is '*dense*' in comparison with our inner world of thoughts and dreams and feelings; and in the material universe nothing is '*plain or sure*': it is not clear what is going on and we cannot be sure about anything. Even our own being seems '*questionable*': we may wonder 'Do I really exist?' If we look at our life, it seems like '*a vague experiment*', as if something is being tried out, but not in a very clear and conscious way. Experiment lies at the very heart of the scientific method: scientists ask, 'What happens if I do this?' They might have an idea or a theory about the way that things work; but then they must set up experiments to see whether things work out in the way that their theory expects and predicts. Whether it works out as predicted or not, they have learned something. Our life seems to be some kind of experiment: trying this, trying that; but it is '*a vague experiment*'. It has not been set up to test a particular theory or to ask a particular question; we just try this and that and even the answers we get seem to be very vague, '*nothing is plain or sure*'. And if at all we feel that we have a soul, it seems like a '*flickering light*'. A candle

flame will 'flicker' in the wind: it is not a steady, reliable light. Sometimes our soul seems to be there and at other times we cannot find it anywhere and it does not seem to light up much for us. If at all the soul is there, it seems like a *'flickering light'* and the world around us is a *'strange ignorant world'*: there does not seem to be any real, reliable knowledge and light here. The earth itself just seems to have happened by accident. The scientists tell us how they think it might have happened: they think that our universe started with an immense explosion, and that over time matter as we know it has evolved, and that by gravity, clouds of gas have solidified and come together to form our solar system and this planet we call earth. They believe that none of that can have been planned and it is just pure chance that this planet formed at just the right distance away from the sun so that here there is the right temperature and the right kind of chemical make-up to allow life and eventually conscious human beings to emerge here. The existence of the earth seems to be the result of a *'mechanic accident'*; and when we look at its life aspect, the earth seems to be *'a net of death in which by chance we live'*. Everything dies eventually; everything in nature is subject to 'entropy': the tendency to disintegrate. For a time, by chance, there occurs this strange phenomenon of life, whose origin no one has yet succeeded in explaining. That is how it all appears to our reasoning mind when it first wakes up and starts to ask questions.

All we have learned appears a doubtful guess,
The achievement done a passage or a phase
Whose farther end is hidden from our sight,
A chance happening or a fortuitous fate.

All that the mind has learned and worked out is still only a theory. Of course, they do not tell you that in school: they tell you 'It is like this', 'It is like that'. But people who have really studied, scientists,

historians, know that whatever knowledge they have gained is only a theory. It is the best theory they have at the moment but it is still only a *'doubtful guess'*. They gather evidence to test it and support it, but maybe tomorrow new evidence will appear and the whole picture will change. Similarly, whatever we have achieved, whether individually or as a race, is never fully satisfying, there is always something more to be done; whatever achievement has been gained is a *'passage'* to something else, a preparation for something more, a *'phase'* or a stage in a development. We do not know what that further development might be and where it will lead us: the *'farther end is hidden from our sight'*. It seems to us that it will happen by chance, as *'a chance happening'*; or it may be fixed; for example, what is going to happen to our sun and its solar system including our earth may already be fixed. Cosmologists think that they know that our sun is going to explode in about 5 billion years; but even though the fate of the solar system seems to be fixed and predetermined and predictable, it also seems to be a matter of chance, a *'fortuitous fate'*, a fate that is fixed by chance, without any deeper meaning or significance to it. Please notice the spelling *'farther'*: *'Whose farther end is hidden from our sight'*. There are two alternative spellings for this word; we can spell it like this with an *'a'* or more commonly with a *'u'*. Sri Aurobindo normally uses this spelling, perhaps because it is more accurate and expressive; it is the comparative form of the adjective *'far'*: – far, farther, farthest. Sri Aurobindo chooses this spelling, and we can pronounce it either *'farther'* or *'further'*. Both spellings and both pronunciations are given in good dictionaries and both are considered correct.

Out of the unknown we move to the unknown.

Ever surround our brief existence here

Grey shadows of unanswered questionings;

The dark Inconscient's signless mysteries

Stand up unsolved behind Fate's starting-line.

This describes our human state: out of the unknown, we are moving to the unknown: we do not know where we have come from and we do not know where the future will lead us. We do not even fully know who and what we are and whether our existence has any significance at all. Our brief existence here is always surrounded by '*grey shadows of unanswered questionings*'. Those questionings '*ever*' – always – '*surround our brief existence here*'. If we try to look back into the past to discover how this line of Fate, this line of karma or determinisms has started, however far back we look, wanting to be able to say, 'This is where the whole process has started', we find that beyond any identifiable '*starting-line*' lie '*The dark Inconscient's signless mysteries*': there is a huge mysterious darkness that we cannot penetrate, there are no signs there. Scientists tell us that the whole material universe has started from a Big Bang: all matter, time and space, everything started from that explosion; but what was there before that? Only '*the dark Inconscient's signless mysteries*': they cannot tell us anything about it.

An aspiration in the Night's profound,
Seed of a perishing body and half-lit mind,
Uplifts its lonely tongue of conscious fire
Towards an undying Light for ever lost;
Only it hears, sole echo of its call,
The dim reply in man's unknowing heart
And meets, not understanding why it came
Or for what reason is the suffering here,
God's sanction to the paradox of life
And the riddle of the Immortal's birth in Time.

In the midst of these uncertainties, there is an aspiration like a little flame in the depths of the darkness of the night. Sri Aurobindo says

that aspiring flame is the *'seed of a perishing body and half-lit mind'*. Why do we have a physical body? And why do we have this ignorant, half-conscious mind? Only because of that little flame. That little flame is lifting up its *'lonely tongue of conscious fire'*; its aspiration is always reaching up *'towards an undying Light'*. It has the sense that somewhere there is a Light which does not die: but it also has the feeling that it has lost that Light, lost it forever. *'Profound'* is usually an adjective meaning *'very deep'*. Here and in a couple of other places in the poem Sri Aurobindo uses it as a noun. In the depths of the night of unconsciousness that flame of aspiration is the *'seed'* from which this *'perishing body'*, this body that must die, and this *'half-lit mind'* have grown. It lifts up *'its lonely tongue of conscious fire'*: that aspiration is a conscious flame; it is reaching up *'towards an undying Light forever lost'*, a light that seems to be beyond reach. The only response it finds is a *'dim reply in man's unknowing heart'*; something in our heart responds to that aspiration, which is the only echo to its call; and looking around at the world it meets *'God's sanction to the paradox of life'*: it sees that everything that exists could not exist unless God is sanctioning it, saying *'Yes, it is good, let it be. Let it be like this'*; but this seems like a *'paradox'*, something contradictory. That little flame of conscious aspiration cannot understand why God would say *'Yes'* to life as we know it. It cannot understand why it is here and why there is all this terrible suffering around. It cannot understand why there should be this mystery, why the immortal being should be born in time.

Then follows a long section where Sri Aurobindo describes the earth, and he obviously does not mean just our material earth, he is speaking about the Earth-Goddess. The Mother has said that the Yoga of the Earth is one of the important themes of the poem. When she was working with Huta on the *'Meditations on Savitri'* paintings she made a whole series of sketches, like a comic-strip, illustrating

these next few pages, eleven pictures altogether showing the story of the Earth-Goddess.

Along a path of aeons serpentine
In the coiled blackness of her nescient course
The Earth-Goddess toils across the sands of Time.

The Earth-Goddess is following a path, she has a journey to make and it is a journey through time, *'along a path of aeons'*: *'aeons'* are very long stretches of time and they seem to move in coils like a spiral: *'the coiled blackness of her nescient course'*. She follows a spiral path that is completely dark, there is no light of knowledge in it, it is *'nescient'*, unknowing. She *'toils across the sands of Time'*. It is very difficult to walk on sand, on a beach or in a desert where nothing grows, it demands a great effort. It is so hard for the Earth-Goddess to struggle across *'the sands of Time'*, where there seems to be almost no progress, no growth: a long, very difficult, very painful journey across a desert of Time.

In the first picture of the series we see the Earth Goddess in her green robe, walking with great effort, toiling forward; and the Mother has shown that on the way some things have been achieved: in her track some plants and animals have sprung up along her coiling path; but what is up ahead is not clear. She has come so far, covered so many billions of years and yet she still has so far to go in her evolutionary journey.

A Being is in her whom she hopes to know,
A Word speaks to her heart she cannot hear,
A Fate compels whose form she cannot see.

Why is she toiling *'across the sands of Time'*? It is because she is carrying within her *'a Being ... whom she hopes to know'*, and because there is *'a Word'* of command speaking to her heart; she cannot hear

it clearly, she does not know what the command is exactly, but the effort to hear and understand it is driving her forward; and she is compelled; she is driven by '*a Fate*': by some predetermination, some destiny, but she cannot see what it is; she cannot see its shape or form. She is just being driven unknowingly forward through the nescient darkness.

In her unconscious orbit through the Void
Out of her mindless depths she strives to rise,
A perilous life her gain, a struggling joy;

Her '*orbit*' is the track, that path that the earth takes as it moves around the sun, through '*the Void*': the emptiness of Space; as she is driven on her orbit around the sun the Earth Goddess is striving, struggling, making an effort to rise up out of this unconsciousness, out of '*these mindless depths*'. What has she gained so far? First, life: the earth is no longer only matter; life has come, there are living forms on the earth; but it is a '*perilous life*', constantly full of danger, it has to die in order to live again; life brings joy, but '*a struggling joy*' which does not come easily and does not last long.

A Thought that can conceive but hardly knows
Arises slowly in her and creates
The idea, the speech that labels more than it lights;

Another achievement that has come about in the course of the earth's evolutionary journey is the development of Mind. On earth, mind has evolved some power of Thought. With the power of thought we can shape ideas, we can conceive, we can imagine things, but still we know almost nothing: we know a little but only with great difficulty. We cannot really say that our mind has knowledge. That thought-power slowly arises in the earth and it creates '*idea*' and '*speech*'; these are products of the power of Thought; but our ideas and our speech do not explain anything, we

can only put labels on things. For example, in *The Life Divine* Sri Aurobindo points out that we have developed an idea and the word 'evolution', but that is just a label for an observed process or mechanism: it labels the mechanism but we do not know how or why it should happen. That is true of many of our ideas: we label something and feel satisfied. If you have one of those wonderful 'peak-experiences' which Sri Aurobindo referred to in the first section and you happen to mention it to a psychotherapist he is likely to say, 'Oh, hallucination, hallucination'. The word is just a label, but he thinks that by giving it that label he has explained everything to you.

A trembling gladness that is less than bliss
Invades from all this beauty that must die.

These poignant lines express something else that the Earth has gained on her journey: '*gladness*', an emotion, a form of delight. But this '*gladness*' is '*trembling*', it is hesitant and uncertain, there is fear in it, it is much '*less than bliss*', the ananda which lies at the origin of everything and which is our goal. Nevertheless that emotion has entered the earth consciousness, and with it the awareness of all the beauty in the world, '*all this beauty that must die*'.

Alarmed by the sorrow dragging at her feet
And conscious of the high things not yet won,
Ever she nurses in her sleepless breast
An inward urge that takes from her rest and peace.

Along with gladness comes its opposite: the Earth-Goddess feels all the sorrow which is like a weight around her ankles, '*dragging at her feet*', holding her back in her journey across the sands of Time. She is '*conscious of the high things not yet won*': she senses that there should be bliss, but this '*gladness*' is not yet bliss; she is aware of many such '*high things*' that have not yet been won, that are waiting to be won

in the course of the aeons still ahead of her on her journey. So she is always keeping in her breast '*an inward urge*' that never sleeps: it is always urging her on, pushing her forward; it does not allow her any rest or any peace. And that is why we, her children, cannot have any rest or any peace either, because we are part of this journey of the Earth, we are children of Earth and part of the Earth-consciousness, so something is always driving us forward. We are part of that struggle of the earth to find the Being within, the Fate whose form we do not know. That '*inward urge*' is always there: we can have moments of happiness, moments of relief and peace, but then something will always come to drive us further on our journey.

Ignorant and weary and invincible,
She seeks through the soul's war and quivering pain
The pure perfection her marred nature needs,
A breath of Godhead on her stone and mire.

The Earth-Goddess is still ignorant, she has not yet gained the knowledge she is seeking; and she is '*weary*', she is tired, she is worn out with struggling through the '*sands of Time*'; but at the same time she is '*invincible*': she cannot be conquered. She is divine and immortal and that '*inward urge*' towards all '*the high things not yet won*' is keeping her going. She will not give up and she will not be overcome. She is continuing her search through the '*soul's war and quivering pain*', the struggles of the soul, all the terrible pain and suffering that comes with the capacity to feel sensation and emotion; she is still seeking the '*pure perfection*' that '*her marred nature needs*'. '*Marred*' means '*spoiled*', '*wounded*' or '*injured*'. She feels her own imperfection, her own incompleteness, she needs that '*pure perfection*'; she needs '*a breath of Godhead on her stone and mire*'. '*Mire*' is the dirty mud on a city street after rain. That '*breath of Godhead*' would change it all.

In the picture that goes with the lines '*A Being is in her whom she hopes to know*' the earth is all dark with a little face. When she made the sketch, Mother wrote detailed instructions for Huta. Some light is coming. Then in the next one, the face is turned towards the light, she is turning towards that '*breath of Godhead*'. Then further developments happen. Later in the series, within the form of the earth instead of only a face, there is a small human form; then that turns towards the light; eventually it even moves outside and stands on the top of the globe turned towards the light. The series continues and each of the pictures conveys something about the Yoga of the Earth.

Before life emerged there was only sea and sky and stone. Perhaps '*mire*', that sticky mud, appears when life starts. Some scientists think that the first forms of life could only have emerged in some kind of sticky clay or mud, a form of matter that was plastic enough for living molecules to appear in it, just as much later on some forms of life developed physical properties that made it possible for mind to emerge. The dirtiness of '*mire*' is the product of the processes of decay that are an integral aspect of evolutionary life.

A faith she craves that can survive defeat,
The sweetness of a love that knows not death,
The radiance of a truth for ever sure.

This is the aspiration of the earth: she '*craves*', longs for and intensely needs a constant faith, a faith '*that can survive defeat*'. On the evolutionary journey there are so many defeats, again and again, that bring discouragement and weariness, so she is longing for a faith that can remain unshaken even by defeat. And she craves '*the sweetness of a love that knows not death*', an immortal love; and '*the radiance of a truth for ever sure*'. The earth is longing for these things. The earth needs us to become conscious, so that she can

become conscious in and with us and her aspiration can be fulfilled.

A light grows in her, she assumes a voice,
Her state she learns to read and the act she has done,
But the one needed truth eludes her grasp,
Herself and all of which she is the sign.

Now the Earth-Goddess reaches the human stage. In the Mother's sketch, within the form of the earth there is depicted a human form. It is in and through human beings that the earth '*assumes a voice*' and becomes able to express herself; through our human consciousness she '*learns to read*' her state: in human minds she can look back and see how things have been done, how things have developed. This is not possible for animals; it is only possible at the human level. We can look around and become aware of the state of the earth at the moment. When we look around we see that things are pretty terrible, for the earth especially; and we can look back at what has been done by the evolutionary force, by this aspiration, this '*lonely tongue of conscious fire*' that is driving the evolutionary process forward. But '*the one needed truth*', the essential truth that the earth needs '*eludes her grasp*': she tries to grasp it but she cannot, it is escaping. To '*elude*' means to avoid being caught. What is that '*one needed truth*'? She needs to know who she really is. She needs to know what she is the sign of, the symbol of, the meaning and significance of her existence. And that is exactly what we human beings need to know: who or what we really are and what is our significance in the whole cosmic scheme of things. The earth needs us to find that out for her, so that she can be saved, rescued, and fulfil her destiny.

The Mother has spoken very beautifully about the destiny of the Earth in one of her *Entretiens*. She said that in this vast material universe, the earth is like a concentration where the psychic being

can develop, where evolution can happen; she added that in the whole earth India is a special place, a special concentration of consciousness, where the true knowledge has been kept and shared; and all human beings, as children of the earth, have the possibility of developing and discovering the psychic being and consciously participating in the evolutionary development of Matter. There are beings in other worlds and on other planes, but they do not have that possibility: if they want to experience evolutionary progress, inner growth, they have to come to earth and take birth as human beings, and some of them do that. Earth is this special concentration on the material plane; earth has a special role. Later on in *Savitri*, Sri Aurobindo shows us that in this dense earth-matter that seems so unconscious, all the other planes are present, as if compressed here, all the possibilities of the manifestation are condensed, concentrated in matter; and that is why the evolution of and in matter is possible.

Now we have seen part of the journey of the earth, the partial achievements of life, the beginnings of mind; but the higher truth which earth really needs in order to fulfil her destiny is yet to be realised. Human beings are in a very special position in this process: because we have learned to read our state and the act that we have done, we have the possibility of choice. We can choose to collaborate with the aspiration of the earth. Most of the time we choose to live unconsciously, without thinking or doing much about it. But if we decide that the discovery of this one needed truth is what we want to dedicate our life to, then our feet are on the first steps of the path of yoga, and all the methods of psychological self-discipline that have been developed here in India over thousands of years by great consciousness researchers are available to help us on that path, and especially all that Sri Aurobindo and Mother have shared with us. We can make a start by aiming to become the best human beings that we can be: that is a good start; but I think it is

helpful to know that we are not doing this only for ourselves: we are part of the journey of the earth. The human journey is part of the journey of the earth. The most helpful thing will be if individually we can discover '*the one needed Truth*' that has the power to lift our consciousness and the Earth-consciousness up to the next evolutionary level.

An inarticulate whisper drives her steps
Of which she feels the force but not the sense;
A few rare intimations come as guides,
Immense divining flashes cleave her brain,
And sometimes in her hours of dream and muse
The truth that she has missed looks out on her
As if far off and yet within her soul.

Impelling all this forward movement of earth is a whisper driving her and us. It is '*an inarticulate whisper*', we cannot hear exactly what it is saying, but there is some urgency in it, there is something that will not allow us to rest for long. Human beings can never feel happy unless they are progressing in some way. The Earth-Goddess feels that, and all of us feel it because we are part of her. We cannot help feeling that we have to progress: we have to go forward, we cannot go back, we cannot let go. But we do not yet grasp the sense of it, the meaning of it. Why do we have to go on developing more and more? The earth feels the force of something pushing her forward but she does not know what it means. But through her human children '*a few rare intimations come as guides*': those peak experiences that we read about in the first section. Those experiences come only occasionally, they are '*rare*', but they are '*intimations*', signs and messages to guide us. Sometimes these may be very strong experiences: '*immense divining flashes cleave her brain*'. To '*cleave*' means to cut deeply. Like lightning, into the physical

brain comes some powerful flash of knowledge. '*Divining*' means knowing something without being able to say how we know it. There are people called 'water diviners' who can walk across a field and tell you where to dig for water; they have a special sense, a direct knowledge which tells them where there is water. '*Divining*' means having a true knowledge but without being able to say how it has come. Those '*divining flashes*' of intuition come into the brain like lightning. Or sometimes, '*in her hours of dream and muse*', when the mind is quiet, indrawn, some sense of the truth that she has missed, the one needed truth, '*looks out on her*' as if it is far off '*and yet within her soul*'. That is an experience one can have, the sense of a very far-away realisation which in another sense feels very close and familiar. When individual human beings have these experiences, the earth is having them: this is the stage that the earth has reached now.

A change comes near that flees from her surmise
And, ever postponed, compels attempt and hope,
Yet seems too great for mortal hope to dare.

There is a change coming near, it is approaching and yet when we try to '*surmise*', to imagine or guess what form it might take, it '*flees*', it runs away, we cannot '*surmise*', we cannot imagine or guess or conceive what that change might be. And it seems to be always '*postponed*'. It is as if human beings have always had the feeling that there is a great change possible, that there is a great change necessary, but still it is always postponed, put off to a future date; that change seems to get postponed indefinitely. But still we cannot give up, we cannot help attempting and hoping for that change even though it '*seems too great for mortal hope to dare*'. How can we dare to hope that things can change so that there will be peace on earth and human unity and all the terrible wounds our planet is

suffering from will be healed? How can we dare to hope for that? And yet we cannot help it, we are compelled to attempt and hope and work for that, because this change is coming near and we are meant to participate in it.

A vision meets her of supernal Powers
That draw her as if mighty kinsmen lost
Approaching with estranged great luminous gaze.

Our '*kinsmen*' are our relatives, the members of our family. You may have heard the expression 'kith and kin': kin are family and kith are the people that you know, your acquaintances. As the Earth consciousness evolves, she gets a vision of higher Powers that attract her and seem familiar, as if they are actually members of her own family which she has lost contact with and now they are coming near to her, '*approaching with estranged great luminous gaze*'. When someone is '*estranged*' from you, it means that you have been close but for some reason you were separated, and perhaps a lot of time has passed and now you have become like strangers: '*estranged*'. Those '*supernal Powers*' who are approaching the earth have wonderful eyes full of light: a '*great luminous gaze*'. They have been lost to her, '*estranged*', but now they are coming near again and that attracts her, draws her towards them.

Then is she moved to all that she is not
And stretches arms to what was never hers.

The Earth is '*moved*', she feels a strong emotion at the approach of these '*supernal Powers*'; her aspiration becomes stronger, she is attracted to all those things that she is not but wants to be, and she stretches her arms out to what has never belonged to the earth.

Outstretching arms to the unconscious Void,
Passionate she prays to invisible forms of Gods

Soliciting from dumb Fate and toiling Time
What most she needs, what most exceeds her scope,
A Mind unvisited by illusion's gleams,
A Will expressive of soul's deity,
A Strength not forced to stumble by its speed,
A Joy that drags not sorrow as its shade.

She '*stretches arms to what was never hers*'; but where does she stretch them out to? She stretches her arms out to the universe and the unconscious emptiness of space. With a great intensity of aspiration she addresses her prayers '*to invisible forms of Gods*'. She is '*soliciting*', begging Fate and Time to give her what she needs. '*Fate*' remains '*dumb*', it does not speak, it does not reveal itself, it does not give any message. Time is '*toiling*': all the moments seem to be filled with so much labour and effort. The earth is praying for '*what most she needs*' and what she most needs seems to be beyond her reach: it '*exceeds her scope*'. 'To exceed' means to go or be beyond; your '*scope*' is what you can reach and hold. What she needs seems to be far beyond her reach. She needs a mind that is not visited by these false gleams of illusion. In our human knowledge there is always an element of error; in whatever we think that we know something is always missing or not quite right. For the earth to fulfil her destiny, she needs a mind that is perfectly clear and pure and open to the truth, a mind that is not visited by false gleams of illusion. The picture that comes to me is of travellers in the old days who had to travel on foot and did not have maps. If at night if they had not reached their destination they might find themselves in a swamp where there was a lot of muddy water and gasses come up out of the water. In the darkness those gasses glow with phosphorescence or bio-luminescence. The poor traveller may think, 'Oh, there is a house over there' and he moves towards the light, but just lands up in a pool of mud. That is what illusions are: they are lights that

attract us, we go towards them but we might be straying off our true track. Earth also needs a 'Will' that can express the divinity of the soul. What is the Will of the soul? If we do not have a clear mind our will cannot express the deity, the divinity of the soul. And she needs '*a Strength*' that is '*not forced to stumble by its speed*'. We may have strength but if we try to go very fast, if we try to progress very quickly, we are very likely to fall, we are even '*forced to stumble*': we will fall down. We may stand up and go on again, but earth needs a strength that is '*not forced to stumble*' even if it moves very fast. The earth, and all of us, are longing for a joy that does not drag '*sorrow as its shade*'. In this world of dualities, where there is happiness there will also be unhappiness; but the earth is longing for pure ananda, the joy that does not have any shadow of sorrow following it.

For these she yearns and feels them destined hers:

Heaven's privilege she claims as her own right.

Earth is yearning for these things, intensely longing for that Mind, that Will, that Strength, that Joy; she feels that she has a right to those things, that she should have them and that she will have them. We may feel 'Oh, these things the Gods may have: that kind of Mind, that kind of Will, that kind of Strength and Joy are the exclusive privilege of celestial beings, not accessible on earth'; but there is something in the earth which says 'I too should have these things': she claims them '*as her own right*'. A '*privilege*' is something that is not allowed to everyone. These wonderful things are allowed in Heaven. Earth does not seem to be allowed to have them but she says 'They are my right: I want them, I need them'.

Just is her claim the all-witnessing Gods approve,

Clear in a greater light than reason owns:

Our intuitions are its title-deeds;

Our souls accept what our blind thoughts refuse.

'The all-witnessing Gods', the higher powers of the universe who see everything that happens in the manifestation, approve, they say 'Yes! Earth's claim to have all these things is just, she should have them.' They say that her right to have them is *'clear in a greater light than reason owns'*. If we reason, we say 'How can it be, it is impossible!' But if we see as the Gods see, with a greater light than the light of reason, then it is very clear that Earth has a right to this privilege. *'Title deeds'* are legal papers which prove that you own a house or a piece of land: if you have the title deeds you can show that it is yours and that you have the right to use it. Our intuitions, which give us a sense of the existence of those higher states, are the *'title deeds'* for earth's claim to share the privileges of heaven. Our souls accept that this is our destiny, this is our right, even though our reasonable minds tell us 'No, it is not possible. There is no use even aiming for anything like that: it is simply impossible.'

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

A *'chimaera'* is an impossible animal, a fabulous fire-spouting creature with the head of a lion, the body of a goat and a serpent's tail. The word comes from Greek and the ancient Greeks made images of that impossible animal; in English we use the word to mean something that is pure imagination and fancy, something unreal and impossible. But Sri Aurobindo tells us that these creatures which are unreal and impossible on the earth at present, are, on a higher plane, *'in Heaven'*, the *'steeds'*, the winged horses that carry the Truth. And then he says that *'the impossible'*, what we feel to be impossible, *'is God's sign of things to be'*: of what will be in the future. The Mother explained one of Sri Aurobindo's aphorisms where he says that *'the sense of the impossible is the beginning of all*

possibility'. She said that when we feel that something is impossible, it means that we are reaching for it and it seems far out of reach; but the fact that we have become aware of it and are reaching for it is the beginning of the possibility of realising it, the sign that it will be realised. What we feel to be impossible is God's sign to us that it will be realised in the future. Perhaps nothing is really impossible. There are things that we are not even aware of, so those things are impossible to us for the time being. A '*steed*' is an animal that carries you. Usually it is a horse; but here in India we say that Ganesh's vehicle, his steed, is a rat, while his brother Kartikeya rides on a peacock. These are symbolic animals, the vehicles or steeds which carry those divine powers.

But few can look beyond the present state
Or overleap this matted hedge of sense.

On earth, few can look beyond '*the present state*', the way things are at the moment. We seem to be so limited in our minds. And even fewer can leap beyond '*this matted hedge of sense*'. A '*hedge*' is a barrier of growing plants; if the plants grow very thick and thorny and entangled, we could say that the hedge is '*matted*' like the locks of those sadhus who never cut or comb their hair: it becomes so thickly matted that it would be impossible to get a comb through it. For us, our sense impressions, what the senses tell us, form a very thick, thorny, entangled, matted hedge – how can we get through it? The poet says that we cannot get through it: we have to leap over it. Only a few can do that, can go beyond the sense impressions, and so very few people can see things in '*a clearer light than reason owns*'.

All that transpires on earth and all beyond
Are parts of an illimitable plan
The One keeps in his heart and knows alone.

Here the word '*transpires*' means 'happens': everything that

happens on earth, and not only on earth but also beyond on other planes, everything that happens in the manifestation is part of the '*illimitable plan*', the plan without limits which the One, the Supreme, is keeping in his heart; he is the only one who knows what it is.

Our outward happenings have their seed within,
And even this random Fate that imitates Chance,
This mass of unintelligible results,
Are the dumb graph of truths that work unseen:
The laws of the Unknown create the known.

This is something we should always remember: that '*our outward happenings*', the small, apparently random things that happen to us, '*have their seed within*'. They have grown from some seed within us. That is why the Mother tells us never to complain about conditions or circumstances: because, she says, they reflect what you are in yourself and what you need to experience in order to reach your goal. That is true even for '*this random Fate that imitates Chance*'. About some things that happen, we think 'Why did that have to happen? How could something like that happen?' They seem completely random, unexpected and inexplicable; but here Sri Aurobindo says that these '*outward happenings*' and '*unintelligible results*' which our intelligence cannot make sense of, are a '*graph of truths that work unseen*'. A '*graph*' is a diagram used for displaying and studying data: a point is placed here and a point there and a point there. Each of those points stands for something, but they will be intelligible to you only if you know how to read the graph, only if you know what those points represent. If you know that one dimension represents population and the other dimension indicates time, then you can read the graph and get an idea of its meaning. Sri Aurobindo is telling us that '*this mass of unintelligible results*',

everything that happens, is an indication of a truth that is working unseen behind the veil. *'The laws of the Unknown create the known.'* Whatever we know, whatever we have become aware of, makes sense only according to the laws of the Unknown.

The events that shape the appearance of our lives
Are a cipher of subliminal quiverings
Which rarely we surprise or vaguely feel,
Are an outcome of suppressed realities
That hardly rise into material day:
They are born from the spirit's sun of hidden powers
Digging a tunnel through emergency.

All these events, the happenings that shape the outer appearance of our lives, are *'a cipher'*: a secret language, a code. If you want to send secret messages to somebody, for each letter of the alphabet you might put a number or some kind of sign; only a person who knows the key to your secret language will be able to read your message; to anyone else it will be *'unintelligible'*. These events form a cipher, a code that corresponds to *'subliminal quiverings'*, small movements that are *'subliminal'*, below the threshold of our awareness. Sometimes we become aware of the subliminal if we put ourselves into a very dreamy kind of state; we may become aware of some of those quiverings that are happening inside us. The outer events correspond to those *'subliminal quiverings'*; *'rarely we surprise'* them; we might occasionally become aware of them, *'or vaguely feel'* them. *'Why has this thing happened? Why did I cut my finger? Why did somebody speak to me like that?'* If you are a little bit indrawn, you might find out why. These happenings *'are an outcome of suppressed realities'*. There are so many realities which are pressed down, suppressed, they *'hardly rise into material day'*; but they are trying to rise and they can cause things to happen on the material plane. We

need to meet a certain person, so somehow from behind something pushes us, we do something unusual and meet just the person we needed to meet. All these events *'are born from the spirit's sun of hidden powers'*: within the darkness of unconscious matter, within the twilight of our mind and life, is the *'spirit's sun'* radiating consciousness and power and joy. That *'sun'* with its *'hidden powers'* is *'digging a tunnel'* out of the unconscious and the subconscious, *'through emergency'*. This word *'Emergency'* makes us think of the Emergency Room in a hospital, or the Emergency Services which we call when something goes terribly wrong and something needs to be done about it very quickly. But we can see that it is also connected with *'emerging'*, coming out. The *'hidden powers'* of the *'spirit's sun'* are gradually emerging in the course of evolution; below the surface of things there is a dense mass of everything that has yet to unfold; *'the spirit's sun of hidden powers'* is *'digging a tunnel'* through all that mass of potential *'emergency'*, and as a result things are born on the surface, in the material world.

But who shall pierce into the cryptic gulf
And learn what deep necessity of the soul
Determined casual deed and consequence?

But who can see that? Who can look below the surface and see what is emerging? Who can *'pierce'* the mystery? To *'pierce'* means to make a hole through something. Who can drive a hole into that *'cryptic gulf'*, that deep space full of mysteries, and see the spirit's sun of hidden powers digging the way out into the light of material day? *'Cryptic'* means mysterious, complex and difficult to understand. Only if we can pierce into that deep mysterious place can we *'learn what deep necessity of the soul'* has determined the things that we do or experience and their consequences. We do something just like that, we do not know why; and sometimes

important consequences follow, afterwards we may think, 'Oh, I wish I had not done that'; or we may find that unexpectedly a great blessing comes to us. That is because of some deep need of our soul, which our limited surface minds do not know anything about. The poet asks 'Who can look into the heart of the mystery and find out the reason why this or that *'casual deed and consequence'* happened?'

Absorbed in a routine of daily acts,
Our eyes are fixed on an external scene;
We hear the crash of the wheels of Circumstance
And wonder at the hidden cause of things.

We are absorbed in our everyday routine, and our attention and our energy is absorbed by it: '*Our eyes are fixed on an external scene*'. But sometimes unexpected things happen to disturb our routine; then '*we hear the crash of the wheels of Circumstance*': there seems to be some kind of engine or machinery moving unexpectedly and then we wonder, 'What is the hidden cause of things? Why did that have to happen? Why did that particular thing happen at that moment?' They seem to be casual acts but they may have huge consequences; and only the prophet or the seer who can look behind the veil can see why this or that was necessary, why it had to happen.

Yet a foreseeing Knowledge might be ours,
If we could take our spirit's stand within,
If we could hear the muffled daemon voice.

'*Foreseeing*' means seeing into the future, seeing things before they happen. Sometimes wise people have 'foresight' which is not exactly vision, but they can see that since circumstances are like this, such and such a course of events is likely to follow; but here Sri Aurobindo means more than that. He speaks of a '*foreseeing Knowledge*' with a capital 'K': a true knowledge, not just the ability to think 'this is probably what might happen', but a knowledge that

can look forward and see 'This is the thing that will happen'. We could have that kind of '*foreseeing Knowledge*', '*if we could take our spirit's stand within*'. With the ordinary mind we cannot have that '*foreseeing Knowledge*', but if we were identified with our spirit within we could have it. Another way that it could come to us would be '*if we could hear the muffled daemon voice*.' The word '*daemon*' comes from the same ancient Greek root as the word '*demon*', which means an evil spirit or a devil; but for the ancient Greeks it meant simply a spirit, not necessarily a good one or a bad one. In this connection we remember the great philosopher Sophocles, who used to say 'My daemon tells me to do this, so I have to do it.' He had some guidance from an inner voice, the voice of the daemon, the spirit within. But for most of us that voice is '*muffled*' as if there is a hand over its mouth, or it is speaking through a mask or a heavy covering. We cannot hear clearly what the inner voice is telling us and usually we are not listening anyway. We are turned outwards; we are not listening to what that inner voice might have to tell us. But if we could hear it and paid attention to it, then we could have '*foreseeing Knowledge*'.

Too seldom is the shadow of what must come
Cast in an instant on the secret sense
Which feels the shock of the invisible,
And seldom in the few who answer give
The mighty process of the cosmic Will
Communicates its image to our sight,
Identifying the world's mind with ours.

'*Seldom*' is the opposite of '*often*'. A blue moon does not happen often, it happens seldom, rarely. Sri Aurobindo says that it happens too seldom, too rarely, that '*the shadow of what must come*', the shadow of some approaching future event, is cast '*in an instant*', for

a moment, on the secret inner sense '*which feels the shock of the invisible*'. The Mother told a story about how once she was walking in the mountains in the south of France with some children, some young people, on a very, very narrow path high up in the mountains: a narrow path with a big drop on one side and a sheer mountain face on the other. Approaching a bend where she could not see around the mountainside, she felt a shock, a warning that something is around the corner. When she stepped carefully around the corner there was a poisonous snake on the path. Because she was prepared for it, nothing happened: she did not make a noise or move suddenly and the snake went away quietly. She had felt the shadow of what was going to come which is felt by '*the secret sense*'. Because she was very conscious within, she felt '*the shock of the invisible*', so she was prepared and nothing bad happened. But here the poet says that this happens '*too seldom*', not often enough, because we are not alert enough. There are a few people who respond to that shock of the future, to what is coming. But even among them, only very rarely will anyone get a clear picture of the whole '*mighty process of the cosmic Will*'. A few people might sense 'Oh, there is some danger around the corner, be careful'; but to have a clear picture, a map of the whole '*process of the cosmic Will*' communicating '*its image to our sight*' so that our individual mind gets identified with the mind of the cosmos or the world – that happens very, very rarely.

Our range is fixed within the crowded arc
Of what we observe and touch and thought can guess
And rarely dawns the light of the Unknown
Waking in us the prophet and the seer.

'Our range' is what we can see, what we can feel: it is limited, fixed '*within the crowded arc*' which our senses reveal to us. An '*arc*' is part

of the circumference of a circle. Our senses allow us a very limited range, a limited horizon; and within that limited horizon so much is going on. It is crowded with all the sense-impressions '*of what we observe and touch and thought can guess*'. We are so occupied with all that, '*absorbed*' as he said, in our '*routine of daily acts*', that only very '*rarely dawns*' some gleam of '*the light of the Unknown*' which wakes up in us the capacity to be a prophet, to see what will happen, to be a seer, to know the future course of things.

The outward and the immediate are our field,
The dead past is our background and support;
Mind keeps the soul prisoner, we are slaves to our acts;
We cannot free our gaze to reach wisdom's sun.

The '*outward*', the things and happenings that are outside us and '*the immediate*', the things that are just under our nose and that we have to deal with today and tomorrow – this is our field of action. Our consciousness is supported by what has been in the past. That is a '*dead past*' but it is '*our background and our support*': we follow our habits, we follow patterns that have been fixed by the past. Also we are mental beings and Mind is keeping our souls imprisoned: '*we are slaves to our acts*': we do things and then we have to take the consequences of them; or some force acts through us and we cannot help it. Because of all these things, our consciousness is not free, '*we cannot free our gaze*', we cannot get our power of vision free from all these influences so as to be able to see clearly; we cannot reach the full light of wisdom which lies beyond our limited range.

Inheritor of the brief animal mind,
Man, still a child in Nature's mighty hands,
In the succession of the moments lives;
To a changing present is his narrow right;
His memory stares back at a phantom past,

The future flees before him as he moves;
He sees imagined garments, not a face.

This is our human state: Man is still a child, he is not yet mature, he has to grow so much before he will become what he is meant to be. Nature is still moulding him. As human beings, we have inherited something from the *'dead past'*: *'the brief animal mind'* has been passed on to us. Animals do not remember much, they have their experiences and their habits, they do not look at the future; the *'brief animal mind'* keeps them safe in a way, and we are still carrying that mind in us. Because of that we live *'in the succession of the moments'*: one moment after another in time. Our consciousness has only a *'narrow right'*, a limited right to *'a changing present'*: here we are in this moment and the next moment we are a little bit further on. *'Memory stares back at a phantom past'*. We remember things, but cannot fully re-experience them; a *'phantom'* is a ghost of something that has been, that is dead. The future is always running away from us; as we move forward in time, or as time moves past us, the future is always ahead. Man *'sees imagined garments, not a face'*. We do not see the face of the truth, we see different kinds of robes that we imagine are what truth looks like; we do not see the truth as it really is, only these *'imagined garments'* that hide truth from us.

Armed with a limited precarious strength,
He saves his fruits of work from adverse chance.

'Armed' means having something to protect yourself with: a stick or a sword or a gun. The human being is armed with only a limited strength, and the limited strength that we have can be lost at any time, it is *'precarious'*: unsure, unreliable, uncertain and may fail us at any moment. Human beings want to be armed because they are always struggling to save their *'fruits of work from adverse chance'*. A person works hard, makes efforts, naturally he wants the results of

his efforts and he is always trying to protect his gains, because all the time it seems that forces in the universe – '*adverse chance*', misfortune – are coming to take away the fruits of his efforts. He uses his limited precarious strength trying to hold on to what he has won.

A struggling ignorance is his wisdom's mate:
He waits to see the consequence of his acts,
He waits to weigh the certitude of his thoughts,
He knows not what he shall achieve or when;
He knows not whether at last he shall survive,
Or end like the mastodon and the sloth
And perish from the earth where he was king.

This '*He*' is Man, the human being. We always have to wait to see the consequence of what we have done: was it a good thing to do? Did we make the right choice or not? We cannot tell in advance for sure. Since we are thinking beings we might form theories about the way that things work in our world, but we have to wait and see whether our theories were correct. We cannot immediately assess how correct our ideas are, we have to wait '*to weigh the certitude*' of our thoughts. We do not know what we are going to achieve. We can try, we can aim at things, but we do not know whether we will succeed or not. We do not know when we might succeed, and we do not even know whether perhaps the whole human race is going to become extinct. We know that all of us individually have to die, but what about humanity in general? Nowadays when we look around at the world we may feel it is rather unlikely that we shall survive. We may '*end like the mastodon and the sloth*'. These are extinct animals. The mastodons were huge animals like elephants with lots of long hair. They lived up in the northern parts of the planet. Now sometimes skeletons of mastodons are found frozen in

the permafrost, so we know that they existed, but none of us has ever seen a live one. There are still sloths in South America; they are called sloths because they move so slowly (*'sloth'* means *'laziness'*). They have long hair and big eyes, with their long claws they dig into the trees and get out grubs and insects; but long ago there were giant sloths; that is what Sri Aurobindo is referring to here: *'the mastodon and the sloth'* are ancient species that are now extinct. Like them, maybe Man will *'perish from the earth where he was king'*. At the moment, humanity is the ruling species, but how long will it last? We do not know and cannot foretell what the fate of the human race will be.

He is ignorant of the meaning of his life,
He is ignorant of his high and splendid fate.

We do not know the meaning of our life, why are we here, what we are supposed to do with our lives; and we have no idea at all about the *'high and splendid fate'* that is intended for the human race, the role that the human race is really meant to play in the forward movement of evolution. Sri Aurobindo did his best to make us aware of the meaning of our lives and of our *'high and splendid fate'*, but humanity as a whole is still ignorant of these things.

Only the Immortals on their deathless heights
Dwelling beyond the walls of Time and Space,
Masters of living, free from the bonds of Thought,
Who are overseers of Fate and Chance and Will
And experts of the theorem of world-need,
Can see the Idea, the Might that change Time's course,
Come maned with light from undiscovered worlds,
Hear, while the world toils on with its deep blind heart,
The galloping hooves of the unforeseen event,
Bearing the superhuman Rider, near

And, impassive to earth's din and startled cry,
Return to the silence of the hills of God;
As lightning leaps, as thunder sweeps, they pass
And leave their mark on the trampled breast of Life.

'Only the Immortals', the deathless beings who live on the higher levels of existence, who dwell *'beyond the walls of Time and Space'* are *'Masters of living'*; they are not bound, tied up by thought in the way that we are. They are *'overseers'*: from their heights they can scan from above all the factors of *'Fate and Chance and Will'*; and they are *'experts'* in the *'theorem'*, the equation, of *'world-need'*. They can see the *'Idea'*, the creative Idea and power that can change the course of Time, in the form of a powerful horse *'maned with light'*. The *'mane'* is the long hair that a horse or a lion grows on its head. This Idea, this Might comes like a horse, a powerful galloping energy. Its mane is not hair but light, *'light from undiscovered worlds'*. The Immortals see that great Idea and that power coming; while the world is just toiling on, going on with its effort and its *'deep blind heart'* they hear its *'galloping hooves'*: that *'Idea'* and *'Might'* are coming quickly like a fast-running horse, *'the unforeseen event'* that is approaching. Riding that *'unforeseen event'* is a superhuman power. It comes near to the earth. It does not care that its passage gives the earth a shock. Suddenly on earth there is a *'din'*, a loud noise, there is a *'startled cry'* of shock, because things here get very disturbed when the *'unforeseen event'* approaches. It passes close to the earth and then it returns, it goes back *'to the silence of the hills of God'*. We only experience the shock and the din and the cry and we do not know where it has come from; but the *'Immortals'* on their heights could see it coming; they see it come and they see it return to where it came from: *'the hills of God'*. The event and its rider come like a great storm, like lightning, like thunder: they pass and they *'leave their mark on the trampled breast of Life'* as if the hooves of a great

horse have left a mark on the life of the earth. Great revolutions happen on the earth, we have no idea why. Some powerful creative Idea has passed with a '*superhuman Rider*' guiding it: one needs to be immortal, seated beyond space and time, to see all that happening.

Above the world the world-creators stand,
In the phenomenon see its mystic source.

There they are on their heights, the ones who create the world; so they can see why things happen, how they happen, because they can see the '*mystic source*', the origin from which everything flowed. A '*phenomenon*' is a thing or event or appearance.

These heed not the deceiving outward play,
They turn not to the moment's busy tramp,
But listen with the still patience of the Unborn
For the slow footsteps of far Destiny
Approaching through huge distances of Time,
Unmarked by the eye that sees effect and cause,
Unheard mid the clamour of the human plane.

These '*world-creators*', these '*Immortals*' do not pay any attention to this '*outward play*', this deceptive, '*deceiving outward play*'. We interpret the outer appearances and happenings, but in fact their true significance does not appear on the surface, in the '*outward play*', so they do not '*heed*' it or pay any attention to it. They do not turn to listen to the '*moment's busy tramp*', the heavy tread of one moment after another like an army on the march. Instead, they are listening '*with the still patience of the Unborn*': they are '*unborn*', they do not have to die, time does not have the same meaning for them as it has for us; so they can be very still and very quiet, very patient. They are listening '*for the slow footsteps of far Destiny*': the approach of what is destined to happen, what is fated to happen. It is coming

nearer and nearer, *'approaching through huge distances of Time'*: not just thousands or millions of years but aeons. We do not notice those *'slow footsteps of far Destiny'* with our senses and minds that see effect and cause. We believe that each thing happens as an effect of something else, its cause. We are fixed in these small moments, we do not notice the approach of Destiny and we do not hear those *'slow footsteps'* coming nearer, because there is so much *'clamour'* on the human plane: all the noise that we human beings are making, with our words, our radios, our music and our TV, our machines and our bombs. Far beyond all that clamour, the *'slow footsteps'* of the destined future are quietly approaching, coming nearer and nearer.

Attentive to an unseen Truth they seize
A sound as of invisible augur wings,
Voices of an unplumbed significance,
Mutterings that brood in the core of Matter's sleep.

The *'Immortals'*, the *'world creators'* are *'attentive'*. While we are absorbed in our daily routines they are *'attentive to an unseen Truth'*; so they can catch *'a sound as of invisible augur wings'*. Sometimes in the autumn when birds are migrating southwards, in the quiet of the night you may hear them passing, the very special sound of invisible wings. Here the poet says that the wings that the Immortals hear passing are *'augur wings'*. An *'augury'* is an omen, a sign. The ancient Romans had priests who would catch birds and open them up and look at their entrails, their inner organs, and then foretell the future on the basis of what they found there. These *'augurs'* would say that the signs were good or bad. I think that in modern Italian, we say *'auguri'* meaning *'best wishes'* for the New Year, because we want good things to happen, but an *'augury'* can indicate either good or bad things to happen in the future. The

sound of those '*invisible augur wings*' signifies something meaningful which is going to happen. The Immortals also hear voices, whose meaning is '*unplumbed*', which is like 'unfathomed': the profound meaning expressed by those voices cannot be measured. The immortal world-creators also hear other sounds: '*mutterings that brood in the core of Matter's sleep*'. Deep within the very heart of the sleep of matter there is some movement, some sound, some indistinct speaking that is going on. '*Muttering*' can also mean 'complaining' or 'grumbling'; the voices that are brooding in the very heart of Matter may not be very happy ones. The '*Immortals*' can hear those faint muffled sounds.

In the heart's profound audition they can catch
The murmurs lost by Life's uncaring ear,
A prophet-speech in Thought's omniscient trance.

'*Audition*' here means listening or hearing. In the deep listening of the heart, they can catch '*murmurs*' of voices that Life's ear does not catch because it does not care to pay the attention needed to hear those sounds. They can also hear the '*prophet-speech*' that comes in that all-knowing trance when Thought falls silent: then a '*prophet-speech*' can be heard, that tells about the future.

Above the illusion of the hopes that pass,
Behind the appearance and the overt act,
Behind this clock-work Chance and vague surmise,
Amid the wrestle of force, the trampling feet,
Across the cries of anguish and of joy,
Across the triumph, fighting and despair,
They watch the Bliss for which earth's heart has cried
On the long road which cannot see its end
Winding undetected through the sceptic days
And to meet it guide the unheedful moving world.

This is what those immortals, those world-creators, are doing. They are watching *'the Bliss for which earth's heart has cried'*. The earth, and all of us, are longing for Bliss. All the other things that we long for are things that we think will bring us bliss. On the *'long road'* of the earth through time towards the fulfilment of the manifestation, this long road *'which cannot see its end'*, all the time there has been this longing for Bliss, and the Bliss has been coming towards us. The World-Creators see that Bliss, they see it *'Winding undetected'*: nobody else has detected it. When you *'detect'* something you discover it, find it out. No-one has detected that bliss which has been there all the time, *'winding undetected through the sceptic days'*. A *'sceptic'* is a person who finds it difficult to believe anything, a person who questions and doubts everything. If we do not experience bliss, we find it difficult to believe that it really exists, even though our hearts are crying out for it all the time; so the days of earth-time have been *'sceptic days'*. But all the time the Bliss has been there *'undetected'*, and the World-Creators have been watching it, and guiding the world to meet it – even though the world is *'unheedful'*: it is not paying attention and does not notice that those higher powers are guiding the world towards the Bliss that we are all longing for. That is what is happening. So now we can go back and look at the lines at the beginning of the sentence, which tell us how the Immortals are seeing the Bliss on its way. They see it from *'above the illusion of the hopes that pass'*; we have so many hopes that things will change and become better, but our human hopes are illusory; they are based on wishful thinking. Bliss is above all those illusory human hopes that pass; it is hiding undetected *'behind the appearance and the overt act'*: all the surface appearances that we see, and all the things that happen or are done on the surface, the obvious things. *'Overt'* is the opposite of *'covert'*; it means *'open'*, *'obvious'*, while *'covert'* means *'secret'*, *'hidden'*. The Bliss is hidden

'behind this clock-work Chance and vague surmise'. 'Clock-work' implies 'mechanical', not living. Nowadays of course we have digital watches, but for several hundred years clock-work was the ultimate achievement of technology, with all the gears and levers and springs that made up a machine that could precisely measure time, and the principles of clock-work were applied to make many other kinds of machines. Sri Aurobindo is saying that the play of chance in our universe seems to be run by some kind of automatic machinery rather than by any conscious will, as if at the beginning of creation something was wound up like one of those clock-work toys which the older ones amongst us remember from our childhood, and it is just going on running the universe in a mindless, mechanical way. On the one hand there is a mechanical play of Chance, on the other a *'vague surmise'*. A *'surmise'* is a kind of guess. We look around, we gather hints and clues about the universe around us, and we think 'Oh ... it might be like that ...'; but we can only guess or suppose, we do not really know anything for sure. The Bliss is hidden above and behind and even in the midst of *'the wrestle of force, the trampling feet'*: all the strife and struggle and clash that goes on in our world; *'amid'* means 'in the middle of' or 'amongst'. Those Immortals and World-Creators are watching the Bliss above and behind and amid the appearances of the world, and they watch it coming *'across the cries of anguish and of joy, / Across the triumph, fighting and despair'*: these things are in the foreground of our life, but the immortals can see across all those surface dramas and sufferings to the Bliss, *'winding undetected'* beyond all these happenings, and they guide the *'unheedful moving world'* towards it, to meet it. *'Unheedful'*, *'unheeding'* and *'heedless'* all mean 'not paying attention' 'not noticing'. The world is going on its way and not paying any attention to the subtle signs that give hints about the future; but the *'Immortals'* are keeping watch and seeing and

hearing all these things and guiding the earth towards a wonderful fulfilment. We are not aware of all these things, but higher powers are guiding the earth towards its true destiny and because of their care and intervention the earth's true destiny is sure to be fulfilled. That is what comes next:

Thus will the masked Transcendent mount his throne.

The '*Transcendent*' is the Divine beyond all limitations. He inhabits all the forms of the world but is not bound or limited by them in any way. He is hidden from us by these forms, as if he is wearing a mask, a disguise. At the moment, Nature is ruling the world through her forms and processes. The Transcendent is the true ruler of Nature, but for the time being he is allowing her to follow her ways; but a time will come when he will '*mount his throne*': a '*throne*' is the high seat that a king or emperor uses, his ceremonial seat. Only the ruler sits on the throne. In the Ramayana, when Rama asks his brother Bharata to rule in his place while he is in exile, Bharata will not sit on the throne that belongs to the true king; instead he places Rama's sandals on the throne, to show that he is still the true ruler even though he has not yet mounted his throne; one day Rama will come and take his true place and rule. One day, with the help of the immortal world-creators, the masked Transcendent will mount his throne. This is how it will happen:

When darkness deepens strangling the earth's breast
And man's corporeal mind is the only lamp,
As a thief's in the night shall be the covert tread
Of one who steps unseen into his house.

This is Sri Aurobindo's prophecy for the future of the earth. He says that this will happen when the darkness of ignorance gets even worse, when it '*deepens*', becomes deeper, so deep that the earth is strangled by it and can hardly breathe, at a time when '*man's*

corporeal mind is the only lamp', when there is no other form of light than the most physical mind. There are higher levels of mind and we can reach them sometimes, but in that darkest hour those higher levels are not available: the '*corporeal mind is the only lamp*'. Secretly, like a thief creeping in at night, the Transcendent will enter his house, this material world which is really his own home.

A Voice ill-heard shall speak, the soul obey,
A Power into mind's inner chamber steal,
A charm and sweetness open life's closed doors
And beauty conquer the resisting world,
The Truth-Light capture Nature by surprise,
A stealth of God compel the heart to bliss
And earth grow unexpectedly divine.

'A Voice', a divine voice will speak; that Voice will not be heard very clearly, but nevertheless the soul within will respond and '*obey*'. With the consent of the soul, a divine Power will '*steal*' into the inner chamber of the mind. Here the word '*steal*' means to creep in unnoticed, just as the dawn-light steals in so silently and gradually that we cannot exactly say when it arrives. Then '*a charm and sweetness*' shall '*open life's closed doors*'. First the soul responds, then the inner mind, and then life. Life responds to '*charm*' and '*sweetness*'; otherwise its doors are closed, it does not respond to the divine touch because it is so occupied with all its dramas, sensations, ambitions and anxieties; but that divine charm and sweetness will make it open its doors and welcome in the Lord. In the physical, a divine power of beauty shall '*conquer the resisting world*'. The world resists the Divine, it wants to go on in its old accustomed way, but beauty has a great power of attraction and influence; it will be able to overcome all the resistances of the world. In the early days of Auroville the Mother gave a message for the

opening of the Last School building. She wrote, 'In the physical, the Divine manifests as beauty.' It is beauty that will '*conquer the resisting world*'. Suddenly '*the Truth-Light*' shall '*capture Nature by surprise*': suddenly, unexpectedly, Nature will understand the highest truth of all that she has been doing. '*A stealth of God*' shall '*compel the heart to bliss*'. '*Stealth*' is connected with 'stealing', in both the senses of the word. If you want to steal something you will have to practice '*stealth*': you will have to creep in secretly and take what you want very quietly so that you are not noticed. Very secretly God will come in like a thief in the night and force the heart to overcome all its resistances and feel bliss, ananda. He will give us no choice, he will '*compel the heart to bliss*'. And when all these things happen, when the masked Transcendent mounts his throne and the soul and mind and heart and even the physical respond, earth shall '*grow unexpectedly divine*'. When we least expect it, when darkness deepens, strangling earth's breast, and man's corporeal mind is the only lamp, all this will happen. It is Sri Aurobindo's wonderful assurance and promise to us. In the darkest hour, the Supreme, the Transcendent will enter his house and mount his throne, the Truth-Light will capture Nature by surprise, and earth shall grow unexpectedly divine.

Then:

In Matter shall be lit the spirit's glow,
In body and body kindled the sacred birth;
Night shall awake to the anthem of the stars,
The days become a happy pilgrim march,
Our will a force of the Eternal's power,
And thought the rays of a spiritual sun.

In this dull dense unconscious Matter '*the spirit's glow*', the flame of the spirit will be lit; and that will be communicated from one body

to the next. 'To kindle' means to light a fire. The flame of the spirit, of the transforming '*sacred birth*' will pass from one body to the next by a kind of contagion and they will be reborn into a new divine life. '*Night shall awake to the anthem of the stars*': when Sri Aurobindo mentions '*Night*' like this he does not mean the physical night we experience when our part of the earth is turned away from the sun, but the psychological darkness when the being or the world is turned away from the Divine Light and Truth and Energy which the sun represents. When we cannot see the sun, we can sometimes see stars; the stars are really suns, or even galaxies, gatherings of billions of suns: we see them as tiny points of light in the dark night sky, but really they are powerful sources of Light and Energy, just like our sun which provides all the energy in our solar system. The stars are symbols of the many truths, the infinite sources of truth. So when this moment of transformation comes and earth grows unexpectedly divine, the night of our ignorant consciousness will become aware of all those suns of truth that are lighting up the entire universe: '*Night shall awake to the anthem of the stars*': an '*anthem*' is a sacred song, a song of worship offered to the Divine. All those powers of truth are singing together their chant of worship to the Supreme, and our ignorant night will become aware of the universal sacred song which is going on all the time without us hearing it. Then all our days will become '*a happy pilgrim march*'. When we are on a pilgrimage, even if difficulties come we face them gladly because we are on our way to a Darshan of the Divine. When that great moment comes, each day will be taking us a stage further in the great journey we are all making towards our sacred goal. In fact it is like that even now, but now we are not aware of it: when the soul and the mind and the heart, and even our Matter, wake up to the call of the transcendent Lord, we shall experience it like that always. Our will, which at present is weak and ignorant, will

become '*a force of the Eternal's power*'; and our thought which is now so dark and confused will become '*the rays of a spiritual sun*'. This is the fulfilment towards which the earth is moving, her intended destiny.

A few shall see what none yet understands;
God shall grow up while the wise men talk and sleep;
For man shall not know the coming till its hour
And belief shall be not till the work is done.

Nobody yet understands about this transformation; but Sri Aurobindo assures us that it will come, and that a few people will be aware of it happening, but only a few: '*God shall grow up while the wise men talk and sleep*', the wise teachers and preachers will be busy teaching and preaching, or they will be sleeping, so that they do not even notice that God has revealed himself at last. Human beings will not know anything about this coming of the Transcendent to mount his throne until it actually happens; and until the work has been done and the change comes about, no one will believe in it; only when the transformation has happened, they will have to believe. Mother loved these last three lines: she has quoted them and pointed them out more often than any other lines in the poem. This wonderful passage brings us to the close of the second section of this canto.

End of Section 2

Section 3, lines 342-520

A Consciousness that knows not its own truth,
A vagrant hunter of misleading dawns,
Between the being's dark and luminous ends
Moves here in a half-light that seems the whole:
An interregnum in Reality
Cuts off the integral Thought, the total Power;
It circles or stands in a vague interspace,
Doubtful of its beginning and its close,
Or runs upon a road that has no end;
Far from the original Dusk, the final Flame
In some huge void Inconscience it lives,
Like a thought persisting in a wide emptiness.

After giving us a wonderful promise at the close of the previous section, Sri Aurobindo now goes into some detail about where we are now. He says, 'Look at the earth: the earth is dominated by a consciousness that does not know the truth of itself.' The consciousness that is dominant on the earth at present is the mental consciousness. It is always in search of something. It is like a 'hunter'; but it is not a very skilled tracker; it is '*a vagrant hunter*', wandering here and there. It is looking for light, but it follows '*misleading dawns*': not the true divine light, but gleams that are always leading it astray. It wanders here and there and does not find its way. Here in the material universe it is moving between the dark end of being, the inconscient, and the luminous end, the spiritual consciousness; it is wandering somewhere in the middle, in a '*half-light*', a twilight of half-knowledge; but to it, that half-light seems to be '*the whole*'. The mental consciousness is not inconscient nor is it the full spiritual consciousness; it is moving in the half-light

of ignorance and thinks that this is all there is. This is the present state of the *'earth-mind'*. Then he says that *'an interregnum in Reality / Cuts off the integral Thought, the total Power'*. There is a gap, an *'interregnum'*. An *'interregnum'* occurs when there is a gap in a line of rulers: one ruler dies and the next one is perhaps not born yet, or is only a child and too young to rule; it is a time when there is a gap between two rulers, an *'interregnum'*. *'An interregnum in Reality'* has cut the present *'earth-mind'* off from integral knowledge and integral power; instead it is circling or standing in a *'vague interspace'*: a space in between. It does not know about its beginning; it does not know about its end; it is *'far from the original Dusk'*, the original morning twilight at the beginning of creation, and it is far from *'the final Flame'*, the fire or the blaze of light that will end it. This consciousness seems to live in a huge empty universe that is totally without consciousness. This ignorant mental consciousness we live in, which seems to be the ultimate achievement of evolution, appears to be a power of thought that is persisting for some unknown reason in the midst of an inconscient universe, *'in a wide emptiness'*.

As if an unintelligible phrase
Suggested a million renderings to the Mind,
It lends a purport to a random world.

In old manuscripts we might find a phrase that we cannot understand, which seems *'unintelligible'*; then we may think, 'Oh, with many copyings some mistake has come in here – what did it say originally, what did it mean?' One scholar suggests that it means one thing and another suggests that it means something different: the *'unintelligible phrase'* suggests to the mind different *'renderings'*: different interpretations. Also we have so-called *'nonsense poetry'* in which most of the words are invented; the

whole poem is completely '*unintelligible*', but the forms and arrangement of the words suggest possible meanings, '*renderings*'; yet we can never be sure. Sri Aurobindo says that the universe is like this: it is mysterious and '*unintelligible*', but still it suggests to the mind many different possible interpretations, '*a million renderings*' that give us the feeling that we do understand something: the ignorant consciousness lends a meaning, '*a purport*', to this '*random world*' which may after all have no meaning at all.

A conjecture leaning upon doubtful proofs,
A message misunderstood, a thought confused
Missing its aim is all that it can speak
Or a fragment of the universal word.

Because it is in this state, this consciousness can only give a theory, a '*conjecture*', a guess. Scientists form a theory, a conjecture, on the basis of some evidence that supports it; but if the evidence is not clear and the '*proofs*' are doubtful then that conjecture is not much help: '*A message misunderstood, a thought confused / Missing its aim is all that it can speak*'. The universe seems to be carrying a message, trying to say something, but we cannot understand what it is saying; a thought seems to be there but it is confused and cannot express what it is aiming to convey; or maybe what it is saying is only a part of the message, '*a fragment of the universal word*'. The '*universal word*' is the OM; this sound represents the original vibration which has given rise to the universe. The pundits say that this word is made up of three sounds or syllables: A, U and M. In the next sentence, Sri Aurobindo says more about this:

It leaves two giant letters void of sense
While without sanction turns the middle sign
Carrying an enigmatic universe,
As if a present without future or past

Repeating the same revolution's whirl

Turned on its axis in its own Inane.

There are three giant letters, A, U and M. The present earth-consciousness separates '*the middle sign*', leaving the two others '*void of sense*', without meaning. There are two giant letters representing the beginning and the end, and there is the middle one, turning around and around as if it had no connection with the other two. Because it is standing alone it has no '*sanction*': there is no authority or support for its existence; and yet here it is, '*carrying an enigmatic universe*'. This universe is '*enigmatic*', like a riddle: we cannot understand its meaning. We do not know the future of the material universe or its past; we see it always turning and turning in the same way: '*repeating the same revolution's whirl*', circling round and round, turning '*on its axis in its own Inane*': its own meaninglessness. Sri Aurobindo is giving an image of the strange state of ignorance that the earth consciousness is in at the moment, this consciousness '*that knows not its own truth*'.

Thus is the meaning of creation veiled;

For without context reads the cosmic page:

Its signs stare at us like an unknown script,

As if appeared screened by a foreign tongue

Or code of splendour signs without a key

A portion of a parable sublime.

As a result, the meaning of creation is '*veiled*', hidden. When we look at the universe, when we try to read '*the cosmic page*', when we try to understand what the universe is telling us, we see it '*without a context*'. When people ask me 'What does this word mean?' in order to answer I always need to see the word in its '*context*', to see the other words in the sentence, and the other sentences around it. With the ordinary earth consciousness, we see the material universe as

the scientists show it to us, the wonderful photographs from the Hubble telescope for example. But we see it without a context: we see *'its signs'*, all the wonderful appearances of Nature, but we do not know what they mean. It is as if its message is written in a script that we do not know, or a foreign language, or disguised by a *'code'*. Secret services use codes to communicate so that their messages can only be read and understood by those who have the key to the code. The universe is disguised in a code of *'splendour signs'*: its signs are powerful and beautiful, yet we do not have the key to their meaning, so we cannot *'read the cosmic page'*, we do not understand what is written there. It seems to be *'a portion of a parable sublime'*, part of a story which has a glorious inner meaning. Since we do not know its context, we do not know where it fits, how it begins, how it ends, or what it means.

It wears to the perishable creature's eyes
The grandeur of a useless miracle;
Wasting itself that it may last awhile,
A river that can never find its sea,
It runs through life and death on an edge of Time;
A fire in the Night is its mighty action's blaze.

We human beings are *'perishable creatures'* who are going to die; to our eyes the universe seems to wear *'the grandeur of a useless miracle'*, vast and beautiful and miraculous, but useless, without a purpose. To our earthly understanding it seems as if the universe is running down, *'wasting itself that it may last awhile'*. That is what the scientists tell us: that everything is running down and eventually it is all going to end. There is an English proverb which says that if you burn your candle at both ends, it will not last a long time, but while it is burning it gives a lovely light. The universe looks something like that. It is wasting itself so that this glorious *'grandeur of a useless*

miracle' can last for some time, but it does not seem to be going anywhere: it is flowing on and on like a river, but where is the sea that it is flowing to? The river seems to be flowing '*through life and death on an edge of Time*' with the past and the future as its banks: there is this narrow strip of '*Now*' that it is running through, but where is it going and why? The '*mighty action*' of the universe is so immense that we cannot grasp it with our minds. It is churning and burning and moving like '*a fire in the Night*', the Night of unconsciousness; it is blazing, full of light and heat and energy, but what is it all for?

This is our deepest need to join once more
What now is parted, opposite and twain,
Remote in sovereign spheres that never meet
Or fronting like far poles of Night and Day.

Sri Aurobindo says that what we really need to do in order to understand the universe that we are part of, is to bring together '*what now is parted, opposite and twain*': we see things as separated, opposite to each other, and '*twain*' which means 'split in two'; we experience the duality, the separation and oppositeness of everything in our universe, as if there are always two poles that can never meet, never become one. Like Night and Day there are so many dualities: hot and cold, good and evil, truth and falsehood, left and right, pleasure and pain, life and death, Soul and Nature, Matter and Spirit ... the list goes on and on. The way that we see and experience our environment is such that our minds can never say 'yes' to one thing without seeming to be saying 'no' to its opposite. Each is ruling in its own sphere but they never meet; or they are opposing each other like opposite poles of the same thing, like '*Night and Day*'. Sri Aurobindo says that it is '*our deepest need*' to bring them together, make the connection, and rediscover the

oneness that unites them.

We must fill the immense lacuna we have made,
Re-wed the closed finite's lonely consonant
With the open vowels of Infinity,
A hyphen must connect Matter and Mind,
The narrow isthmus of the ascending soul:

A '*lacuna*' is an empty space where something is missing. We need to fill up that gap that we have made with our consciousness by separating one element of the cosmic Word from the other two. We need to '*re-wed*', bring back together all the letters of the universal word, reuniting '*the closed finite's lonely consonant / With the open vowels of Infinity*'. A '*consonant*' is a sound in speech for which you need to close your lips: m, p, b The poet connects the consonant with what is finite, limited. To make a full word, the '*lonely consonant*' of the finite needs to be brought together with '*the open vowels*' – the 'a' and the 'u' – '*of Infinity*'. We have to bring these three symbolic sounds together again into one word, '*a hyphen must connect Matter and Mind*'. A '*hyphen*' is the short line that we use to join two elements together to make them function as one word, as in '*re-wed*'. We need a hyphen to connect matter and mind, which for us are separate, to join them together to make a word like 'matter-mind' or 'mind-matter'. That '*hyphen*', he says, will be '*the narrow isthmus of the ascending soul*'. '*Isthmus*' is a Greek word: it means a very narrow strip of land connecting two bigger land masses. So here we have got Matter on one side and Mind on the other, two '*sovereign spheres*' which are separated. What can join them and make them one? An '*isthmus*': a narrow connecting strip created by the soul as it moves on its journey from matter to mind and then on to spirit. The soul is the hyphen that can connect Matter and Mind as it moves on its upward journey.

We must renew the secret bond in things,
Our hearts recall the lost divine Idea,
Reconstitute the perfect word, unite
The Alpha and the Omega in one sound;
Then shall the Spirit and Nature be at one.

We must '*renew*', make new, strong and conscious again '*the secret bond in things*'. Secretly everything is connected, bound together, only we do not usually experience it like that: everything in the universe is connected but we have to become aware of that again. Our hearts have to '*recall*', remember, the '*divine Idea*' that has been lost, the Idea and intention that connects everything. We have to '*reconstitute the perfect word*' by bringing together again the letters that have been separated, '*the Alpha and the Omega*': these are the first and the last letters of the Greek alphabet and when they are used like this, together, with capital letters, they mean the beginning and the end of creation, the Origin and the Goal. If they are brought together in one sound 'AUM', OM, then '*the Spirit and Nature*', which now seem to be ruling separate '*sovereign spheres*', will again '*be at one*', in accord, agreement, in harmony with each other. That is '*our deepest need*'.

Two are the ends of the mysterious plan.
In the wide signless ether of the Self,
In the unchanging Silence white and nude,
Aloof, resplendent like gold dazzling suns
Veiled by the ray no mortal eye can bear,
The Spirit's bare and absolute potencies
Burn in the solitude of the thoughts of God.

The '*mysterious plan*', the '*divine Idea*', has two ends to it like a piece of string or a rainbow; now Sri Aurobindo is going to tell us about the two ends, Spirit and Nature; the passage about the Spirit begins

here and continues up to page 60, and then in just a few lines, he tells us about the other end, the Nature end. But first he tells us about the Spirit: *'the Spirit's bare and absolute potencies'*. *'Potencies'* means *'powers'*; the powers of the Spirit are *'bare'*: pure and unadorned; they are absolute, and they live *'in the wide signless ether of the Self'*. *'Ether'* is the subtlest state of substance. We have earth and water, fire and air, and the subtle atmosphere: *'ether'*. The poet speaks of the *'ether of the Self'*. It is pure consciousness, pure existence which is vast and wide and formless, *'signless'*; it lies beyond all manifestation, *'in the unchanging Silence white and nude'*. There are no colours there; colours appear when the pure and integral white light is separated into its elements, the possibilities it contains within it. The Silence of the Self is *'white and nude'* without any covering. It is *'aloof'*, distant and apart. These *'potencies'*, these powers of the Spirit, are *'resplendent'*, shining and glorious like *'gold dazzling suns'*, (when we look towards a very bright light our eyes get *'dazzled'*, blinded by the light) and they are *'veiled by the ray no mortal eye can bear'*. Even looking directly at our physical sun is *'dazzling'* for us; the powers of the Spirit are so much more brilliant, we cannot bear to look into the ray of superconscience that veils the potencies which are radiating all that light. They are burning *'in the solitude of the thoughts of God'*. They are like thoughts in the consciousness of the Creator. They have not been separated from Him, they have not become manifested. They are powers, possibilities, *'potencies'* of pure Spirit.

A rapture and a radiance and a hush,
Delivered from the approach of wounded hearts,
Denied to the Idea that looks at grief,
Remote from the Force that cries out in its pain,
In his inalienable bliss they live.

Those Powers are '*a rapture*', an intense delight, '*a radiance*', a brilliant radiating light, and a '*hush*', a silence. They are '*delivered from the approach of wounded hearts*': our human hearts that feel pain, that are wounded, cannot get anywhere near those '*potencies*'; they are protected, nothing painful can come anywhere near them. And '*the Idea*', the creative concept that looks at the grief and suffering of the world cannot approach them either, they are beyond all that. They are far away, '*remote from the Force that cries out in its pain*': the life-force we experience here on earth which suffers and expresses its pain. They are living in the '*inalienable bliss*' of the Lord, the bliss that nothing can touch, that nothing can take away, that nothing can spoil in any way. Grief and wounds and pain cannot come anywhere near them. They are in a state of perfect *ananda*.

Immaculate in self-knowledge and self-power,
Calm they repose on the eternal Will.
Only his law they count and him obey;
They have no goal to reach, no aim to serve.

'*Immaculate*' means 'stainless', absolutely pure. These '*bare and absolute potencies*' are pure in self-knowledge and self-power: they know themselves entirely, and they are entirely powerful. They are absolutely calm as they '*repose on the eternal Will*', at ease, entirely supported by the eternal Will. The only thing that concerns them is the law of the Lord; they obey only '*the eternal Will*'. They need not go anywhere; they have '*no aim to serve*': they only '*repose on the eternal Will*'.

Implacable in their timeless purity,
All barter or bribe of worship they refuse;
Unmoved by cry of revolt and ignorant prayer
They reckon not our virtue and our sin;

'*Implacable*' is usually a negative word, meaning harsh, merciless,

unbending, like a strict judge for example, who says 'This is the law. I cannot make any exceptions'. These '*absolute potencies*' of the Spirit are '*implacable in their timeless purity*': so eternally pure that nothing can change them. Human beings may try to make bargains with them: to '*barter*' means to bargain, to haggle about a price or an exchange. Sometimes people turn to the Lord like that. They pray 'Lord, if you give me what I want, I will do this or that for you'. But these pure powers are not interested in that kind of bartering or bribing: 'I will give you this; I will do this'. They refuse it. They are not in the least bit interested in any kind of worship that we may offer them; they are not moved either by our prayers or if we say 'I curse you, you are heartless, you are cruel, you are wicked'. Human beings cannot help saying sometimes 'O Lord, why are you doing this to me?' But the powers of the Spirit are not affected by this kind of cry of revolt; it does not bother them at all, they just do not care. And when we pray, 'Please, please!' they do not listen; they do not care whether we are good or bad. We can be as good or as bad as we want, they are not interested: '*they reckon not our virtue or our sin*'. Sometimes our virtue is just an attempt to bribe the Lord; but these powers are so pure, they are beyond all forms of corruption, they do not pay any attention either to our revolt or to our ignorant prayers.

They bend not to the voices that implore,
They hold no traffic with error and its reign;
They are guardians of the silence of the Truth,
They are keepers of the immutable decree.

Our human voices '*implore*' them, beg them: 'Please do this, please do that', but they do not bend to listen, they do not hold any kind of '*traffic*', any kind of dealing or communication with this reign, this rule of error, falsehood and mistakes that we live in. They are

'guardians of the silence of the Truth'; that is their function, 'they are keepers of the immutable decree', the unchangeable command of the 'eternal Will'.

A deep surrender is their source of might,
A still identity their way to know,
Motionless is their action like a sleep.

Those powers are entirely surrendered to the Will of the Lord and that is *'their source of might'*, the origin of their strength. They do not use mind as we do; *'a still identity'* is *'their way to know'*: their knowledge comes through silent oneness with the Will of the Lord. *'Motionless is their action like a sleep'*: whatever action they perform is done without any movement as if in sleep or trance.

At peace, regarding the trouble beneath the stars,
Deathless, watching the works of Death and Chance,
Immobile, seeing the millenniums pass,
Untouched while the long map of Fate unrolls,
They look on our struggle with impartial eyes,
And yet without them cosmos could not be.

Those powers of the Spirit are *'at peace'*. They are watching, *'regarding'* the troubles that we experience here *'beneath the stars'*, here on earth. They are *'deathless'*, immortal, but they are watching everything that happens here in this realm of *'Death and Chance'*. They are *'immobile'*: they do not move as they watch *'the millenniums pass'*. A *'millennium'* is a thousand years; a thousand years pass, another thousand and another, but they do not move. They are *'untouched'*: they are not affected as *'the long map of Fate unrolls'*. This *'long map'* is being rolled out gradually through time; as it is unrolled, they see all that is happening. *'They look on our struggle with impartial eyes'*: a person who is *'impartial'* does not take sides, he is free of preferences, detached. So it seems as if they have no

connection with us at all; but Sri Aurobindo says '*without them cosmos could not be*': they are essential to the existence of the universe, without them it would not exist.

Impervious to desire and doom and hope,
Their station of inviolable might
Moveless upholds the world's enormous task,
Its ignorance is by their knowledge lit,
Its yearning lasts by their indifference.

They are '*impervious*': our '*desire and doom and hope*' cannot touch or affect them at all. '*Their station*', their position, of '*inviolable might*', which cannot be weakened or impaired in any way, '*moveless upholds the world's enormous task*', supports the tremendous labour and responsibility of the material world without moving: all effort and movement in the universe is held up by that unmoving strength. The ignorance of our world receives some light from their knowledge; and even all our yearning, our feelings of dissatisfaction, our longing for something better, something different, can only continue because of '*their indifference*'; they do not respond but they are constantly supporting the parts in us which feel that there should be a higher state than the one we experience now.

As the height draws the low ever to climb,
As the breadths draw the small to adventure vast,
Their aloofness drives man to surpass himself.

The fact that there is something high makes whatever is low want to climb it. When people were asked 'Why do you want to climb Mount Everest?' they replied 'Because it is there!' The fact that the height exists, attracts the lower levels '*to climb*', to mount up; and the fact that there are '*breadths*', broad, wide spaces, attracts what is small to undertake vast adventures, to explore those vastnesses. If

we look at the sea we wonder what is on the other side and think 'Could I ever go there one day?' It is the '*aloofness*' of those powers of the Spirit, the fact that they seem to be forever distant and remote, that drives human beings to surpass themselves, to go beyond their limits, to strive to become more than they are.

Our passion heaves to wed the Eternal's calm,
Our dwarf-search mind to meet the Omniscient's light,
Our helpless hearts to enshrine the Omnipotent's force.

'*Our passion*', the intensity of human feelings, whether of delight and suffering and longing, '*heaves to wed the Eternal's calm*': as the waves of our earthly oceans are stirred and lifted up by the gravitational attraction of the distant moon, our troubled and confused emotions are stirred and drawn towards the remote calm of the Eternal. '*Our dwarf-search mind*', our limited mind with its petty seekings, is being drawn towards the light of the Omniscient, the All-Knowing. Our '*helpless hearts*' are being moved towards higher things, longing to '*enshrine*', to hold and provide a home for the force of the All-Powerful. The '*Spirit's absolute potencies*' are aloof and distant, but they are always exerting an influence on us: our limited nature-parts are attracted, drawn and lifted up by their high calm light and force.

Acquiescing in the wisdom that made hell
And the harsh utility of death and tears,
Acquiescing in the gradual steps of Time,
Careless they seem of the grief that stings the world's heart,
Careless of the pain that rends its body and life;

'*Acquiescing*' means agreeing or accepting, saying 'yes' by keeping silent. If you keep silent and do not protest when you see something happening, actually you are agreeing to it, accepting it. Those powers accept and consent to '*the wisdom that made hell*'. How could

the Lord make 'hell' with all its terrible suffering? But those powers of the spirit do not protest, they consent, they accept; they see that a wisdom has made hell and that '*death and tears*' have a use; although we protest and revolt against them, they have a '*harsh utility*'. The powers of the Spirit accept and consent to the long slow process of evolution: '*the gradual steps of Time*'. It seems as if they do not care about the grief that is always stinging the heart of the world, that they do not care about the pain that tears our bodies and lives. 'To rend' means 'to tear'.

Above joy and sorrow is that grandeur's walk:
They have no portion in the good that dies,
Mute, pure, they share not in the evil done;
Else might their strength be marred and could not save.

They are above the dualities of joy and sorrow, of good and evil. If they cared about our transient good and evil, our virtue and sin, that would reduce their strength – 'to mar' means to spoil or damage – and they would not be able to save us.

Alive to the truth that dwells in God's extremes,
Awake to a motion of all-seeing Force,
The slow outcome of the long ambiguous years
And the unexpected good from woeful deeds,
The immortal sees not as we vainly see.
He looks on hidden aspects and screened powers,
He knows the law and natural line of things.

An immortal being, one of those Powers of the Spirit who are not subject to death, does not see things the way that we see them. Sri Aurobindo says that we see things '*vainly*', in vain, without power. We do not see things as they truly are. The immortal is '*alive to the truth that dwells in God's extremes*', aware of a truth that we do not see: the truth that lives in and is expressed by the opposites that

God contains within his Oneness, the opposites of Good and Evil, Spirit and Matter, Soul and Nature. The immortal is aware of the movement and action of '*all-seeing Force*', the Conscious-Force of the Supreme, and of '*the outcome*' which is going to emerge in the course of time, through the passing of '*the long ambiguous years*'. We look at the world around us, at all the terrible things that are happening, all the '*woeful deeds*': wars, violence and corruption, starving children: all that goes on and on, it has been going on for centuries and millennia. But the way that we see all that is not the way it really is. For us, all the events that happen through the long years are '*ambiguous*', we do not know how to interpret them, how to understand them. The immortal sees differently, he is aware of '*the unexpected good*' that comes about as a result of those '*woeful deeds*'. He sees things and aspects that are hidden to us. He knows about the existence of '*screened powers*' that we do not see. The immortal knows the true law, '*the natural line of things*': the way that things develop according to their inherent nature. The understanding and reaction of those immortal powers to the unfolding of God's purpose in time is quite different from our own limited understanding.

Undriven by a brief life's will to act,
Unharassed by the spur of pity and fear,
He makes no haste to untie the cosmic knot
Or the world's torn jarring heart to reconcile.
In Time he waits for the Eternal's hour.

Here are some more differences between the immortal and ourselves: we feel that we have only a short lifetime, '*a brief life*' and so we are driven; in the short time that we have we want to fulfil certain aims, to get things done. '*The immortal*' is not under that time pressure. He is '*undriven*', not driven by the '*will to act*' that drives

our brief lives; he is not harassed, not troubled, *'by the spur of pity and fear'*. A *'spur'* is a sharp piece of metal that a rider wears on his heel so that he can urge his horse to go faster: the pain of the spur in its side drives the horse to run faster; similarly we human beings feel the spur of certain things that drive us: we may feel pity, we may want to change things because we feel *'Oh, it should not be like this'*; or we may be driven by fear. But the immortal who sees how everything is supposed to develop does not feel that spur of pity and fear, that is not driving or harassing him; so he does not feel in any hurry: *'he makes no haste to untie the cosmic knot'*. He knows that this strange riddle of existence will all be sorted out in time, so he does not feel the same sense of urgency to set things right as we do when we become aware of the suffering caused by all the oppositions at play in life; he is not in a hurry to *'reconcile'* them. *'To reconcile'* means to bring things or people who are in conflict together in agreement and harmony. The *'world's heart'* is *'torn'*, wounded and divided, and because it is divided there is a lot of pain. If you have a wound it is very painful when the two sides of the wound touch each other. The doctor will try and bind together the two parts that have been separated so that they can come together and heal quickly. Very often in our human relationships it is like that. We have been close to people, but then for some reason there is a quarrel and then it is like the two sides of an open wound: every contact is painful. That is what is implied by this word *'jarring'*: when a door is not fully closed, every little breath of wind makes the door *'jar'* against the door frame with a disturbing repeated *'jarring'* sound. Something like that is going on in the heart of our world, a continuous conflict, clash and pain, and we feel it should not be like that, we long to establish harmony everywhere. Of course there should be harmony everywhere; but the immortal sees that there is a long evolutionary process to be gone through to

establish the harmony, so he is not in a hurry to heal everything and set it right immediately. Often we try to set things right on the surface but underneath they are not really set right. The immortal waits. He waits '*in Time*' for the hour of the Eternal, the hour when the Eternal Will can be realised and fulfilled.

Yet a spiritual secret aid is there;
While a tardy Evolution's coils wind on
And Nature hews her way through adamant
A divine intervention thrones above.

The immortal powers of the spirit are waiting for the right moment: they are not in a hurry; so it seems to us that the skies are indifferent, that the gods do not care, that the Lord is not taking any notice of what is happening here on earth; but here Sri Aurobindo tells us that despite these appearances '*a spiritual secret aid is there*'. Evolution goes winding slowly on its way; '*tardy*' means that the process seems to be too slow and to be taking too long. It takes long because it is a very difficult process for the nature force that is driving the evolution: she has to hew '*her way through adamant*'. 'To hew' means to cut with great effort. An explorer pushing his way through a jungle has to '*hew*' at the thick undergrowth to cut his path through; a miner or a sculptor will have to '*hew*' rock with a lot of effort. Nature has to cut '*her way through adamant*', the very hardest form of substance. The word is connected with '*diamond*', the hardest substance. We use this word in a psychological sense when we say that somebody is '*adamant*' meaning that they will not change their mind: you can say what you like, you can offer what you like, but they will refuse to change. The resistance that Nature has to cut through as she drives evolution forward is '*adamant*', it refuses to change; Nature has to deal with that kind of resistance all the time. But while all this is going on, '*a divine intervention thrones*

above. On a higher level there is a power of divine help, an *'intervention'* that acts in the world. The unmoving powers of the Spirit are watching and waiting; but there is also a divine power always at work in our world to help it move forward: *'a spiritual secret aid is there'*.

Alive in a dead rotating universe
We whirl not here upon a casual globe
Abandoned to a task beyond our force;
Even through the tangled anarchy called Fate
And through the bitterness of death and fall
An outstretched Hand is felt upon our lives.

We are *'alive'* but if we look around at the rest of the universe, most of it seems to be not alive; it seems to be purely material, inanimate, without life. This universe that is going round and round, *'rotating'*, seems to be dead. How is it that we are alive in this dead universe? It is a great mystery. Sri Aurobindo tells us that we are not whirling around here on *'a casual globe'*. Our globe is not *'casual'*, trivial and meaningless. It has a meaning and significance and purpose. It is not just an accident that we are alive here, and we have not been abandoned to a task that is *'beyond our force'*, a task that is too difficult for us. Sometimes we feel that this business of living is just too difficult for us and we do not know how to go on facing the puzzle we have been set, all the problems and challenges that confront us. Here Sri Aurobindo is telling us that we have not been *'abandoned'*, rejected and forgotten: a divine help is always with us, *'even through the tangled anarchy called Fate'*. Sometimes things go wrong, somebody has a terrible accident and we cannot find out any reason for it, it just seems to be what we call *'Fate'*: for some unknown reason it had to be like that. Here the poet refers to Fate as a *'tangled anarchy'*, a complex confusion of many different forces

interacting without any governing order. In the wind, your hair gets '*tangled*', intertwined so that you cannot get a comb through it. There is a tangle of forces operating in the world and we call the outcome 'Fate'. We go through bitter experiences: someone dies, something goes wrong, we do something wrong and feel, 'Now I made a terrible mistake, I did not live up to myself, I have done something wrong, now what can I do?' That is a very bitter experience. But here Sri Aurobindo tells us that '*through the bitterness of death and fall / An outstretched Hand is felt upon our lives*'. In the worst and darkest moments, we can turn to the Divine and ask for help, and feel a Hand stretched out to help us.

The poet is telling us about two different actions of the Divine: there are the powers and potencies of the Spirit which remain aloof. Later on he will tell us that they will not always remain aloof, but for now he says that '*they have no portion*', no share in what we do here, because if they did, if they connected themselves with what happens here, then their strength would be marred – it would be spoiled and they would not be able to save. But there is another aspect of the Divine which is always close to us, a protective, helping power. That is what he will show us now: the '*outstretched Hand*'.

It is near us in unnumbered bodies and births;
In its unslackening grasp it keeps for us safe
The one inevitable supreme result
No will can take away and no doom change,
The crown of conscious Immortality,
The godhead promised to our struggling souls
When first man's heart dared death and suffered life.

That '*outstretched Hand*' is near to us through all our '*unnumbered bodies and births*' and it is always holding onto something for us. It is

holding our true individual destiny '*in its unslackening grasp*'; that Hand never 'slackens', it never lets go: '*it keeps for us safe / The one inevitable supreme result / No will can take away and no doom change*'. No matter what bad things happen to us, what difficulties we have to face in our life, no will can change that supreme result, neither our own will nor anybody else's, because that is our destiny: our '*crown of conscious Immortality*'. As we move nearer to our true destiny we come closer to the state of '*conscious Immortality*', the divine state that was '*promised to our struggling souls / When first man's heart dared death and suffered life*'. These lines suggest that we had a choice and that we have agreed to come here and be human beings, to suffer on the earth. We have agreed to leave a higher state, to come here and forget where we have come from. When we were offered that choice, the Lord promised us 'It will be all right, I will look after you. You will come through it all. And you will grow.' Probably most of us were beings on the mental plane and we were offered the opportunity. Universal evolution had developed to the point that mental beings could be incarnated on the earth, and then we were offered the chance: 'Do you want to go? It will be tough, it will be terrible, but you will have the opportunity to become more than mental beings, to join yourself to the evolving principle in earth and you can become more than what you are now.' At that time we were promised '*The crown of conscious Immortality*'. Sri Aurobindo does not say all that in these lines, but just suggests something like that by saying that '*the crown of conscious Immortality*' was '*promised to our struggling souls / When first man's heart dared death and suffered life*', when we accepted the adventure of incarnating into a world of life and death, not a life of bliss and unchanging happiness but one full of struggle and suffering.

One who has shaped this world is ever its lord:

Our errors are his steps upon the way;
He works through the fierce vicissitudes of our lives,
He works through the hard breath of battle and toil,
He works through our sins and sorrows and our tears,
His knowledge overrules our nescience;

'One who has shaped this world is ever its lord': the Lord has not just created the world and then left it to its own devices without caring what happens to it; the *'One who has shaped the world'* is still and always in charge; even our mistakes are part of his path: *'Our errors are his steps upon the way'*. This is a poetic way of saying it; if we want to understand this in detail we shall have to read other books of Sri Aurobindo, but here he gives us these wonderful poetic suggestions. The Lord is working through everything, including *'the fierce vicissitudes of our lives'*. *'Vicissitudes'* are all the ups and downs of life, the unexpected changes in circumstances; you may have everything planned out: *'Tomorrow I will do this and that and the other'*, but suddenly something unplanned and unprepared-for comes in the way, and sometimes these are very serious things. The Lord is working through all that. He is working through all our struggles: *'the hard breath of battle and toil'*, our conflicts and labours – everything here demands effort; he is working *'through our sins'*, the things that we do wrong, the things that we feel separate us from the Divine; he is working through *'our sorrows and our tears'*; *'His knowledge overrules our nescience'*: in our ignorance we take a decision, but the Lord decides differently. There is a proverb, *'Man proposes, God disposes'*: we can say, *'Wouldn't this be good, Lord?'* He may say, *'No! Like this!'* or sometimes he may say, *'Yes! Very good idea, let us do it like that!'*; but it is up to Him, because we do not know what is going on, we are *'nescient'*. We do not know, but the Lord is overruling our nescience and making sure that everything in the universe is always the best that it can be at every

moment in the evolving process of his plan.

Whatever the appearance we must bear,
Whatever our strong ills and present fate,
When nothing we can see but drift and bale,
A mighty Guidance leads us still through all.

Here is one of the sentences in *Savitri* that we should learn by heart and remember in difficult times: '*Whatever the appearance we must bear*', however bad things look and feel, '*Whatever our strong ills...*' whatever seems to be wrong in our life at the moment, our '*present fate*', whatever situation we are in, even when we cannot see anything but '*drift and bale*' – '*drift*' happens when there is a river with rubbish floating on it: the current carries along sticks and leaves and bits of paper, and all those bits and pieces have no choice, they just have to go where the current carries them; often in our lives we feel that we are just being carried along by forces that we have no control over; and '*bale*' is '*misfortune*': sometimes it really feels as if there is a bad will making everything go wrong for us. If you are angry with someone you may give them 'a baleful look' to let them know that you wish them ill. But even in those moments when we feel that we are being carried by forces we cannot control and some of them seem really hostile, still '*a mighty Guidance leads us still through all*'. An outstretched Hand is keeping our ultimate destiny safe; and whatever happens, the Lord, the One who has shaped this world, is still looking after it and guiding everything so that what happens is the best possible in the present state of the universe. Through '*drift and bale*' we may learn many wonderful life-lessons and later look back at that bad time and see what blessings it brought us.

After we have served this great divided world
God's bliss and oneness are our inborn right.

We are born with a certain right that is '*inborn*': nobody can take it away from us. Now we have to serve '*this great divided world*', this evolutionary world with all its play of clashing forces; but when we have finished our time of service, '*God's bliss and oneness are our inborn right.*' Sri Aurobindo assures us that we shall reach that fulfilment in the end.

A date is fixed in the calendar of the Unknown,
An anniversary of the Birth sublime:
Our soul shall justify its chequered walk,
All will come near that now is naught or far.

That date is already fixed '*in the calendar of the Unknown*' already decided; it is '*an anniversary of the Birth sublime*': it marks a miraculous birthday. The date of that anniversary is fixed '*in the calendar of the Unknown*' although we have no idea when it will arrive according to our earthly calendars. On that day of fulfilment our individual soul '*shall justify its chequered walk*'. '*Chequered*' means an alternation of black and white. The soul has passed through good times and bad ones, dark times and brighter ones; when that special day and time arrive everything will be justified, will make sense. The soul will see the whole course of its journey, its '*chequered walk*' and say, 'Oh yes, it had to be just like that.' All the things that now seem to us unreal and non-existent or far away and unachievable will become near and real to us on that date which is already fixed '*in the calendar of the Unknown*'.

These calm and distant Might shall act at last.

The Spirit's absolute potencies are waiting for that day and when it comes they will '*act at last*'.

Immovably ready for their destined task,
The ever-wise compassionate Brilliances

Await the sound of the Incarnate's voice
To leap and bridge the chasms of Ignorance
And heal the hollow yearning gulfs of Life
And fill the abyss that is the universe.

Those powers of the spirit, those *'ever-wise compassionate Brilliances'*, full of radiant light, eternal wisdom and powerful compassion are *'immovably ready for their destined task'*: they are motionlessly waiting for the moment to come when they must act. They are waiting for *'the sound of the Incarnate's voice'*. The Divine *'incarnate'*, embodied in the material world, has to say 'The time has come', then they will leap down and create a bridge across these *'chasms'*, these deep ravines of ignorance, making it possible for Knowledge and Ignorance to meet. They will *'heal the hollow yearning gulfs of Life'*, great hollow spaces that are just longing for something without knowing clearly what they are longing for. What is needed to heal them is a descent of the powers of the spirit to fill their longing emptiness.

On page 57 at the top Sri Aurobindo told us: *'Two are the ends of the mysterious plan'*. Since then he has been showing us one of those two ends: the powers of the Spirit, the bare and absolute potencies who refuse all prayer and all worship, who are not at all affected by anything that we do and are turned only to the supreme Will. But then he told us that we are not left alone. There is a help, an *'outstretched Hand'* a *'divine intervention'* from above; and also that *'a date is fixed in the calendar of the Unknown'* when those powers are going to come down on earth. Now we shall read about the other end of the plan, about what is happening here, in the world of Nature.

Here meanwhile at the Spirit's opposite pole
In the mystery of the deeps that God has built

For his abode below the Thinker's sight,
In this compromise of a stark absolute Truth
With the Light that dwells near the dark end of things,
In this tragi-comedy of divine disguise,
This long far seeking for joy ever near,
In the grandiose dream of which the world is made,
In this gold dome on a black dragon base,
The conscious Force that acts in Nature's breast,
A dark-robed labourer in the cosmic scheme
Carrying clay images of unborn gods,
Executrix of the inevitable Idea
Hampered, enveloped by the hoops of Fate,
Patient trustee of slow eternal Time,
Absolves from hour to hour her secret charge.

To begin to understand this long sentence we can take three lines, one from the beginning, one from the middle, and the one at the end:

Here meanwhile at the Spirit's opposite pole ...
The conscious Force that acts in Nature's breast, ...
Absolves from hour to hour her secret charge.

This is the basic structure of the sentence. '*Meanwhile*', until that wonderful '*anniversary*' arrives, here in this world, '*at the Spirit's opposite pole*', at the other end of the mysterious plan, '*in the mystery of the deeps that God has built / For his abode*', in the deep places that God has prepared for himself to live in '*below the Thinker's sight*', hidden from mind in the subconscious, the unconscious, in the lower levels of nature, something is happening: we shall see later what Nature is doing there. In the next lines the poet continues to describe this world of ours. It is a compromise: a '*compromise of a stark absolute Truth*' represented by those pure absolute powers of

the Spirit, with another kind of Light, '*the Light that dwells near the dark end of things*' in the lower levels of nature. It is also a '*tragi-comedy of divine disguise*'. There are two kinds of drama: tragedies, which end unhappily, and comedies, which make us laugh. Theatre as we know it in the West was invented by the ancient Greeks and it began as a religious festival, the festival of Dionysus, the God of Delight. There would be special days in the year when people did not have to work and they all went to the theatre. The best poets and playwrights in the city would produce new dramas for each Dionysus festival. One of the great philosophers of that time has explained that the purpose of these dramas was to purify the people's consciousness. You go to see the drama and identify with what happens in it; it is very intense: it makes you roar with laughter and washes away all your troubles and anxieties; that is very good for you. But it is also very good for you if you see something so sad, so painful, so moving that it washes away all your usual troubles and little complaints and annoyances with your neighbour; the deep emotions you experience in the theatre wash away all those things and by the end of the festival you are purified and ready to start a new year. That was the theory behind it. Tragedy is drama that takes you deep into the sorrow of things and comedy makes you see the funny side of life. Sri Aurobindo has said that this world could never have been made by a God who has no sense of humour, who does not laugh: of course, he laughs. In a '*tragi-comedy*' both kinds of drama are mixed. Life in our world is like that: it makes us weep; it also makes us laugh, it is a '*tragi-comedy of divine disguise*' because after all, who is the actor? Who is playing all the parts? It is only the Lord, wearing different disguises.

Another aspect of our world is unsatisfied longing, the '*long far seeking for joy ever near*'. In reality the divine bliss is always near to

us; we could not breathe or live if it were not the very atmosphere of our existence; but in our present state we are not aware of that, we are always feeling that we are missing it, we are always looking for it, seeking for it, hoping that it will come. Our world is based on a '*grandiose dream*': '*grandiose*' means something on a very large scale, very rich and sumptuous. Just look at the wonders of the universe! But the way that we experience it is a dream, not its reality.

The poet describes our world as a '*gold dome on a black dragon base*'. The '*black dragon base*' is the Inconscient. Dragons are very powerful symbolic animals which live in caves, sitting on piles of treasure which they cannot use, gold and diamonds and gemstones. In the West they are traditionally considered as very dangerous monsters; in the East they are believed to be benevolent and auspicious. The Vedas speak about a secret cave where all the riches of consciousness are kept; they have been stolen by powers that divide things up and powers that hold on to things: thieves and misers; the treasures are guarded by the '*dragon of the dark foundation*' in the dark bottomless cave of the Inconscient which lies at the base of the material world. The work of the rishis, the work of evolution, is to call down the power of the gods to break into the cave and release all those lost riches so that the higher consciousness can be realised here in the material world. This world we live in, this '*grandiose dream*' is a '*gold dome*' supported on the '*black dragon base*' of the Inconscient.

In this world of ours '*The conscious Force that acts in Nature's breast*' is at work. The Force of Nature is driving evolution, creating all these wonderful forms. We tend to think of her as unconscious; we feel that Nature is just the movement of forces of physics, forces of life. Sri Aurobindo is telling us that within what we think of as

unconscious nature, the divine Conscious-Force is at work, wearing a dark robe of apparent unconsciousness. As '*a dark-robed labourer*' she is working hard at '*the cosmic scheme*', doing her part in the mysterious plan of the Lord. As part of her work, she is carrying '*clay images of unborn gods*': material forms of gods that have not yet been born. Here we are in our physical bodies, these insignificant human forms made of living matter; these clay images are representing and are supposed to become divine beings; but those gods are not yet born yet; they are growing up within us.

The '*conscious Force that acts in Nature's breast*' is an '*Executrix*'. This '*ix*' is a feminine ending; the masculine form of the word would be '*executor*'. An executor or executrix is somebody who carries out the wishes or directions or instructions of somebody else. The work of this '*executrix*' is to carry out the '*inevitable Idea*', the original creative Idea of the Supreme. It is '*inevitable*', it is certain to be carried out, but it is very difficult for her, because she is '*hampered*': something is preventing her, obstructing her from achieving her task. She is '*enveloped by the hoops of Fate*': '*hoops*' are strong metal bands used to hold together wooden barrels; they hold the planks very firmly so that they cannot move and leak; the Force acting in Nature is bound by such strong hoops, '*hoops of Fate*': the determinisms of matter make it very difficult for her to carry out her work. But she is a '*patient trustee*': she does not get discouraged, she is patient, she is faithful, she goes on doing her work, however long it takes in '*slow eternal Time*'. From '*hour to hour*' she is '*absolving her secret charge*', fulfilling, discharging her responsibility, the mission that she has been given, to work out the '*inevitable Idea*' of the evolving universe.

All she foresees in masked imperative depths;
The dumb intention of the unconscious gulfs

Answers to a will that sees upon the heights,
And the evolving Word's first syllable
Ponderous, brute-sensed, contains its luminous close,
Privy to a summit victory's vast descent
And the portent of the soul's immense uprising.

'She', *'the conscious Force'* that is acting in *'Nature's breast'*, *'foresees'* the whole course of evolution, the whole course of development by which the *'inevitable Idea'* is going to be fulfilled. She does not foresee it mentally, but rather intuitively or instinctively, *'in masked imperative depths'*, deep within. The depths of Nature hold an *'imperative'* will which cannot be denied, which must be obeyed, a vision of what must be, what must come. Deep in nature there is an intention. It cannot express itself, it cannot say what it is, but it exists in the very basis of matter. That *'dumb intention of the unconscious gulfs'* corresponds to, *'answers to'*, a fully conscious will on the higher levels: *'a will that sees upon the heights'*. There is a connection between the seeing will on the highest levels of consciousness and the *'dumb intention'* hidden in the very core of Matter. On page 56 Sri Aurobindo told us about *'the universal word'* with its three sounds or syllables. Here he uses the image in a slightly different way. He says that the Word is evolving and that its first syllable, the earliest stage of the evolutionary process is *'ponderous'*: heavy and slow-moving; it is *'brute-sensed'*, its forms are very unrefined and crude; but once the first syllable is there, then the rest is going to come, for it contains the rest of the word that will bring about something beautiful and full of conscious light: the *'luminous close'* of the Word. This is sure to happen because deep within the apparent unconsciousness there is a consciousness that is *'privy to a summit victory's vast descent'*. If you are *'privy'* to something, you know a secret. *'The conscious Force that works in Nature's breast'* is privy to the secret of a victory that is already there

on the summit of things and that is going to come down as a '*vast descent*'. At the same time, the soul involved in matter is rising upwards through the successive levels of universal evolution, and this is a '*portent*', a sign, a promise of the '*immense uprising*' which it will experience in the future.

The rising of the soul in evolution and the descent of the '*summit victory*' into the lower levels of the manifestation can be seen in Sri Aurobindo's symbol. The upward pointing triangle represents the upward movement of the soul in evolution, while the downward pointing triangle shows the descent of the higher powers; his symbol shows us the complementary movements of involution and evolution, aspiration and transforming power.

End of Section 3

Section 4, lines 521-616

Here we are in this marvellous canto, 'The Secret Knowledge', and we have come to a short but very revealing section which gives a key to the rest of the canto, and indeed to all the rest of the poem. We can say that summed up in this section there is a key to everything that Sri Aurobindo would like us to understand.

All here where each thing seems its lonely self
Are figures of the sole transcendent One:
Only by him they are, his breath is their life;
An unseen Presence moulds the oblivious clay.

Here in our world '*each thing seems its lonely self*', separate, cut off from everything else; but in fact everything is linked and united because every single thing here is a figure, an image, an expression '*of the sole transcendent One*', the One who is '*transcendent*': beyond the world, beyond the universe, beyond all limits. He is in everything as well as beyond everything. He is not limited by any of these figures that he takes, but all these figures exist only because of Him. Our life energy, our prana is '*his breath*'; the '*unseen Presence*' of the One gives each thing its shape. 'To mould' means 'to shape': the '*unseen Presence*' of the One gives shape to the forms of Matter, '*this oblivious clay*'. Matter is '*oblivious*', unaware, unconscious, because it has forgotten its origin; but still everything here can only exist because '*the sole transcendent One*' supports it.

A playmate in the mighty Mother's game,
One came upon the dubious whirling globe
To hide from her pursuit in force and form.

Sri Aurobindo has often said that this manifestation is a play, a game; the mighty Mother of the Worlds has created this game and

the One, the Lord, has joined the game as her playmate. He has come onto our earth, this '*dubious whirling globe*': our little earth spinning in space, which is '*dubious*', '*doubtful*'; our earth is full of doubt, we do not know what we are doing here, why we are here, and the outcome of our existence is doubtful: are we going to survive at all, or are we going to blow ourselves up? Is there any purpose in our existence, in our life, or is it just an accident in space? That all seems '*dubious*', doubtful, to our consciousness. But here Sri Aurobindo is telling us that the '*transcendent One*' has come here to this '*dubious whirling globe*' to join in the Mother's game: '*to hide from her pursuit in force and form*'. Sri Aurobindo says in an aphorism that God and Nature are like a boy and a girl who are in love, and playing hide and seek. They like to hide so that they will be found. They run away so that they will be caught. Perhaps this explains why we find it so difficult to get in touch with the One, with the Lord, as long as we are in our nature being, our human instrumentation. We try to find him and he runs away; but if we forget him, then from time to time he comes and reminds us, 'You were supposed to be looking for me.'

A secret spirit in the Inconscient's sleep,
A shapeless Energy, a voiceless Word,
He was here before the elements could emerge,
Before there was light of mind or life could breathe.

From the very beginning of this manifestation, before evolution even seemed to have started, the unseen Presence of the One was there in the sleep of the Inconscient, as '*a secret spirit*', a hidden conscious spirit shaping everything, as '*a shapeless Energy*' or Force; and as a silent Word of creation and command. '*He was here before the elements could emerge*'. Chemistry teaches us that all matter is made up of about a hundred and eight '*elements*'. Before the

elements began to emerge, before Matter existed, he was there. In the Indian tradition as well as other ancient traditions, the elements were thought of as earth, water, fire, air, ether: five vibratory formations in subtle matter which have given rise to the forms of gross matter, which is a mixture of them all. Before that differentiation into elements could start, the One was there. Before there was any light of mind, before there was any breath of life, He was there, the Origin of everything.

Accomplice of her cosmic huge pretence,
His semblances he turns to real shapes
And makes the symbol equal with the truth:
He gives to his timeless thoughts a form in Time.

An '*accomplice*' is somebody who helps a criminal; Sri Aurobindo uses the word humorously here; the '*mighty Mother*' is creating this '*cosmic huge pretence*', this illusory universe where each thing seems to be its lonely self, although it is really a figure of the One, and He helps her. He enters into the '*semblances*', the forms, representations, images and figures which she creates, and by his Presence and His consciousness makes them into '*real shapes*': the semblances become real because of the indwelling Presence of the One; by entering into them, by accepting them as his symbols, he '*makes the symbol equal with the truth*'. Also '*He gives to his timeless thoughts a form in Time*': he projects them in time and space as forms of Himself.

He is the substance, he the self of things;
She has forged from him her works of skill and might:
She wraps him in the magic of her moods
And makes of his myriad truths her countless dreams.

'*He is the substance, he the self of things*'. We sometimes feel the difference between ourselves and our substance: we may look in the mirror and we think, 'What is this? This is not the real me.' But all

this substance, this Matter, is nothing but the One; and at the same time he is the conscious self who inhabits all this. The World-Mother, his Force, has taken this substance and this self of the One and '*forged from him her works of skill and might*'. '*Forged*' is a word that has a double meaning and we can keep both the meanings of the word in mind as we read these lines. In philosophy or mathematics or science, a word is supposed to mean only one thing, but in poetry a word can have several meanings at once and we can keep those different meanings in our mind at the same time; when this is skilfully done, as Sri Aurobindo does it, it enriches the poetry very much. We '*forge*' iron: we heat it and cool it, we hammer and shape it and create an object out of that metal. That is probably the primary meaning here: the Mother shapes each thing in the universe out of the substance and self of the One. But '*to forge*' can also mean to make something false, a forgery or fake that is not the real thing. The poet mentioned the Mother's '*cosmic huge pretence*', so there is a shade here of this other sense of '*forging*': the action of maya, the power of illusion. Then, '*she wraps him in the magic of her moods*'. A '*mood*' is a state of consciousness. The Mother in her play wraps up the One, the conscious Being, in the many different moods of her game. She '*makes of his myriad truths her countless dreams*.' '*Myriad*' means so many that we cannot count them. The infinite One contains an infinite number of truths; the Mother takes those truths and weaves from them the '*countless dreams*' that she is working to make real in her creation.

The Master of being has come down to her,
An immortal child born in the fugitive years.

The One is the Master of existence. He has come down into this creation here, to the Mother at work, in the form of '*an immortal child*' who is constantly being born in the fleeting passage of time.

In objects wrought, in the persons she conceives,
Dreaming she chases her idea of him,
And catches here a look and there a gest:
Ever he repeats in them his ceaseless births.

'Wrought' like '*forged*' means 'made', 'shaped'. In the objects that she shapes, in the persons that she conceives and gives birth to, all the time she is chasing – as part of her game of hide and seek – her idea of him, '*the Master of being*'. She is like an artist trying to express a wonderful conception which she has in mind; from time to time, just for a moment, she captures something of him: a little look here, a gesture there. '*Gest*' is a shortened form of 'gesture', meaning an expressive movement. Whenever she catches some expression of the presence of the Lord in these objects that she makes and in all these persons that she conceives, he is born in them: '*he repeats in them his ceaseless births*', over and over and over again.

He is the Maker and the world he made,
He is the vision and he is the Seer;
He is himself the actor and the act,
He is himself the knower and the known,
He is himself the dreamer and the dream.

The One himself is '*the Maker*', the creator, and also the whole world that he has made. He is the power of vision and also '*the Seer*', the one who sees. He is '*the actor*': the one acts, who does things; and he is also '*the act*', what is done. He is the consciousness that knows and he is everything that consciousness is aware of, everything that is known. He is '*the dreamer*' and also the dream that he dreams.

There are Two who are One and play in many worlds;
In Knowledge and Ignorance they have spoken and met
And light and darkness are their eyes' interchange;
Our pleasure and pain are their wrestle and embrace,

Our deeds, our hopes are intimate to their tale;
They are married secretly in our thought and life.

These '*Two who are One*' are the Master and the Mother: the '*great World-Mother*', the creative Conscious-Force, and the One, of whom she is the Force. They '*play in many worlds*', not only the material world. By becoming Two, the One gains the possibility of relationship, of play, of speaking and meeting, and they do this '*in Knowledge and Ignorance*'. Ignorance is the separated state we are in, having forgotten our origin and our essential oneness; but there is also a state in the Knowledge where individual souls are aware of their oneness, aware of who they really are and where they have come from and yet, still, because they are individualized, there is '*interchange*'. The poet says that the play of '*light and darkness*', the light of Knowledge and the darkness of Ignorance and unconsciousness, which may represent all opposites, '*are their eyes interchange*'. They look at each other and communicate through the play of the dualities. This is their play, and we are part of that '*interchange*': '*our pleasure and pain are their wrestle and embrace*'. The '*Two who are One*' are wrestling – a competitive sport which is also an embrace, for the combatants hold each other very close; the '*pleasure and pain*' which we experience are signs of their '*wrestle and embrace*'; '*Our deeds, our hopes*', what we do and hope for, are closely related to the story that they play out between them; '*They are married secretly in our thought and life*': each of us carries both of them '*in our thought and life*', where they are secretly united.

The universe is an endless masquerade:
For nothing here is utterly what it seems;
It is a dream-fact vision of a truth
Which but for the dream would not be wholly true,

A '*masquerade*' is a festival where people disguise themselves: they

put on fancy dress, with masks to hide their faces, and go out and dance and play in the streets, and no one knows who anyone else is. The universe is like that: '*an endless masquerade*' where nothing is '*utterly what it seems*'. We see the appearance, the disguise; we do not see the truth behind the seeming. Each thing here in the universe '*is a dream-fact vision of a truth / Which but for the dream would not be wholly true*'. The truth-consciousness envisions, as if in a dream, the facts and forms of the universe so that each thing here is a representation of a truth. In one sense, these appearances are illusory: they are dream-appearances, not the whole truth of what they represent; but if the truth behind were not represented in the material world in this disguise, part of its truth would remain unexpressed: it would not be '*wholly true*'. There is an original truth that expresses itself in the symbolic form of facts and happenings and events and objects in the material universe; in one sense it is a '*masquerade*', but the disguise is also an aspect of the truth; without the symbolic '*dream-fact*', the essential truth would not be fully expressed.

A phenomenon stands out significant
Against dim backgrounds of eternity;
We accept its face and pass by all it means;
A part is seen, we take it for the whole.

A '*phenomenon*' is something that happens, something temporary, not the essential truth of the thing but just one expression of it. The plural of '*phenomenon*' is '*phenomena*'. We see phenomena all the time: chair, table, cupboard, tree, this person, that one; these are all different phenomena. Each individual form is '*a phenomenon*'; when we focus on it, it stands out for us in its individual appearance; behind it lies all eternity, but we just accept the phenomenal face and normally do not think, even for a moment, of everything that it

represents, everything that lies behind: we just see a part, and we assume or act as if that part were the whole reality.

Thus have they made their play with us for roles:

Author and actor with himself as scene,

He moves there as the Soul, as Nature she.

This is the way that the Two who are One have made their game, and we are the '*roles*', the characters in '*their play*', their drama. The One is the author, and the actor who plays all the roles; he himself is the scene where the drama is played out. In the drama he is the conscious Soul; she, his creative Force, is Nature, who provides all the forms and forces, the implementation of the play. This is the way they have made their play, acting and interchanging in this universal masquerade.

Here on the earth where we must fill our parts,

We know not how shall run the drama's course;

Our uttered sentences veil in their thought.

We are the characters in their drama; we have to '*fill our parts*': a '*part*' in this sense is the same as a '*role*' in the drama: a part to play, a role to play, a character to play in the drama. We must '*fill our parts*' and give them life; but we can think of it as '*fulfilling*': we must give the part that we have to play its full value, by playing it as well as we possibly can. Each of us has been given a part in this drama and we have to play that part as well as possible, but we do not know how the drama is going to end; and all the things that we say or do '*veil in*' the thoughts of the Two-in-One who are acting out their story and expressing themselves through our thoughts and actions and lives.

Her mighty plan she holds back from our sight:

She has concealed her glory and her bliss

And disguised the Love and Wisdom in her heart;
Of all the marvel and beauty that are hers,
Only a darkened little we can feel.

'She' is the creative Conscious-Force of the Divine, the mighty Mother, acting as what we call Nature: *'He moves here as the Soul; as Nature, She.'* We usually think of Nature as unconscious; she hides her *'mighty plan'* from us, so we are unaware of the great evolutionary plan of the manifestation. Perhaps at the most we experience Nature as Mother Earth, a power that is unconscious and becoming conscious through us: *'She has concealed her glory and her bliss / And disguised the Love and Wisdom in her heart'*: it is all hidden. *'Of all the marvel and beauty that are hers, / Only a darkened little we can feel.'* We admire Nature, we turn to Nature to widen ourselves, to get fresh energy, to escape from our human pettiness, but whatever we can see is only a little *'of all the marvel and beauty that are hers'* and that little is *'darkened'*, veiled by the inconscience.

He too wears a diminished godhead here;
He has forsaken his omnipotence,
His calm he has foregone and infinity.
He knows her only, he has forgotten himself;
To her he abandons all to make her great.

'He', the One, also wears *'a diminished godhead'* here in the material world. As the soul in humanity *'he has forsaken his omnipotence'*, given it up, renounced it; he has also *'foregone'*, abandoned or renounced, *'his calm ... and infinity'*. He is identifying entirely with Nature: *'He knows her only, he has forgotten himself'*; here, in the evolution he has given everything to her, in order to *'make her great'*.

He hopes in her to find himself anew,
Incarnate, wedding his infinity's peace
To her creative passion's ecstasy.

He has done this because '*He hopes in her to find himself anew*', in a new form, a new way: '*Incarnate*', in a material body: when the evolutionary process is fulfilled, there should be a marriage between the peace of the infinity of the Lord and the ecstasy of the Mother's '*creative passion*' in individualised material forms living a divine life upon earth.

Although possessor of the earth and heavens,
He leaves to her the cosmic management
And watches all, the Witness of her scene.

He is the ruler and '*possessor*' of the material world and the higher universal planes, but he has delegated to Nature '*the cosmic management*': she is arranging all movements, all forms and forces in the universe, while he just watches, as '*the Witness of her scene*', her drama.

A supernumerary on her stage,
He speaks no words or hides behind the wings.
He takes birth in her world, waits on her will,
Divines her enigmatic gesture's sense,
The fluctuating chance turns of her mood,
Works out her meanings she seems not to know
And serves her secret purpose in long Time.

In the theatre, a '*supernumerary*' is an extra actor, an unimportant and inconspicuous character who does not have to speak; in Nature's evolutionary drama the soul is like that at first; he does not speak any words, often he is not even on stage, he only '*hides behind the wings*', which are the hidden side parts of the stage where the actors wait until it is time for them to come forward onto the stage and play their parts. The soul is hiding in the background and nobody knows that he is there. He '*takes birth in her world*'. The soul is born again and again in the world of Nature and does what

Nature wills; at the same time he is observing and trying to make sense of what Nature wants and is doing. To '*divine*' is to sense intuitively or to guess; he tries to find out the meaning of her gestures, which are '*enigmatic*', mysterious, riddling; and he tries to understand '*the fluctuating chance turns of her mood*', which changes unpredictably. As the individual conscious being, He tries to work out '*her meanings she seems not to know*'. It is as if Nature is not aware of what she is doing and her meanings and intentions can only be understood through human beings. As the conscious being he is serving and supporting '*her secret purpose in long Time*': he does what she needs him to do to fulfil her aim for the manifestation.

As one too great for him he worships her;
He adores her as his regent of desire,
He yields to her as the mover of his will,
He burns the incense of his nights and days
Offering his life, a splendour of sacrifice.

In these lines and the ones which follow Sri Aurobindo depicts, in a wonderfully poetic way, the relationship between the Lord and his Creative Force, between He and She, the Two-in-One, which he has expressed in his aphorism about the boy and the girl who are in love and at play. As the individual soul he worships and adores Nature, as someone very small and insignificant would look up to a great powerful being: '*As one too great for him he worships her*'. Because he adores and worships her, he lets her rule all his desires: what he wants depends on her; he allows her to move his will; he adores her as his '*regent of desire*': a '*regent*' is a person who rules in place of the king; the real ruler is the soul, but for the time being he has abdicated all his powers to Nature and is allowing her to rule himself and the whole universe. This self-surrender is a sacrifice in the Vedic sense, an offering to a higher being, which is burnt in the

fire of worship; he is burning all his nights and all his days like incense in a continuous sacrifice of worship, '*offering his life, a splendour of sacrifice*'.

A rapt solicitor for her love and grace,
His bliss in her to him is his whole world:
He grows through her in all his being's powers;
He reads by her God's hidden aim in things.

A '*solicitor*' is one who begs for favours; he is '*a rapt solicitor for her love and grace*': in a state of bliss and delight he asks only for '*her love and grace*'; he feels this bliss simply because she exists, her existence is his whole world. Through her, through the action of nature, he grows in all the powers of his being. Nature gives him many different experiences and through them the inner and outer consciousness grows; and as it grows, the conscious being '*reads by her God's hidden aim in things*': according to the experiences and indications that Nature gives him, he begins to become aware of '*God's hidden aim in things*'. This is the image of the soul as a worshipper and servant, deeply absorbed and identified with Nature: the soul is growing through all the experiences that it gains by this total identification with Nature. It is the image of the *bhakta*, who grows through worship and adoration of his chosen deity. Then Sri Aurobindo gives a different image, of a '*courtier*' in the '*retinue*' of an empress.

Or, a courtier in her countless retinue,
Content to be with her and feel her near
He makes the most of the little that she gives
And all she does drapes with his own delight.
A glance can make his whole day wonderful,
A word from her lips with happiness wings the hours.

Nature is like a powerful empress, surrounded by her '*countless*

retinue, her followers; these are all the individual souls; he is just one among so many, he does not ask for any special privileges; he is 'content' simply to be with her, to be one of the many in her retinue, to feel her near. He makes the most of whatever little he receives from her, and whatever she does, he *'drapes with his own delight'*. Delight is the characteristic of the soul, which is always in a state of delight and enjoys and grows by whatever it experiences. So even if she just glances in his direction for a moment, that makes *'his whole day wonderful'*; if she happens to speak to him, *'a word from her lips with happiness wings the hours'*. *'He leans on her'*, relies on her *'for all he does and is'*. For him, everything depends on her, and he receives everything from her with delight.

He builds on her largesses his proud fortunate days
And trails his peacock-plumaged joy of life
And suns in the glory of her passing smile.
In a thousand ways he serves her royal needs;
He makes the hours pivot around her will,
Makes all reflect her whims; all is their play:
This whole wide world is only he and she.

'Largesses' are the gifts that rulers distribute to their followers and subjects. Her generous gestures are the basis for his feeling of being proud, fortunate, of having a good life; and like a peacock showing off his beautiful tail, he trails and parades his *'peacock-plumaged joy of life'* and bathes in the sunlight *'glory of her passing smile'*, because he is so proud and happy to be part of her retinue. Happily he serves her: *'in a thousand ways he serves her royal needs'* and *'makes the hours pivot around her will'*: all the hours of his days turn around what she wants; that is the only thing that is important to him, even if what she wants are just *'whims'*. A *'whim'* is a casual caprice; for him there does not have to be a reason or a justification for her to

want this or that; she chooses, and to him it does not matter why. Everything in the whole universe is their play: lover and beloved, soul and nature, Purusha and Prakriti: *'This whole wide world is only He and She.'*

Sri Aurobindo is showing us the relationship of the Lord and the Mother in their play. How does it come about that the complete identification of the soul with nature lasts so long? It is so powerful that even now when we begin to be conscious we cannot easily break it, because the soul is really in love with nature and there is deep meaning to it. In some forms of spirituality there is the feeling that this is regrettable and needs to be changed; but throughout this canto, Sri Aurobindo makes us see that it expresses a profound and essential Truth. Worship of the Mother, even disguised or expressed as Prakriti, as Nature, is meaningful and valuable for the growth of the individual consciousness. Of course, Sri Aurobindo tells us that essentially the soul is Master, and must become the Ruler. Nature will not rule us forever. You may like to take a look at Sri Aurobindo's poem, 'The World Game', which is subtitled 'The Ishwara to the Ishwari'¹⁷. As the game reaches its culmination the Two-in-One are no longer Purusha and Prakriti but Ishwara-Ishwari, equal partners, equally powerful aspects of the One.

End of Section 4

¹⁷*Collected Poems*, CWSA volume 2, p. 632

Section 5, lines 617-735

In this section Sri Aurobindo continues and develops his exploration of the relationship between '*the Two who are One*', the supreme Conscious Existence, who plays in the manifestation as Soul, and his dynamic Force, who acts here as Nature:

This is the knot that ties together the stars:

The Two who are one are the secret of all power,

The Two who are one are the might and right in things.

The relationship between '*the Two who are One*' is '*the knot that ties together the stars*': it unites the entire universe. Together, they are '*the secret of all power*'; they are '*the might and right in things*'. In this world we feel that there are two powers which determine how things go: what is '*right*', some inner truth; and then '*might*', power or force. These are two aspects of the Two who are One.

His soul, silent, supports the world and her,

His acts are her commandment's registers.

Earlier Sri Aurobindo has told us that '*He*', the One, moves here in the manifestation as Soul, and '*She*', his conscious Force, the creative Power of manifestation is working in what we think of as Nature. Here it is shown that the soul, when it is silent and seems passive, is really supporting the world and Nature, who could not act at all unless she had the silent support of the Lord behind and within, saying 'Yes' to what she does. The silent soul that we almost do not notice is supporting the whole play of relationships that is the world, as it supports her and her action. When the soul acts, as the conscious individual, his actions are a record, a '*register*' of what Nature has commanded.

Happy, inert, he lies beneath her feet:

His breast he offers for her cosmic dance
Of which our lives are the quivering theatre,
And none could bear but for his strength within,
Yet none would leave because of his delight.

These lines remind us of an image in Hindu iconography where we see Kali, the dynamic force, dancing; but she cannot dance unless there is something for her to dance on, so Shiva is shown lying '*passive, inert*', allowing her to dance upon his breast. This is a traditional image which expresses the truth which Sri Aurobindo is showing us here: Kali, the dynamic force, dances in time and space, shaping all the many different forms and forces and events; but her ever-changing dance is supported by the ever-unchanging existence of the Lord. Our lives are the '*theatre*', the stage where that dance is taking place; we are '*quivering*', we are alive; we are moving with that dance which is so tremendous that none of us could bear it if the Lord's strength were not within us supporting the dance; because he is in us, we share in his delight. It is a remarkable thing that however dreadful their life is, people cling to life, they do not want to leave; that is because of the delight of the Lord within enjoying Kali's dance: '*none would leave because of his delight*'.

His works, his thoughts have been devised by her,
His being is a mirror vast of hers:
Active, inspired by her he speaks and moves;
His deeds obey her heart's unspoken demands:
Passive, he bears the impacts of the world
As if her touches shaping his soul and life:
His journey through the days is her sun-march;
He runs upon her roads; hers is his course.

Whatever the individual conscious being does, '*his works, his thoughts*', whatever he thinks and feels, have all '*been devised by her*',

they have been planned and shaped and prepared by Nature. We see this clearly with plants and animals, but human beings often feel separate from nature and that what we do is not natural, not spontaneous but artificial; but in fact everything that we think and do is also an expression of nature: it has all been '*devised by her*'; so when the soul is active as the individual conscious being, he speaks and moves inspired by her; whatever he does, '*his deeds obey her heart's unspoken demands*': Nature does not say anything; impulses from her simply come and shape our behaviour; we are not aware that we are obeying her '*unspoken demands*'. When he is not active, when he is passive and inert, still he is experiencing '*the impacts of the world*', which are '*her touches*', as if she is a potter or a sculptor '*shaping his soul and life*': the individual soul and life get shaped and influenced by '*the impacts of the world*' which are the touches of Nature's shaping hands. As the individual being travels through life, he is marching forward: Nature is the sun by which his march is guided; he is running on her roads, '*hers is his course*': the individual soul follows the universal evolutionary course of Nature.

A witness and student of her joy and dole,
A partner in her evil and her good,
He has consented to her passionate ways,
He is driven by her sweet and dreadful force.

Purusha is often said to be the '*witness*', passively standing back and observing the play of Prakriti or Nature; or he may be actively studying '*her joy and dole*', her happiness and her sorrow and suffering; he is '*a partner*', involved in everything she does, both good and evil, because '*he has consented to her passionate ways*', he has agreed to support whatever she wishes, and accepted to be '*driven*' through the world by her Force which is both '*sweet and dreadful*' at once.

His sanctioning name initials all her works;

His silence is his signature to her deeds;

If you are in charge of an institution or an office, when a document arrives on your desk you '*initial*' it, you write your initials on it to show that you are aware of what is in the document and that you have sanctioned it, agreed to it. Similarly the Lord '*initials*' all Nature's works: he says 'Yes' to everything that she does; and even if he does not initial it with his '*sanctioning name*', if he just remains silent, it is well known that silence means consent. If you send around a notice that this or that is going to happen, and no reply comes back, then it is understood that everyone agrees. So '*his silence is his signature to her deeds*': even by remaining silent, he shows his consent to what she does.

In the execution of her drama's scheme,

In her fancies of the moment and its mood,

In the march of this obvious ordinary world

Where all is deep and strange to the eyes that see

And Nature's common forms are marvel-wefts,

She through his witness sight and motion of might

Unrolls the material of her cosmic Act, ...

We shall pause here. After this Sri Aurobindo goes on to give a long list of things that form part Nature's '*cosmic Act*', which we shall look at later. On her part, Nature, as the Executrix, is '*executing*', carrying out, the scheme of her drama. Also she has '*her fancies of the moment and its mood*'; Sri Aurobindo often refers to the way that Nature seems to do things for no reason, just as a caprice, a whim, a fancy. Then there is the way that things go on '*in the march of this obvious ordinary world*'; we are so used to the ordinary normal way things go on in the world that we take it for granted and do not look closer; but if we would open our eyes and really see we would

realise that in '*this obvious ordinary world*' everything is in fact '*deep and strange*': if we would see things as they really are, we would realise that all ordinary things are a series of miracles: '*Nature's common forms*', plants and animals and people, plastic chairs, fans, plates and spoons ... all these things are in fact '*marvel-wefts*'. A '*weft*' is something woven, like cloth or a spider's web. If we begin to look closer, if we take a little bit of any of these '*common forms*' and look at them under the microscope, there are scales of magnification which allow us to see how marvellously they are constructed, what '*marvel-wefts*' they really are. Through all of these movements Nature is unfolding her drama's '*scheme*', unrolling '*the material of her cosmic Act*'. All the infinite qualities and possibilities and powers of the Lord are getting unrolled, in space and time and in the relationships between all these many forms that she has made. The transcendent One contains all infinite potentiality within himself; here in Nature's '*cosmic Act*' some of these possibilities get unrolled. Nature does this '*through his witness sight and motion of might*': only because he looks at it and accepts it, all this can unfold; because he allows the movement of his power, it can happen; otherwise this universe would not exist at all. Now Sri Aurobindo lists some examples of '*the material of her cosmic Act*':

Her happenings that exalt and smite the soul,
Her force that moves, her powers that save and slay,
Her Word that in the silence speaks to our hearts,
Her silence that transcends the summit Word,
Her heights and depths to which our spirit moves,
Her events that weave the texture of our lives
And all by which we find or lose ourselves,
Things sweet and bitter, magnificent and mean,
Things terrible and beautiful and divine.

All these things are the '*material of her cosmic Act*'. She is unrolling them all. Some of her happenings '*exalt*' the soul, lift it up with joy; others are terrible and '*smite the soul*', giving a dreadful shock or wound; or even, the same happenings that give a blow, if the soul is strong enough, may '*exalt*' it, lift it up, make it feel its own strength. To '*exalt*' means 'to lift up'. '*Her force that moves, her powers that save and slay*': her force moves things and events, she has great powers that can save, but they may also sometimes slay, kill, destroy. Then there is her creative Word: sometimes, when we are very silent, it speaks to our hearts and something flowers and blossoms in our life. Or beyond even that wonderful creative Word, there is a supreme silence: '*Her silence that transcends*', that goes beyond, even the very highest '*summit Word*'. She has very high levels, '*heights*', as well as '*depths*', deep spaces to which our spirit can move. Then there are the small ordinary events '*that weave the texture of our lives*': if one observes, in the course of a day many different things happen, one can have many different experiences just in the course of one day. For much of the time our life may seem to be very much the same, the days have much the same '*texture*' or feel; '*texture*' is a quality that we feel with our fingers; but now and then things come up and give some different feelings, the texture of our days changes. '*The texture of our days*' is woven by all these happenings, all these experiences, qualities, moods: everything which helps us to find ourselves, and everything by which we seem to lose ourselves, '*things sweet and bitter, magnificent and mean*', wonderful things or very small, petty, unpleasant things, poor, small things, as well as '*things terrible and beautiful and divine*'. All of the things listed in these lines are part of the '*cosmic Act*' of Nature and the scheme of her drama.

Her empire in the cosmos she has built,
He is governed by her subtle and mighty laws.

An *'empire'* is a huge territory ruled by one person, an emperor or empress. Nature is an empress: she has built up her empire in the *'cosmos'*, the universe; and *'he'* as the conscious individual, the soul, *'is governed by her subtle and mighty laws'*, ruled by the laws of nature: not just the laws of matter but all the subtle psychological laws of the universe too.

His consciousness is a babe upon her knees,
His being a field of her vast experiment,
Her endless space is the playground of his thoughts;

Nature holds the individual consciousness like *'a babe upon her knees'*, playing with him as a mother plays with her little child. The being of the Lord, extended in space and time, has become *'a field of her vast experiment'*: the laboratory where Nature is carrying out her immense experiment of evolution. And the *'endless space'* which she has created for her drama *'is the playground of his thoughts'*. We can understand this in two ways: from the point of view of the individual consciousness, of the Lord involved in each of the forms of manifestation, the universe is a vast space where his thoughts can play and discover and grow, as children play and discover and grow in the school playground. From the point of view of the Supreme, we can say that all the shapes and forms which Nature manifests in the universe to play and interact there, are expressions of thoughts of the Lord, to which she is giving forms in space and time; both things are true. Although she seems to rule, she is his Force, always carrying out his will.

She binds to knowledge of the shapes of Time
And the creative error of limiting mind
And chance that wears the rigid face of fate
And her sport of death and pain and Nescience,
His changed and struggling immortality.

The Lord is of course immortal; but when he identifies himself with his individualised forms and takes his stand within each of us separately, then his immortality is changed: the surface consciousness, which is bound *'to knowledge of the shapes of Time'* is not aware of it; in us, *'his changed and struggling immortality'* is bound by all kinds of things: *'the creative error of limiting mind'*; *'chance that wears the rigid face of fate'*; Nature's play of *'death and pain and nescience'*. In us the Lord faces our struggles in an individual form, assailed on all sides by all the other forms and energies in the universe. In her drama Nature binds the supreme consciousness individualized in forms *'to knowledge of the shapes of Time'*: awareness of all the other shapes and forms; she binds him to *'limiting mind'*, which is bound to make mistakes because it is limited and limiting – but the error of the mind has a creative aspect: through the action of mind new things happen in her drama. Although in his essence he is immortal and all-blissful and omniscient, in his nature parts she binds him to this game of hers, *'her sport of death and pain and Nescience'*: not knowing. The Lord is bound here in each of us and in all the forms and movements of the universe.

His soul is a subtle atom in a mass,

His substance a material for her works.

An atom is more or less the smallest individuality that we know. For a long time the soul in matter is like that: just one tiny little atom in this mass of matter, the mass of the universe, the mass of the body: *'a subtle atom in a mass'*. But matter, after all, is the substance of the Lord himself: the substance of his eternal and infinite existence is turned by Nature into *'a material for her works'*.

His spirit survives amid the death of things,

He climbs to eternity through being's gaps,

He is carried by her from Night to deathless Light.

In fact, he is still immortal; although all forms die, although everything in the universe dies, *'his spirit survives amid the death of things'*; his spirit lives on in the midst of all that dying; and there is an evolutionary process going on: he has involved himself within the manifestation, but the secret purpose in nature is that all these individual forms shall become fully conscious again; so the Divine as the individual is climbing back to eternity *'through being's gaps'*, the subtle spaces through which the soul can grow. Nature is carrying him, in each of us, from the *'Night'* of unconsciousness to the *'deathless Light'* of full divine consciousness.

This grand surrender is his free-will's gift,
His pure transcendent force submits to hers.

The surrender of the soul to material Nature, of the Lord to the action of his creative Force, of Purusha to Prakriti, is a gift of *'free-will'*, chosen and deliberate. Some spiritual philosophies appear to say that the supreme consciousness is somehow forced to be subject to Nature and her play, her power of illusion; but here Sri Aurobindo says that it has been willed. It is a *'grand surrender'* of the supreme consciousness to the action of his own creative force, *'his free-will's gift'*. The absolute freedom of *'his pure transcendent force'* is not limited by anything, cannot be compelled by anything: it willingly submits to the action of limiting nature, for a purpose. At the end of this canto Sri Aurobindo will tell us exactly what the purpose is. The Lord is not compelled by anything; there is a deliberate choice of the Supreme to submit to this play.

In the mystery of her cosmic ignorance,
In the insoluble riddle of her play,
A creature made of perishable stuff,
In the pattern she has set for him he moves,
He thinks with her thoughts, with her trouble his bosom heaves;

He seems the thing that she would have him seem,
He is whatever her artist will can make.

He submits to the action of nature. It is a mystery how the supreme consciousness can enter into this universal ignorance. How can it happen? The play of nature is like a riddle that we cannot solve, it seems '*insoluble*'. The supreme Being becomes a creature '*made of perishable stuff*': stuff that will not last, that has to die because it is '*perishable*', like milk and eggs and vegetables and other things that do not last long. In his many forms, the supreme consciousness accepts to move in the pattern that nature sets for him. Even thoughts which we think are our own are actually coming to us from universal mind; the conscious being in us '*thinks with her thoughts*', thoughts formed by universal nature. Or we may feel suddenly sad, because some wave of universal sadness has entered into us: '*with her trouble his bosom heaves*', he feels moved to weeping by intense feelings that have formed in nature's play and have entered into his individual being. He takes on whatever appearance she wants him to wear and he becomes whatever Nature can make of him with her artistry.

Although she drives him on her fancy's roads,
At play with him as with her child or slave,
To freedom and the Eternal's mastery
And immortality's stand above the world,
She moves her seeming puppet of an hour

Nature may seem to be just playing with the individual being; she may seem to be driving him here and there according to her fancy, without any real reason or purpose, playing with him as she might play with a child or a slave who has to do whatever she wants, or with a '*puppet*', a figure that you can move as you want, playing with it for a while; but really she is moving '*her seeming puppet of an*

hour' towards 'freedom and the Eternal's mastery', towards 'immortality's stand above the world': independent of the world, free from death and ignorance, Master and Lord again. Now, in his individualised forms, he seems to be a slave and puppet of Nature, but with her 'artist will' she is preparing him and moving him, in each of them, towards his fulfilment: freedom and mastery and immortality.

Even in his mortal session in body's house,
An aimless traveller between birth and death,
Ephemeral dreaming of immortality,
To reign she spurs him. He takes up her powers;
He has harnessed her to the yoke of her own law.
His face of human thought puts on a crown.

Even here and now, in '*his mortal session*', while he is still subject to death and ignorance and seems to be an aimless traveller, travelling between birth and death not knowing why he is here, and perhaps dreaming of immortality even though his existence is '*ephemeral*' and can last only a very short time, still Nature is spurring him, driving him forwards. She is driving him on '*to reign*', to become master of himself and master of his environment. Because Nature is spurring him, the individual being does try to understand and control himself and things around him: '*He takes up her powers*'. Human beings have learned how to use the powers of nature in many ways: to build beautiful buildings; to create gardens and breed hybrid flowers; to travel to the moon and to Mars. To do this, '*he has harnessed her to the yoke of her own law*'. We put a 'yoke' on a bullock so that it will pull a cart or a plough; similarly human beings have '*harnessed*' some powers of nature such as electricity and magnetism, wind-power and solar power. We have harnessed the powers of nature to her own law, her law of progress. In this

way, the *'face of human thought puts on a crown'*. This is what Nature has been driving us towards: to become rulers and masters. The human race has achieved some kind of mastery but it is not yet complete, and so far we do not seem to have learned to use our mastery very wisely.

Held in her leash, bound to her veiled caprice,
He studies her ways if so he may prevail
Even for an hour and she work out his will;
He makes of her his moment passion's serf:
To obey her feigns, she follows her creature's lead:
For him she was made, lives only for his use.

At our level of evolution the human race has put on a crown and become the dominant species upon earth, but nevertheless we are still held in nature's *'leash'*. We put a *'leash'* on a dog so that we can control him; similarly we are under the control of nature, and still *'bound to her veiled caprice'*. Although we do not notice it, she can do what she wants with us, we are still subject to the laws and whims of Nature. But like clever dogs, we are observing and studying the ways of nature, to find how we can make her do what we want, how we can *'prevail'* over her, control her, even if only *'for an hour'*, a very short time. Human beings want Nature to obey them, and we want become independent of her. *'He makes of her his moment passion's serf'*. A *'serf'* is a bonded labourer, a slave, a person with no freedom of choice, who has to do what they are told whether they like it or not. We human beings try to make nature our slave and use her powers to fulfil our wishes, our fancies, our desires, our *'moment passions'*; and she pretends to obey us: *'she follows her creature's lead'*. She follows our suggestions and initiatives and does what human beings want her to do; she acts as if she exists only to fulfil our wishes. Some people think that we have to make whatever

use we can of nature's powers: that is what we are here for, that is why she exists: to serve us; but Sri Aurobindo points out that this does not make us independent of Nature:

But conquering her, then is he most her slave
He is her dependent, all his means are hers
Nothing without her he can, she rules him still.

This is particularly true if we remain enslaved to the materialistic view of life, for then without her we cannot do anything at all, we are totally dependent on material nature; we cannot do without her, so she is still ruling us. This is the present state of human development. In the coming lines Sri Aurobindo will show us further evolutionary steps.

At last he wakes to a memory of Self:
He sees within the face of deity,
The Godhead breaks out through the human mould:
Her highest heights she unmasks and is his mate.

When Nature has done her work, the conscious being wakes up to the memory of who he really is and '*sees within the face of deity*', the divine presence within himself. Then '*the Godhead*', the individualised Divine '*breaks out through the human mould*'. Sri Aurobindo tells us that the human being is a '*mould*' in which formless spirit gets shaped by the evolutionary action of Nature. When it is fully formed, then it can break out through the mould and reveal itself; and when that happens Nature too takes off her mask of unconsciousness, reveals her '*highest heights*', and shows herself as '*his mate*', the partner and playmate of the Lord: they are the '*Two who are One*'.

Till then he is a plaything in her game;
Her seeming regent, yet her fancy's toy,

A living robot moved by her energy's springs,
He acts as in the movements of a dream,
An automaton stepping in the grooves of Fate,
He stumbles on driven by her whip of Force:

Until that happens, until *'the Godhead breaks out through the human mould'*, he, the individual being, is *'a plaything in her game'*; he may seem to be the *'regent'*, the ruler, but he is just the toy of nature's fancy, she can move him as she likes. Sri Aurobindo even says that he is *'a living robot'*. A *'robot'* is a machine which can move around and perform tasks; nowadays some of them can speak or play games. A human being is not entirely mechanical, it is *'a living robot'*, but just as the robot is moved by its designer or user, we are driven by the energy of universal nature; Sri Aurobindo uses the word *'springs'* which makes us think of clockwork: there used to be toys that you could wind up like a mechanical clock, and then they would run around for a while, as long as the spring was unwinding. He says that we act *'as in the movements of a dream'*, doing things without really knowing why we are doing them. *'Automaton'* is an old word for a robot, a figure or creature that moves by clockwork: sometimes it may run on tracks, following the *'grooves'* which the determinisms of Nature have prepared for it. Those grooves form what we call *'Fate'*, Destiny; as long as we are subject to material Nature it seems that we cannot escape those *'grooves'*. The human being is like that: driven by *'her whip of Force'* *'he stumbles on'*: he takes a step, trips and falls and takes another step; but all the time Nature is driving him on with *'her whip of Force'*. She wants him to go further, to evolve until he comes to the point where he can see in himself *'the face of deity'*.

His thought labours, a bullock in Time's fields
His will he thinks his own, is shaped in her forge.

'Labours': In English, this word means simply 'to work very hard'; but in French 'labourer' means 'to plough'. Our mind is always at work; Sri Aurobindo suggests that the mind is working hard to serve the purposes of Time, the evolutionary unfolding; the bullock is driven on, pulls the plough so that the farmer can come behind and sow the seed: the human mind is working hard, making grooves in the fields of Time; some fresh growth will sprout from those grooves perhaps. Human beings think that we have free will, that we can choose, we are convinced that this makes us distinctly different from animals, who are rather more obviously driven by nature; but even this will which we think is free and our own '*is shaped in her forge*'. A '*forge*' is a workshop where metals are shaped: Nature is like a craftsman shaping our wills as well as our thoughts and actions: we will what she has shaped us to will.

Obedient to World-Nature's dumb control,
Driven by his own formidable Power,
His chosen partner in a titan game,
Her will he has made the master of his fate,
Her whim the dispenser of his pleasure and pain;

We read that the Soul has surrendered to Nature out of his free will: out of the truly free will of the Divine he has submitted to the rule of his own Conscious-Force acting in Nature; individualized in each of his creatures, the One is '*obedient to World-Nature's dumb control*'; he is '*driven by his own formidable Power*'. '*Formidable*' means powerful, tremendous. He has accepted to be driven by her because she is the '*partner*' he has chosen for this '*titan game*'. '*Titan*' means immense, huge, on a superhuman scale. In this game, he has accepted '*her will*' as '*the master of his fate*': he will do whatever she tells him; she need not even have a reason for it, he accepts it even if it is only '*her whim*', a trivial fancy; according to the '*whim*' of

Nature, he will experience either '*pleasure*' or '*pain*'.

He has sold himself into her regal power
For any blow or boon that she may choose:
Even in what is suffering to our sense,
He feels the sweetness of her mastering touch,
In all experience meets her blissful hands;
On his heart he bears the happiness of her tread
And the surprise of her arrival's joy
In each event and every moment's chance.

It is as if he has sold himself as slave, a serf, '*into her regal power*' so she can do whatever she wants with him; whether it is a '*blow*' or a '*boon*', a gift, the soul enjoys the touches of Nature, '*even in what is suffering to our sense*'. When Nature gives us a blow our surface consciousness feels very unhappy and wonders why that has happened to us; but the soul '*feels the sweetness of her mastering touch*': he feels 'Oh, my beloved, my Mother is caressing me.' '*In all experience*' he feels the touch of her hands, which brings bliss; lying beneath her feet his heart feels the happiness of her tread as she dances, even if her dance is very fierce and frightening; whatever happens, '*in each event and every moment's chance*', whatever comes, he feels surprise and delight: 'Oh, she has come!' Whatever form she takes, the soul enjoys the delight of the Mother's touch and the Mother's presence.

All she can do is marvellous in his sight:
He revels in her, a swimmer in her sea,
A tireless amateur of her world-delight,
He rejoices in her every thought and act
And gives consent to all that she can wish;
Whatever she desires he wills to be:

He adores her: whatever she does is marvellous to him, '*he revels in*

her. 'To revel' in something means to take intense delight in it, to luxuriate in it. Here Sri Aurobindo gives the image of the soul as '*a swimmer*' in the sea of nature: there is this whole ocean of existence and the little golden soul is swimming in it and enjoying it so much that even if a big wave comes crashing down on him he feels the Mother's presence enveloping and surrounding him and '*revels*' in it, thoroughly enjoying it. He is '*a tireless amateur of her world-delight*'. This word '*amateur*' in everyday English means somebody who is not a professional: there are amateur tennis players or golfers and professional ones; there are professional actors and then there are amateurs who act just for fun; if we look at the root of the word, we see that it means a person who loves something. The soul is '*a tireless amateur*' of Nature's play, endlessly enjoying whatever she does: '*he rejoices in her every thought and act*'. He also gives his consent '*to all that she can wish*': in fact, if he does not give his consent, nature cannot do anything; if the soul says 'No' to any of her movements then she will have to stop it; but as long as the soul is blindly adoring Nature, he will say 'Yes' to whatever she wants to do, and become whatever she wants him to be.

The Spirit, the innumerable One,
He has left behind his lone eternity,
He is an endless birth in endless Time,
Her finite's multitude in an infinite Space.

He is '*the Spirit*', the One who has become '*innumerable*', the Many, the countless beings in the manifestation. We can say that beyond manifestation the One is alone in his eternity and infinity; he contains all possibilities within him and is the sole existence. Entering into the manifestation '*he has left behind his lone eternity*' to become an '*endless birth in endless Time*': he is born again and again in all the different forms and beings of the manifestation. A

'multitude' means many, many people or things. He has become '*her finite's multitude in an infinite Space*'. The material world that nature has created is '*finite*', limited, and the countless creatures in it live and die and then take other forms; that finite creation of hers exists in '*an infinite Space*'. He has become all that.

I suggest that you reread this passage carefully: quietly open your mind and heart, let it sink in. There are such deep, subtle truths in this 'Secret Knowledge' which Sri Aurobindo is sharing with us; if we want to know how he sees the world, we should give it a little time and concentration.

End of Section 5

Section 6, lines 736-842

The master of existence lurks in us
And plays at hide-and-seek with his own Force;
In Nature's instrument loiters secret God.

'The master of existence' is hiding in us, because he is playing *'hide-and-seek with his own Force'*. This reminds us of Sri Aurobindo's aphorism, about God and Nature being like a boy and a girl in love and at play who run away from each other in order to be caught and hide from each other in order to be found. *'In Nature's instrument loiters secret God'*: each form in the manifestation is an instrument of Nature, one of the tools that she uses for her evolutionary game; but within each of them God is secretly loitering. *'To loiter'* means to move slowly, or to take time; *'Secret God'* is enjoying this game, he is hidden within Nature's instruments and he is not in a hurry, he is loitering, taking his time; in his own good time he will reveal himself.

The Immanent lives in man as in his house;
He has made the universe his pastime's field,
A vast gymnasium of his works of might.

The *'Immanent'* is the Divine dwelling within the forms of the manifestation: *'im-manent'* means *'dwelling within'*. The immanent Divine *'lives in man as in his house'*; each of us is a house for the divine presence. *'He has made the universe his pastime's field'*; a *'pastime'* is a leisure occupation, something that you do for fun, for amusement, or just to pass the time; the whole universe is a playground for the Lord to play in. It is also *'A vast gymnasium of his works of might'*. *'Gymnasium'* is a word from ancient Greek. In ancient Greece they had public places for men and boys, where the

young ones would learn from the older ones; there were rooms for exercising, baths, and halls where they could sit around and rest and talk and learn from each other. In English a '*gymnasium*' means a place where you exercise to strengthen your body; in other European languages it has come to mean a secondary school, but in English it means a place where you have all the equipment to learn and practice exercises to make yourself strong. The universe is a place for learning and growth for the '*Immanent*', the Divine dwelling within the forms of Nature.

All-knowing he accepts our darkened state,
Divine, wears shapes of animal or man;
Eternal, he assents to Fate and Time,
Immortal, dallies with mortality.

The Divine is '*All-knowing*', but he has accepted '*our darkened state*', our state of limitation and ignorance; he is divine, but '*wears shapes of animal or man*'; he is eternal, but he accepts, '*assents*' to experience '*Fate and Time*'; the Eternal is beyond Time and the determinisms which we call Fate, but by entering into the forms of the manifestation, he accepts the limitations of Time and the determinisms of Fate; he is immortal but he '*dallies with mortality*'. 'To dally' means to play or to do something without taking it seriously. Because he is immortal, he can play at being mortal, at having to die.

The All-Conscious ventured into Ignorance
The All-Blissful bore to be insensible.
Incarnate in a world of strife and pain,
He puts on joy and sorrow like a robe
And drinks experience like a strengthening wine.

The Divine is '*All-Conscious*', but he has undertaken the adventure of '*Ignorance*'. 'To venture' means to dare, to take a risk, to do

something although you do not know what the outcome will be. What is it like for the '*All-Conscious*' to become so limited in consciousness? To become ignorant as we are, unconscious as the plants are? The Divine is also '*All-Blissful*', he is Ananda itself, and yet he has accepted '*to be insensible*', which means to have no senses, no capacity to feel, no sensitivity. He has put on a body and become '*incarnate*' in this world of '*strife and pain*', of struggle and suffering; he puts on '*joy and sorrow like a robe*', wearing different moods like a child dressing up: now he puts on the joy robe and tomorrow the sorrow robe, and whatever experience comes he drinks it in like '*a strengthening wine*'. Wine symbolically represents delight, bliss, and some kinds of wine are supposed to make the body stronger; the immanent Divine '*drinks all experience like a strengthening wine*'.

He whose transcendence rules the pregnant Vasts,
Prescient now dwells in our subliminal depths,
A luminous individual Power, alone.

'He', is the One, the Lord, who as the Transcendent rules '*the pregnant Vasts*', the empty vast spaces that have not yet given birth to the manifestation. The Transcendent is beyond all limits, he rules everything, including what has not yet manifested; but as the Immanent he is now dwelling in us, in our '*subliminal depths*'. '*Subliminal*' means 'below the threshold of consciousness'; we are not aware of him living there in our deeper parts. There he is '*prescient*': he knows already what is going to happen in the future. The '*master of existence*' the transcendent One, has chosen to live within each of us as '*a luminous individual Power, alone*'.

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

The ineffable puissance of his solitude.

'The Absolute, the Perfect, the Alone' is the Supreme in his transcendent aspect, beyond manifestation; in order for the manifestation to happen, that absolute ineffable existence of consciousness, force and bliss *'has called out of the Silence his mute Force'*. His aspect of creative force is within him; in the Silence, in the *'featureless and formless hush'* before anything is manifested, she is lying asleep; as long as she lying asleep, *'immobile'*, not moving, she is *'guarding the ineffable puissance'*, the inexpressible power, of his *'solitude'*. When he calls and wakes her, things begin to change. She is *'his mute Force'*: the Supreme Mother, the creative Force who will give birth to the creation. She is the dynamic aspect of the Supreme, his Shakti; as long as she is asleep in his indrawn Silence there are no forms, no qualities and no movement. There seems to be nothing in that Silence, but in fact all possibilities are sleeping there with her; but as long as she is sleeping, immobile, she is guarding his *'solitude'*, his aloneness, protecting the *'ineffable puissance'*, the inexpressible absolute power of the aloneness of the One.

The Absolute, the Perfect, the Alone

Has entered with his silence into space:

He has fashioned these countless persons of one self;

He has built a million figures of his power;

He lives in all, who lived in his Vast alone;

Space is himself and Time is only he.

Before the creative force wakes up and sets to work, that One, the *'Alone'* is holding all possibilities within himself. Then, from being the One, the Alone, containing all potentiality within him, he extends himself in time and space, and enters *'with his silence into space'*. *'He has fashioned'*, shaped and made all *'these countless persons'*: all the individual forms in the universe. Each of them is a

'person', a unique expression of the one self. He has made the entire manifestation out of his own self, '*built a million figures of his power*'. He shows his power in so many, many different ways; here '*a million*' means not only one million, but millions of millions. The one has entered into all these persons and figures of his power: '*he lives in all*'. Beyond manifestation he lives '*in his Vast alone*'; but when he extends himself as the manifestation, he is omnipresent everywhere in it: as Space and Time and all the individual forms in the universe, he becomes and enters into every part of it. '*Space is himself and Time is only he*': that One spreads himself out in space and in time and in all these many different forms. He is fully present in each moment of time, in every inch or centimetre or nanometre of space, in every one of these forms and in all the atoms and molecules that make up the forms.

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

There was a beautiful rhythmic repetition of the mantric words, '*The Absolute, the Perfect, the Alone*'; this time it is changed slightly, to '*The Absolute, the Perfect, the Immune*'. Someone who is '*immune*' cannot be harmed. Nowadays in medical science we talk about 'the immune system' in our bodies that protects us against germs or viruses; if 'the immune system' is weakened then we may fall sick. In another sense of the word, ambassadors who come to India with their staff to represent their country are granted 'diplomatic immunity', which means that they are not subject to the laws of the land in exactly the same way that everybody else is; they have some

immunity because they are representing another country. When the Absolute, the Perfect enters into the forms of the manifestation, he remains '*immune*'; he cannot be harmed or hurt in any way by anything. The '*One who is in us as our secret self*' has put on '*our mask of imperfection*', disguising his true immunity. All of us, the many persons of the '*one self*', are masks with which he disguises his perfection. The original meaning of the word '*person*' is '*a mask*', the mask that an actor in the ancient theatre used to wear to indicate which role he was playing. Even today in West Africa, tribes have their sacred masks, each representing a god, a power; one particular person is allowed to wear each mask on ceremonial occasions to represent a particular spirit, and he may be known by the name of the mask he is privileged to wear. Each of us wears a mask of the One as we play our role in Nature's drama.

'He has made this tenement of flesh his own'. This refers to our body. '*Flesh*' is our living tissue and a '*tenement*' is a large house where you can rent a room to stay for a while. He has entered into the mortal body and made it his own. He has also '*cast*' '*his image in the human measure*'. '*To cast*' sometimes means '*to throw*': we say that the farmer '*casts his seeds*', spreading them on the field that he has prepared; but we also speak about casting a bronze statue. The sculptor prepares an image and then casts it in bronze. All forms in the manifestation are figures of the One; but we are told that God has made human beings '*in his own image*', implying that the human form is an especially significant image of the Lord. Here Sri Aurobindo says that the One has cast his image '*in the human measure*' with a purpose: so '*that to his divine measure we might rise*': He has made these small human images of himself so that they shall grow and become vast and infinite and eternal like the Supreme himself. It is his intention that we should rise '*to his divine measure*'.

Then in a figure of divinity
The Maker shall recast us and impose
A plan of godhead on the mortal's mould
Lifting our finite minds to his infinite,
Touching the moment with eternity.

When the right time comes the '*Maker*', the one who has cast us, is going to '*recast us*'. He is going to cast us again, no longer in this figure of a limited separated human being but in '*a figure of divinity*'. On the '*mortal's mould*', this limited shape, he is going to impose his new plan, his '*plan of Godhead*', of individualized divinity, which will mean '*lifting our finite minds to his infinite*'. What is '*infinite*' has no limits; '*finite*' means that there are boundaries and limits; our limited minds will be widened to infinity, and he will touch '*the moment with eternity*': it is possible to experience eternity, timelessness, freedom from time, in a moment; it is one of the '*peak experiences*' that human beings can have: just for a moment we may experience what is eternal and our own eternity. When the Maker recasts us into his '*plan of godhead*', that will become our normal experience.

This transfiguration is earth's due to heaven:
A mutual debt binds man to the Supreme:
His nature we must put on as he put ours;
We are sons of God and must be even as he:
His human portion, we must grow divine.
Our life is a paradox with God for key.

A '*transfiguration*' happens when an earthly form becomes glorious and divine. The Maker is going to change our forms from this little human mould to the divine mould, and Sri Aurobindo says that '*this transfiguration is earth's due to heaven*': earth owes this change to heaven, because '*a mutual debt binds man to the Supreme*'. The

Supreme owes us something and we owe him something: there is a debt to be paid on both sides – that is what ‘*mutual*’ means. We must put on his divine nature in the same way that he has put on our limited human nature because ‘*we are sons of God and must be even as he*’: we must become like him. We are ‘*his human portion*’: each of us is a little human expression of God; so ‘*we must grow divine*’: that is the real meaning and purpose of our lives, and the ‘*key*’ to solving all our problems. ‘*Our life is a paradox with God for key*’. A ‘*paradox*’ is an apparent contradiction; what seems contradictory may really be true. For example Sri Aurobindo writes ‘The whole world yearns after freedom, yet each creature is in love with his chains’.¹⁸ He often writes in paradoxes, in order to wake up our minds and widen them out of the fixed and limited way of seeing things that thinks ‘Either this must be true or that – they can’t both be true’; for in fact, in life the most apparently contradictory things are true, and we should try to find out the truths which link them so that they make sense. ‘*Our life is a paradox with God for key*.’ If we know that we are a ‘*human portion*’ of the divine, that gives a new meaning to our lives; if we know that we are supposed to grow, evolve, and that this is the human journey, the purpose of our existence, this gives value to our life and changes our outlook on everything.

But meanwhile all is a shadow cast by a dream
 And to the musing and immobile spirit
 Life and himself don the aspect of a myth,
 The burden of a long unmeaning tale.

But until that transfiguration happens, until we wake up to our inner divinity, everything ‘*is a shadow cast by a dream*’, even to the spirit. We read in the earlier sections how the spirit is fascinated by

¹⁸*Essays in Philosophy and Yoga*, CWSA volume 13, p. 204

nature: he is musing, he is immobile, he does not exercise his power; he just says 'yes' to everything that nature does. When the spirit is in that state, life and even his own existence seem like '*a myth*', an ancient story that may not be true; life seems like '*a long unmeaning tale*': a story without meaning. The poet uses the word '*burden*' here again; we saw earlier that this word has two meanings: a '*burden*' is a heavy load; but it can also refer to the central or essential meaning of a message; here again we can hold both those meanings in our minds at the same time: when Sri Aurobindo says that to the musing spirit life seems like the '*burden of a long unmeaning tale*', it can mean something heavy that has to be carried, borne and endured, but it may also mean the message of the tale, if at all it has a meaning and a message.

For the key is hid and by the Inconscient kept;
The secret God beneath the threshold dwells.

God is the key to the paradox and the tale; but God is hidden in '*the Inconscient*'. We remember that Sri Aurobindo wrote that God and Nature are like a boy and girl in love and at play; when the Mother read this aphorism with the children in the Ashram playground, one of them asked an intelligent question : 'Where does God hide?' The Mother replied 'In the Inconscient, and Nature hides there too'. '*Inconscient*' means 'without consciousness'. The concept of the Inconscient is very important in Sri Aurobindo's teaching. If we think of Matter, there seems to be no consciousness there; when we look at the whole process of evolution, our universe seems to have emerged from a state of total unconsciousness, the Inconscient. Sri Aurobindo says in *The Life Divine* that the Inconscient is infinite and eternal just as the Superconscient is, and everything that is in the Superconscient is also in the Inconscient; but the Inconscient has cut itself off from the memory of its Origin. The evolutionary journey is

meant to recover that memory, so that the Creation can become fully conscious again. In our present state of ignorance, of partial consciousness, the secret God within us, who we are meant to become, is living *'beneath the threshold'*, deep down below the threshold of our consciousness.

In a body obscuring the immortal Spirit
A nameless Resident vesting unseen powers
With Matter's shapes and motives beyond thought
And the hazard of an unguessed consequence,
An omnipotent indiscernible Influence,
He sits, unfelt by the form in which he lives
And veils his knowledge by the groping mind.

'The secret God' is sitting within these material bodies which obscure *'the immortal Spirit'* and cover it with darkness; he is within them as *'a nameless Resident'*. A *'resident'* is a person who resides or lives somewhere; but *'Resident'* with a capital letter has another sense too: during British rule in India, there were many independent or semi-independent princely states ruled by Indian princes; in each of them there would be an official British Resident: somebody who lived there and represented the government of British India; he was not officially the ruler, but he had a great deal of influence behind the scenes. Here in our bodies lives a *'nameless Resident'*, *'the secret God'*. *'He sits, unfelt by the form in which he lives'*: normally we do not feel his presence. He is omniscient, but he *'veils his knowledge'* with *'the groping mind'*. *'To grope'* means to feel your way through darkness; if the light goes off suddenly, you may have to grope your way through the darkness to find a candle or an emergency light. Our mind is constantly groping through the darkness of ignorance; it wants to have more light, but it is surrounded by darkness and has to uncertainly feel its way to find a little truth, a little certitude.

What is this '*nameless Resident*' doing as he sits here in the body? He is '*vesting unseen powers / With Matter's shapes and motives beyond thought / And the hazard of an unguessed consequence*'. He has invisible powers, which he is '*vesting*', clothing with '*Matter's shapes*' and with '*motives*', compelling reasons for action that are '*beyond thought*'; he is also putting on them '*the hazard of an unguessed consequence*'. The verb '*vest*' means 'to clothe' or 'to dress', but it can also mean to give someone a particular responsibility and the authority to carry out that task; he gives each of these powers shapes and motives, a programme and goal, but there is also the whole play of chance; '*hazard*' is chance, risk, unpredictability; the outcome is not known, it is '*an unguessed consequence*'. The nameless Resident lives in the body as '*an omnipotent indiscernible Influence*'. '*Omnipotent*' means 'all-powerful', and '*indiscernible*' means that he cannot be seen or detected; nevertheless he is an all-powerful influence. The presence of the divine Resident in us is arranging our lives, guiding us by his influence. At the same time he is the '*immortal Spirit*', '*a nameless Resident*', and '*an omnipotent indiscernible Influence*'. Here he is, sitting in the body, veiling his knowledge by our groping minds.

A wanderer in a world his thoughts have made,
 He turns in a chiaroscuro of error and truth
 To find a wisdom that on high is his.

In this world which his own thoughts have brought into existence, the Spirit is a '*wanderer*', a word which suggests that he may even be lost; he has veiled his knowledge by '*the groping mind*', and is wandering '*in a chiaroscuro of error and truth*'. '*Chiaroscuro*' is an Italian word used by artists, meaning 'contrasting darkness and light'; in a painting, an artist can indicate form by making a contrast between light and dark areas. The world we live in is made up of

contrasting dualities of light and darkness, error and truth, and many other sets of opposites. The Spirit is wandering here, turning this way and that, *'to find a wisdom that on high is his'*. In his original state on the higher levels, he has All-Wisdom, but here he is a wanderer, involved in the adventure of manifestation and the game of hide-and-seek; here he has to seek, to explore and experience many different things in order to rediscover the wisdom which is already his on the higher levels of consciousness.

As one forgetting he searches for himself;
As if he had lost an inner light he seeks:
As a sojourner lingering amid alien scenes
He journeys to a home he knows no more.

It is really as if he has forgotten who he is. That is the state the embodied soul is in, searching for himself, looking all the time for *'an inner light'* that he seems to have lost. Here in our world, the Spirit is *'a sojourner lingering amid alien scenes'*. A *'sojourner'* is a temporary visitor, visiting a place that is not his true home. Here he is *'lingering'*, spending time *'amid alien scenes'*, scenes that foreign to him and quite different from, almost opposite to, his true nature. Here in us, in this world, he is journeying to his own home; but he no longer knows, he has forgotten where that home is.

His own self's truth he seeks who is the Truth;
He is the Player who became the play,
He is the Thinker who became the thought;
He is the many who was the silent One.

The Lord is seeking the truth of himself: *'His own self's truth he seeks'*, although he is himself the highest Truth. He has created this game or drama and now he has identified himself with it and become a player in it, so that *'as if forgetting'* he has to search for himself. He is the Thinker: he has originated all thought, he has thought out

everything that has been manifested here, and now he has identified with each of his thoughts. He was the '*silent One*', '*The Absolute, the Perfect, the Alone*'; now he is '*the many*': all the innumerable individual forms and beings in the universe.

In the symbol figures of the cosmic Force
And in her living and inanimate signs
And in her complex tracery of events
He explores the ceaseless miracle of himself,
Till the thousandfold enigma has been solved
In the single light of an all-witnessing Soul.

All the things that we see are '*symbol figures*' that the '*cosmic Force*' has made; whether '*living*' or '*inanimate*', not alive, they are all '*signs*' of deep inner realities. Through them all, as well as through everything that happens, the complicated interlocking patterns of Nature's '*complex tracery of events*', the One in the many – in us – is exploring '*the ceaseless miracle of himself*'; he has to go on exploring until '*the thousandfold enigma*', the riddle, the mystery which is expressed in so many varied ways, has been solved '*in the single light of an all-witnessing Soul*': when the immanent Divine in us regains the one consciousness that can see and understand everything, the hidden key will be found and the paradox, the mystery, '*the thousandfold enigma*' of our existence will be solved.

This was his compact with his mighty mate,
For love of her and joined to her for ever
To follow the course of Time's eternity,
Amid magic dramas of her sudden moods
And the surprises of her masked Idea
And the vicissitudes of her vast caprice.

The Lord has made an agreement, a '*compact*' with '*his mighty mate*', his Conscious-Force, the Mother who has created everything. He

has promised that '*for love of her and joined to her for ever*' he will '*follow the course of Time's eternity*', the eternal flow and recurrence of Time; he will follow the whole course of this manifestation in time along with her; he will stay with her forever in this mighty adventure they have undertaken together. He will '*follow the course of Time's eternity*' surrounded by all that she offers him: '*Amid magic dramas of her sudden moods / And the surprises of her masked Idea / And the vicissitudes of her vast caprice*'. Her moods are ever-changing, but all part of the '*magic dramas*' she is always playing and inventing; '*her masked Idea*' is the original creative Idea which has given rise to the entire creation; that remains unchanged, but as it gets worked out in time and space there are all kind of surprises, unexpected things happen; and there are '*the vicissitudes of her vast caprice*': '*vicissitudes*' are unexpected changes, the ups and downs of life that happen apparently by chance, according to the '*vast caprice*' of the creative force working in nature. We discussed this word '*caprice*' earlier: it means a sudden change of idea or decision for no apparent reason; Nature seems to do that from time to time. The transcendent One, inhabiting the individual souls of the many, is experiencing and exploring himself in all these things in the play of time and space.

Two seem his goals, yet ever are they one
And gaze at each other over bourneless Time;
Spirit and Matter are their end and source.

The Soul in Nature seems to have two goals, two different things that he is moving towards; but these two goals are really one and the same. Although they seem to be separated in the manifestation, they are always gazing at each other '*over bourneless time*'. '*Bourneless*' means without borders and limits; there is no end to the eternity of Time. Spirit and Matter seem to be the two opposed aims

of existence, but really they are always one – *'yet ever are they one'*. We can say 'Spirit and Matter' or we can say 'Soul and Nature'. From one point of view, Spirit seems to be where we are going, our goal, our end; from another, it is the beginning. If we look at it in another way, Matter is the beginning and the end of everything. These seem to be contradictory goals, but Sri Aurobindo tells us that *'ever are they one'*.

A seeker of hidden meanings in life's forms,
Of the great Mother's wide uncharted will
And the rude enigma of her terrestrial ways
He is the explorer and the mariner
On a secret inner ocean without bourne:
He is the adventurer and cosmologist
Of a magic earth's obscure geography.

The Divine, individualized as the soul in each of his creatures, is *'a seeker'*. He is seeking *'hidden meanings'* in all the forms of life. He is *'the explorer and the mariner'* trying to discover what the Mother wants: what is *'the great Mother's wide uncharted will'*? With this word *'uncharted'* Sri Aurobindo introduces the idea of a map; a *'chart'* is a map, particularly the kind of map used by sailors, by *'mariners'*; *'uncharted'* territory is an area which has never been mapped. The individual conscious being is exploring *'the rude enigma of her terrestrial ways'*, the mystery of the ways in which the Mother acts in the material world, which often seems to us to be *'rude'*, brutal and rough. The soul, the immanent Divine, is an explorer and a *'mariner'*, a sailor, exploring the *'secret inner ocean without bourne'*, the limitless inner ocean of consciousness. He is *'the adventurer'* exploring the unknown, and *'the cosmologist'*. A *'cosmologist'* studies the universe, trying to understand its history and how it works. The conscious being is discovering and trying to

understand the manifested universe and the geography of '*a magic earth*'. From here onwards up to the end of the canto Sri Aurobindo will be following and developing this image of the immanent Divine as an explorer and a sailor.

In her material order's fixed design
Where all seems sure and, even when changed, the same,
Even though the end is left for ever unknown
And ever unstable is life's shifting flow,
His paths are found for him by silent fate;

Here, the individual soul, the conscious being, is dwelling in the '*material order*' created for him by his Conscious-Force working through Nature, living in this world that is dominated by matter; and here there seems to be a '*fixed design*', fixed by the laws of nature, the laws of physics. The material world seems to be something fixed and sure that we can rely on, and even when things change, basically they are still the same. But what is the end, the goal to which he is going? Where his journey is leading? That is '*left for ever unknown*': the explorer does not know where he is going. And while the material order may seem fixed, there is also the '*shifting flow*' of life. Life is like water: it flows here and there, into and through all living forms, shifting and unstable, forever changing unpredictably. Through both the fixed design of matter and the shifting flow of life, '*his paths are found for him by silent fate*'. Sri Aurobindo says that the paths of the soul are determined by '*silent fate*'. When the well-known Vedic scholar Professor Kashyap spoke at Savitri Bhavan he pointed out that from the point of view of etymology, the origins of language, the words 'fate' and 'path' are closely related; he said that our 'fate' is the goal that our soul has chosen: that choice acts as '*silent fate*', determining the paths that our soul must follow on its journey through the manifestation.

As stations in the ages' weltering flood
Firm lands appear that tempt and stay awhile,
Then new horizons lure the mind's advance.

'As stations in the ages' weltering flood': here time is imaged as an ocean or flood, a vast expanse of water. 'To welter' means to roll or tumble, and poetically it is used for the movement of waves in the ocean. As the conscious being travels on his journey of exploration across the ocean of time, now and again he comes across *'firm lands'* like islands or continents, where he can stay for some time. A *'station'* is a place where you can stand, where you can stay for a while. Those firm lands are attractive, they tempt him to stop and rest on his journey. Here the word *'stay'* is a verb meaning 'delay' or 'halt'; the firm lands stay his advance by keeping him in the same place for a time; but then *'new horizons lure the mind's advance'*. *'Lure'* means 'attract'. On this evolutionary adventure the conscious being can never stay fixed in one place for ever; something will always lure or drive him onwards, in time as well as in space.

There comes no close to the finite's boundlessness,
There is no last certitude in which thought can pause
And no terminus to the soul's experience.

This is why he always needs to move further: there is *'no close'*, no end *'to the finite's boundlessness'*. The material universe is not infinite, but in a sense it is boundless; I think that Einstein has also used the expression 'a boundless finite' to describe the material universe. It is a question of dimensions. The image is of an ant on a big plate or bowl: it can go round and round and round and round on the rim of the bowl without ever reaching an end, although of course the bowl is finite; there is a similar *'boundlessness'* to material time and space. Similarly, *'there is no last certitude in which thought can pause'*: the mind always gets lured on and on by new horizons, new

possibilities; and for the soul there is no '*terminus*'. The '*terminus*' is the station where the bus ends its journey; but for the soul's experience there is no terminus: the soul is infinite and eternal and can always journey further and experience more.

A limit, a farness never wholly reached,
An unattained perfection calls to him
From distant boundaries in the Unseen:
A long beginning only has been made.

On his journey, the conscious being sees something like a limit, a distant horizon; but as he travels towards it, it recedes: it is never fully reached, there is always something further on. There is also the sense of an always greater perfection; '*an unattained perfection calls to him*'; however perfectly we manage to do something, there is always the possibility of doing it better; real perfection, perfect perfection is always eluding us, always calling us further. That '*unattained perfection*' calls to him '*from distant boundaries in the Unseen*', from what is invisible, what is beyond the horizon, so that wherever he is on his journey, there is always the feeling that only a beginning has been made; however long he has been travelling it is only a beginning, he still has far to go.

End of Section 6

Section 7, lines 843-966

In the previous section Sri Aurobindo showed us that the Lord himself, *'the master of existence'* is within all of us, as the involved divine in each individual form, as the immanent divine in humanity and in the whole creation. In this involved condition, *'as one forgetting he searches for himself'*; and in his search he is like an adventurer, a traveller, an explorer. Throughout this last section of the canto, Sri Aurobindo develops this image to help us understand the journey that we are all part of, the human journey, which is also the journey of the divine soul through time and space and evolving consciousness.

This is the sailor on the flow of Time,
This is World-Matter's slow discoverer,
Who, launched into this small corporeal birth,
Has learned his craft in tiny bays of self,
But dares at last unplumbed infinitudes,
A voyager upon eternity's seas.

The divine soul in man is *'the sailor on the flow of Time'*, the ocean of time; *'This is World-Matter's slow discoverer'*; slowly, in the long course of evolution, he is discovering the world around him. He is *'launched into this small corporeal birth'*, as if he has been put into a small boat, a human body, and launched off on to the flow of time; *'corporeal birth'* means birth into a body. First, he must learn how to manage the little boat which is his body. He has to learn *'his craft in tiny bays of self'*. When you are learning how to handle a boat for the first time, you do not go straight out into the ocean; you find some protected bay where you can learn the skill or *'craft'* of dealing with your vessel, your boat, which is also known as a *'craft'*. To start with, the soul learns how to live in this material world *'in tiny bays*

of *self*, in very limited areas of experience and consciousness; but at last, when he is really well launched on his journey, he will dare to go out into the '*unplumbed infinitudes*', into limitless spaces and depths that have never been 'plumbed', nobody has ever measured how vast and deep they are. Even in our earthly oceans there are '*unplumbed*' depths which no one has ever been able to measure, but here Sri Aurobindo is referring to the ocean of time and the ocean of consciousness. In the ocean of consciousness there are infinite depths which have never been measured. Eventually he becomes '*a voyager upon eternity's seas*', a traveller through the infinite oceans of eternity. In this section Sri Aurobindo will describe for us the stages of this adventure.

In his world-adventure's crude initial start
Behold him ignorant of his godhead's force,
Timid initiate of its vast design.

At the beginning of '*his world adventure*' when he first starts on his journey, the journey of the soul in the physical body, he is '*ignorant of his godhead's force*', unaware of the divine presence and power within him. In the beginning, '*the crude initial start*' of his '*world-adventure*', he is a '*timid initiate of its vast design*'. We can see that the words '*initial*' and '*initiate*' are connected; they are both connected with beginnings; your '*initials*' are the letters at the beginning of your names; we also use the word '*initial*' as an adjective, as the poet does in the first line here, to indicate that something is just beginning; if you want to start up a new business, you will need some '*initial capital*', some money to get started with; and an '*initiate*' is somebody who is just starting to learn something, somebody who has been given some first knowledge to start him on his path. When we are just beginning some great task, we may be '*timid*', shy and hesitant and fearful; when you are just a beginner

you will not have the courage to try the very difficult things you may be able to do later on when you have had more experience. He is starting on a great adventure; the force within him has a '*vast design*', an enormous complex plan and purpose, but now he is just making a first start, as a '*timid initiate*', a hesitant beginner.

An expert captain of a fragile craft,
A trafficker in small impermanent wares,
At first he hugs the shore and shuns the breadths,
Dares not to affront the far-off perilous main.

In the passage which follows, Sri Aurobindo is showing us two things: he is referring to developments that have happened in the history of the human race; when human beings first started to move off the land and onto the sea they did not travel across the oceans, they just rowed or sailed from one little bay to the next one, along the coast; at the same time, he is using this description from human history as an image of how the individual consciousness begins to develop. When the soul is first launched onto the sea of time and consciousness, the body is his '*craft*', the ship he has to learn to manoeuvre. As he becomes good at using his body, he becomes '*an expert captain of a fragile craft*': the body that is his ship is '*fragile*', it can easily be broken. What does he do with his ship? He trades; he is '*a trafficker*', a trader in '*small impermanent wares*': not huge cargoes, but small things that do not last very long; perhaps he carries fruit and vegetables to the next village and in exchange brings back something else. '*At first he hugs the shore*': he stays very close to land and will not go out into the open sea; '*he shuns the breadths*': 'to shun' means 'to avoid', 'to keep at a distance'. He does not have the courage or the strength '*to affront the far-off perilous main*'; the '*main*' is the open sea, beyond the shelter of the land, out on the ocean, and that is too far away and too dangerous for him at

first; *'perilous'* means 'dangerous'.

He in a petty coastal traffic plies,
His pay doled out from port to neighbour port,
Content with his safe round's unchanging course,
He hazards not the new and the unseen.

He *'plies'*, he travels backwards and forwards from one small port to the next one; this is *'a petty coastal traffic'*: short journeys along the coast, backwards and forward from one port to another; or maybe he goes between two or three ports, trading from one to another, and in each port he gets paid a little. *'His pay'* is *'doled out'* to him *'from port to neighbour port'*: in each port he gets a little pay; the verb *'doled out'* makes it clear that he does not earn much. The significant thing about this stage of consciousness is that he is *'Content with his safe round's unchanging course'*; he is not asking for adventure; he is just happy to earn his living with the small business which he does; it is safe and *'unchanging'*, every day the same; *'he hazards not the new and the unseen'*: he does not take the risk of doing anything new or going anywhere unknown that he has never seen before. This corresponds to our first physical instinct for stability and safety.

But now he hears the sound of larger seas.
A widening world calls him to distant scenes
And journeyings in a larger vision's arc
And peoples unknown and still unvisited shores.

Now he gets a new impulse: *'he hears the sound of larger seas'*, and feels the attraction of *'a widening world'* that is calling him *'to distant scenes / And journeyings in a larger vision's arc'*. An *'arc'* is part of the circumference of a circle: the horizon we see when we look out to sea is an arc. Now he begins to feel the call of wider horizons. This happens when the vital being starts to wake up: he becomes aware that there are countries and nations that he does not know, places

that are waiting to be visited, and feels an urge to explore new possibilities and experience exciting new unknown things.

On a commissioned keel his merchant hull
Serves the world's commerce in the riches of Time
Severing the foam of a great land-locked sea
To reach unknown harbour lights in distant climes
And open markets for life's opulent arts,

Now his vessel is '*a commissioned keel*' and a '*merchant hull*': the '*keel*' and the '*hull*' are parts of a ship; the keel is the rib at the bottom of the ship, and the hull is the body of it. He may own his ship, but he is '*commissioned*' by somebody who pays him to make his journeys; and he is serving '*the world's commerce*', the interchange of life and experience '*in the riches of time*'. Now he has a bigger vessel and he is using it for trading different kinds of things; in order to do that, he is '*severing the foam of a great land-locked sea*': as he sails, his ship is cutting through the '*foam*', the waves, of not just a few little bays along the coast, but a whole sea. This sea is big, but it is surrounded by land. It is not the open ocean. When Sri Aurobindo describes this, we cannot help thinking about our early European history: so far as we know, about four or five thousand years ago sailors who had been going from bay to bay around the coast set off across the sea. They became great adventurers, crossing the Mediterranean Sea, which lies between Europe, Asia and Africa. It is a great sea but surrounded by land on all sides. Sailors from Phoenicia, the area which is now Lebanon and the coast of Syria, started setting up colonies all around the Mediterranean and trading between the different nations living along the coasts, in Gaza and Egypt and along the North African coast, then Spain and southern France and Italy and Greece, which then included what is now Turkey. Sri Aurobindo uses this development as an image for a certain stage in

our human growth. The things that are getting exchanged and traded in these '*open markets for life's opulent arts*' are luxuries. These are not '*small impermanent wares*' any longer, not perishable foodstuffs and so on, but much more exciting and interesting things:

Rich bales, carved statuettes, hued canvases,
And jewelled toys brought for an infant's play
And perishable products of hard toil
And transient splendours won and lost by the days.

'*Rich bales*', rolls of luxurious cloth: in fact the Phoenicians, who started making long sea journeys around the Mediterranean and beyond for trading, specialised in making a unique cloth. It was purple. They were the only ones who knew how to make that purple cloth. Later on they started weaving gold threads into the purple fabric, and that cloth was so beautiful and so expensive that the Romans made a rule that only their Emperor or people belonging to the Imperial family were allowed to wear it. Then, '*carved statuettes*', small statues, maybe made of ivory or of fine wood painted and decorated with precious stones; and they were trading '*hued canvases*', colourful paintings, '*and jewelled toys brought for an infant's play*'. An '*infant*' of course is a small child; but the children of the Spanish royal family, the princes and princesses, were called '*Infantas*': only royal children get jewelled toys that have come from faraway lands. But again, all these are symbols for developments in consciousness. It is not only a stage that happened historically in human development, it is also a stage that happens in the development of our individuality: we grow out of the stage when we are focussed mainly on our physical needs, and begin to want to experience the rich enjoyments of life. These are '*transient splendours won and lost by the days*': wonderful rich things that cost great efforts to gain, and which may then be lost in time, because

they are '*transient*', not permanent.

Or passing through a gate of pillar-rocks,
Venturing not yet to cross oceans unnamed
And journey into a dream of distances
He travels close to unfamiliar coasts
And finds new haven in storm-troubled isles,

Here is another stage: where the Mediterranean Sea meets the Atlantic Ocean, there is a fairly narrow passage. These days it is about three miles across and sometimes we cannot see from Morocco to Spain, but the ancient literature tells of a narrow passage between rocks which seemed to have been pushed apart. If you passed through that '*gate of pillar-rocks*' you would leave the landlocked Mediterranean Sea and enter the open ocean. Those early Phoenician traders did that; but they did not dare to start crossing what we now call the Atlantic Ocean, which then was '*unnamed*'. Instead they travelled close to its '*unfamiliar coasts*'. They followed the coast of Africa southwards, and it seems that they travelled down the whole west coast of Africa, around the tip of South Africa and then northwards again up the east coast. They also travelled northwards around the coast of Western Europe and even reached the '*storm-troubled isles*' of north-western Scotland. It seems that they reached all those places by sea, founded harbours there and traded in metals and ceramics. In this stage the soul is travelling '*close to unfamiliar coasts*'; if he keeps the coast in sight, he does not feel completely lost; and he finds '*new havens*', new safe harbours, unexpectedly in far distant places, even ones that may be troubled by frequent storms. Again this is an image, this time for the kind of exploration that our mind does, following the thread of known things to new discoveries. And then comes a further stage:

Or, guided by a sure compass in his thought,

He plunges through a bright haze that hides the stars,
Steering on the trade-routes of Ignorance.

Eventually there was somebody who had heard or guessed that the world is not a flat disk, but spherical like a ball; so Christopher Columbus set off westwards across the open ocean '*guided by a sure compass in his thought*'; he had the faith to leave the coast and start sailing across the unknown ocean because he was convinced that by sailing west, he would reach the Far East. In those days sailors navigated by the stars, but he could keep sailing westwards even when he could not see the stars because he had a '*compass*', a small device that shows us where north is, so that we can know where east and west and south are; we can know which direction we are travelling in. In the development of our consciousness there comes a stage when we feel that we can rely on our reason; and once one explorer has done that and found a new continent others will follow him, so that the route he has taken becomes a trade-route: following Christopher Columbus, regular trade-routes were established across the Atlantic Ocean in both directions, linking Africa and Europe with the 'New World', the Americas. But as long as we are following our thoughts, we are still in the Ignorance: the routes we follow are '*the trade-routes of Ignorance*'. 'To steer' means to direct a ship to move in a particular direction.

His prow pushes towards undiscovered shores,
He chances on unimagined continents:
A seeker of the islands of the Blest,
He leaves the last lands, crosses the ultimate seas,
He turns to eternal things his symbol quest;

Then he becomes a real adventurer. The '*prow*' of a ship is the front-most part, the peaked point at the front. Now the ship pushes on through the ocean towards '*undiscovered shores*', new countries that

have not yet been discovered, and *'he chances on unimagined continents'*: Christopher Columbus thought that he was going to China, and had no idea that the Americas lay in between; he discovered the Americas by chance, it was something completely unexpected. What the soul is really seeking is *'the islands of the Blest'*: it used to be believed that the lands where the blessed souls would enjoy their immortality, the paradise islands, lay far out to the west; that is where the embodied soul is heading for; but of course those lands are not on our material earth at all; so *'he leaves the last lands, crosses the ultimate seas'*. Gradually, in this journey of expanding consciousness, *'he turns to eternal things his symbol quest'*; then he is no longer looking for a new continent and new animals and new products or anything like that; he is looking for imperishable things that lie beyond this physical world.

Life changes for him its time-constructed scenes,
Its images veiling infinity.
Earth's borders recede and the terrestrial air
Hangs round him no longer its translucent veil.

This sounds almost as if Sri Aurobindo is referring to space travel: *'Earth's borders recede'*; the adventurer can go out into Space, where *'the terrestrial air / Hangs round him no longer its translucent veil'*. But it also means that a time comes when our quest is no longer for physical things, vital and mental things, when we realise that the real goal of our life lies beyond the range of this material world. Then the significance of life changes for us, we see that everything here is *'time-constructed'*, made in time and by time, and that all the appearances we see with our physical eyes are *'images veiling infinity'*.

He has crossed the limit of mortal thought and hope,
He has reached the world's end and stares beyond;

The eyes of mortal body plunge their gaze
Into Eyes that look upon eternity.

When the human soul has this realisation, it has '*crossed the limit of mortal thought and hope*'; it has '*reached the world's end and stares beyond*'. He has crossed a borderline, so that our human thoughts and hopes are no longer his aim: it as if, with physical eyes, he looks into Eyes that see beyond time, into eternity.

A greater world Time's traveller must explore.
At last he hears a chanting on the heights
And the far speaks and the unknown grows near:
He crosses the boundaries of the unseen
And passes over the edge of mortal sight
To a new vision of himself and things.

'*Time's traveller*' is the soul exploring the evolutionary world. So far in this section Sri Aurobindo has been describing the stages of the evolution of consciousness mainly in the material world. But there comes a point where the consciousness has developed enough that '*Time's traveller*' has to go beyond this material world and move into a greater one. So at last '*he hears a chanting on the heights*', perhaps the cosmic OM resounding on the higher levels of consciousness; and as he crosses over the boundary between the physical world and the subtle worlds he gains a new capacity of hearing and seeing: '*the far speaks and the unknown grows near*'. These experiences give him '*a new vision of himself and of things*'. In the next few lines Sri Aurobindo expresses the '*new vision*', the new understanding of himself and of things which comes to the traveller at this stage:

He is a spirit in an unfinished world
That knows him not and cannot know itself:
The surface symbol of his goalless quest
Takes deeper meanings to his inner view;

His is a search of darkness for the light,
Of mortal life for immortality.

Now he realises that he is no longer primarily a body or life-force or mind but a spirit, a spirit living in a world that is not yet complete, because evolution is not finished. The '*unfinished world*' that he is living in does not know about the spirit within it, and so it '*cannot know itself*'. Then his vision, his understanding of his journey also changes: the '*quest*' which Sri Aurobindo has shown us in terms of the sailor with his vessel exploring further and further now '*takes deeper meanings to his inner view*'. Now he sees that all this quest, all the explorations he has made in the material world, in the body, in the growing life force, in the mind, have all been '*a search of darkness for the light*': his unconsciousness or half-consciousness has all the time been seeking for ever higher light; in him '*mortal life*', this life of ours that is subject to death and desire and incapacity, has all the time been searching for unlimited life, for '*immortality*'.

In the vessel of an earthly embodiment
Over the narrow rails of limiting sense
He looks out on the magic waves of Time
Where mind like a moon illumines the world's dark.

His '*vessel*', his boat, is '*an earthly embodiment*', the body that he inhabits. This is the vessel that he has been learning to steer and using to explore with. On a ship there are rails all around the deck to protect you from falling into the ocean. Here Sri Aurobindo says that on this journey of consciousness our body is our vessel, and the '*narrow rails*' which prevent us from falling into the ocean of universal forces are the senses, which limit our sense experience to the physical world. Now he can look beyond those '*narrow rails of limiting sense*': now he can look out at '*the magic waves of Time*', the ocean of Time that he has been navigating all this while; now he

sees '*mind like a moon*' lighting up the darkness, the ignorance of the world. The moon is a good symbol for the mind because it does not have any light of its own: all the light that comes to us from the moon is reflected from the sun. Our mind, like a moon, receives light from somewhere else, from the sun of divine Consciousness; but with that pale reflected light it can light up the world for us to a certain extent.

There is limned ever retreating from the eyes,
As if in a tenuous misty dream-light drawn,
The outline of a dim mysterious shore.

When the spirit looks out with the light of the mind across the ocean of Time, he sees an outline, '*the outline of a dim mysterious shore*', some distant land; but that outline is always retreating from him: however far he goes he never seems to reach that shore. It seems as if that outline has been drawn in a faint misty light: a '*tenuous misty dream-light*'. '*Limned*' means '*drawn*', and '*tenuous*' means very thin and insubstantial.

A sailor on the Inconscient's fathomless sea,
He voyages through a starry world of thought
On Matter's deck to a spiritual sun.

The spirit in the evolution now sees himself as a sailor '*on the Inconscient's fathomless sea*'. We have had this world '*fathomless*' before; it means 'so deep that nobody can measure how deep it is'. A 'fathom' is the measure which sailors use to measure how deep the sea is. They have a plumb line with a weight on the end of it, a rope with the fathoms marked on it; as the ship moves through unfamiliar waters the sailors will 'sound' with the weighted line to find out where the bottom is. If the line of fathoms does not reach the bottom, then the sea there is 'unplumbed' or '*fathomless*'. Here Sri Aurobindo says that this sea is the fathomless sea of the

Inconscient. Here we are, sailing on its surface. We are voyaging through '*a world of thought*' that is lit by stars. The stars are symbols of the many truths; although they are faint faraway lights, sailors can use them for navigating, as guiding lights. The deck of our boat is Matter, and the goal of our journey is '*a spiritual sun*', a divine source of energy and consciousness. This is the '*new vision of himself and things*' that comes to the traveller-soul when he passes beyond the limits of the material world.

Across the noise and multitudinous cry,
Across the rapt unknowable silences,
Through a strange mid-world under supernal skies,
Beyond earth's longitudes and latitudes,
His goal is fixed outside all present maps.

At present there are no maps to show us where our goal is – except the map that Sri Aurobindo has given us. The traveller passes through '*the noise and multitudinous cry*' of all the many voices of the manifestation, the many voices which are part of the cry of earth life. He also experiences '*the rapt unknowable silences*', the silences of higher realms where consciousness is as if in a trance, '*rapt*'. He is travelling through '*a strange mid-world*': not earth, not heaven, but something in-between; above him are '*supernal skies*', skies of higher consciousness; his goal is fixed '*beyond earth's longitudes and latitudes*': the imaginary lines that are drawn on the globe to help us to locate ourselves and find our way, especially at sea, are of no use to him now, for '*his goal is fixed outside all present maps.*'

But none learns whither through the unknown he sails
Or what secret mission the great Mother gave.

On this journey we do not know where we are going. '*Whither*' means 'where to'; there are three words which go together: 'where', 'whence', meaning 'from where', and 'whither': 'to where'. While

we are on the journey, none of us knows where we are sailing to through the unknown; nobody knows '*what secret mission the great Mother gave*': each soul has a secret mission, a task that he alone can do, but for a long time on our journey we do not know what it is.

In the hidden strength of her omnipotent Will,
Driven by her breath across life's tossing deep,
Through the thunder's roar and through the windless hush,
Through fog and mist where nothing more is seen,
He carries her sealed orders in his breast.

For so much of our journey we do not know where we are going, so how can we find the way? Earlier Sri Aurobindo told us that the soul's paths '*are found for him by silent fate*'; but here he says that the soul is driven on its journey by the breath of the great Mother, at first in the form of Nature or Maya or Prakriti or Fate: we seem to be driven by something unconscious and inexorable; but in fact that apparently unconscious Nature or Fate is really being moved by the will of the supreme creative force, the divine Mother, and '*the hidden strength of her omnipotent will*'. That is what is keeping us all going: we are being driven by her breath across the ocean of unconsciousness and time. On the way we have all kinds of adventures, as sailors do: we pass through storms, we pass through the '*windless hush*', when our little boat hardly seems to move; we pass through a time of fog and mist when we cannot see where we are going; but all the time we are carrying within us the great Mother's '*sealed orders*'. This is a military term: when someone is sent on such a secret mission that the superior officers who are sending him out do not even tell him where he is going or what he is supposed to do, they give him '*sealed orders*'; at a certain moment, when he reaches a particular place or receives a particular sign, he has to take out the sealed orders that he has been carrying and open

them; only then will he find out what his mission is, where he is going and what he has to do. All of us have sealed orders in our hearts; we are carrying within us the great Mother's instructions.

Late will he know, opening the mystic script,
Whether to a blank port in the Unseen
He goes or, armed with her fiat, to discover
A new mind and body in the city of God
And enshrine the Immortal in his glory's house
And make the finite one with Infinity.

Only at a late stage, when we can open up '*the mystic script*' and read our sealed orders, will we know what our goal is: whether our goal is to merge back into our unknown Origin, as if sailing to '*a blank port in the Unseen*', or whether the Mother has empowered us with her command: a '*fiat*' is a command, an order; the word is Latin, and it means 'Let it be done'; it is similar to the Sanskrit '*tathastu*'. Perhaps the supreme creative power has given us the command to discover '*a new mind and body in the city of God*'; perhaps our goal is a divine life in a divine society here on earth, so that the travelling soul can '*enshrine the Immortal in his glory's house*'. The house is the body. The fully awakened psychic being can make the physical body a shrine for the Immortal, and re-establish its connection with the divine origin, so that '*the finite*', the distinct individual form in the manifestation, can become '*one with Infinity*'. In the evolutionary process we shall not know the answer until we have reached the point where we can open '*the mystic script*', read our '*sealed orders*' and find out what the Mother has commanded us to do.

Across the salt waste of the endless years
Her ocean winds impel his errant boat,
The cosmic waters plashing as he goes,

A rumour around him and danger and a call.

The ocean is like a desert, a salty desert, a '*salt waste*' where nothing can grow. This is the ocean of time, the soul is travelling across '*endless years*' of time and unconsciousness; but through all that, the Mother is driving him onwards: '*Her ocean winds impel his errant boat*'. The ship of the body is '*errant*', wandering here and there as if aimlessly; but she is guiding it, driving it forward with her winds. As he moves on, '*the cosmic waters*' are '*plashing*' around him. '*Plashing*' is connected with '*splashing*'; it is the sound that water makes against the sides of a wooden boat. '*The cosmic waters*' are the energies of universal existence, and they are affecting us as we move forward in our boat of an earthly embodiment. There is '*a rumour*', a noise, a sound all around him, and there is danger in this life on the ocean of time; but there is also a call, attracting him ever onwards.

Always he follows in her force's wake.

He sails through life and death and other life,

He travels on through waking and through sleep.

He is always following something. He is following in '*her force's wake*'. The '*wake*' is the track that a ship leaves behind it as it moves through the water. The Mother is driving our ship forward with her breath, with her '*ocean winds*'; but at the same time she is always ahead of us too, with the action of her force, and we are following in her wake. That makes it much easier for our boat to move forward: dolphins for example like to follow in the wake of ships, because there is less resistance from the water, so they can go quicker. The individual soul is always following in the wake of the Mother's force; she is not only impelling him from behind but also attracting him from in front. The individualized spirit '*sails through life and death and other life*', again and again and again. His journey

continues '*through waking and through sleep*'. Even when we are asleep at night we are still travelling towards the goal; sometimes I feel that I travel much further during the nights than during the days. The journey continues through the days and through the nights, '*through waking and through sleep*'.

A power is on him from her occult force
That ties him to his own creation's fate,
And never can the mighty Traveller rest
And never can the mystic voyage cease
Till the nescient dusk is lifted from man's soul
And the morns of God have overtaken his night.

The soul is as if under a magic spell, an enchantment: '*a power is on him from her occult force*'. That power, that spell, keeps the Divine, the Lord, the Creator connected to this manifestation which is really his own creation. In the individual form he has forgotten that he has made all this; but there is a power in the Mother's force that keeps the embodied soul tied to the fate of the whole creation. '*The mighty Traveller*' in Time is not allowed to rest, the '*mystic voyage*' cannot come to an end, until '*the nescient dusk is lifted from man's soul*', until the dark cloud of ignorance has been removed. At the moment the whole manifestation is in a state of darkness, a night of God; but every night gives birth to a new dawn: eventually '*the morns of God*' will overtake this night; then the ignorant darkness will disappear, our souls will remember their Origin and we shall know who we are and why we are here. That will bring us to the fulfilment of our quest.

As long as Nature lasts, he too is there,
For this is sure that he and she are one;
Even when he sleeps, he keeps her on his breast:
Whoever leaves her, he will not depart

To repose without her in the Unknowable.

'As long as Nature lasts, he too is there', because they are one: he, the Lord, the Soul, and she, Nature, are one, inseparably; so even when he is sleeping, when he is involved in matter and unconsciousness, she is always with him. *'Whoever leaves her, he will not depart'*; I think that here Sri Aurobindo is referring to those who want to escape from the manifestation, who want to pass into nirvana, merge back into the Origin and leave the world behind; individual souls may choose to do that, but the Lord is not going to abandon his creation and his creative Force; he will not go away and rest without her *'in the Unknowable'*. Then Sri Aurobindo tells us why this is not going to happen:

There is a truth to know, a work to do;
Her play is real; a Mystery he fulfils:
There is a plan in the Mother's deep world-whim,
A purpose in her vast and random game.

Sometimes it looks as if all this creation is just a play of Maya, an illusion, a game for the amusement of the soul, a *'vast and random game'*. But Sri Aurobindo tells us that *'Her play is real'*, and that the soul involved in the creation is fulfilling a Mystery, working out something with a deep significance. *'There is a plan in the Mother's deep world-whim'*: there is a plan, a purpose; her game of creation may seem like a whim, a caprice, a *'random game'* but in fact it has an aim, a purpose. What is her purpose?

This ever she meant since the first dawn of life,
This constant will she covered with her sport,
To evoke a Person in the impersonal Void,
With the Truth-Light strike earth's massive roots of trance,
Wake a dumb self in the inconscient depths
And raise a lost Power from its python sleep

That the eyes of the Timeless might look out from Time
And the world manifest the unveiled Divine.

Ever since the very beginning, *'the first dawn of life'*, in all her sport, all her games and her whims and caprices, she has been keeping hidden *'one constant will'*; behind everything she has done, there lay a hidden intention. What is she aiming at? There are several aspects: first, *'to evoke a Person in the impersonal Void'*: in the *'impersonal Void'*, the universal emptiness which is formless and without individuality, she wants to *'evoke'*, to draw out, *'a Person'*, an individual with qualities and characteristics, a Person with a capital 'P', in fact the ultimate Person, the Purushottama, the One who is inhabiting all this. Secondly, she is aiming *'to strike earth's massive roots of trance'* *'with the Truth-Light'*. Earth, the material principle, seems to be rooted in a state of indrawn trance which shows no signs of consciousness. The great creative Mother through all her play of manifestation is aiming to strike at these *'massive roots of trance'*, as if with a bolt of lightning from the Truth; and she is intending to do this because sleeping in the very heart of Matter, *'in the inconscient depths'* is a being, *'a dumb self'* which she wants to wake up. When that *'dumb self'* wakes up, *'a lost Power'* will be lifted up from *'its python sleep'*. A python is a huge snake that kills its prey by crushing it; the python is a symbol for the deep unconscious powers that are holding onto us from below. In the depths of Matter a lost Power lies sleeping like a python, coiled up; an aspect of the Mother's plan is to wake it up, so that *'the eyes of the Timeless might look out from Time / And the world manifest the unveiled Divine'*. *'The Timeless'* is the transcendent Lord, eternal and infinite beyond all manifestation; but Sri Aurobindo has shown us that the Lord has involved himself in his creation and all its individual forms; the Mother's aim is that the timeless transcendent Lord should *'look out from time'*: from the eyes of all the individual forms that the Mother

has made for him to inhabit, he will look out at the world she has made; her whole world should '*manifest the unveiled divine*'. The whole world does of course manifest the divine even now, but at present he is veiled by its material forms; the aim is that it should eventually '*manifest the unveiled divine*'.

For this he left his white infinity
And laid on the spirit the burden of the flesh,
That Godhead's seed might flower in mindless Space.

Why has the Lord left his white infinity, all his infinite integrality and perfection? Why has he become this material universe and inhabited all its forms and forces and beings, as the spirit in limited beings like us, in these material bodies? Why has he '*laid on the spirit the burden of the flesh*'? He has done all this so that eventually, when evolution has run its whole course, '*Godhead's seed might flower in mindless Space*': the seed of divinity that he has sown in the creation should flower throughout this whole vast material universe that seems to be made up of '*mindless Space*', but is actually a habitation for the Lord, and full of veiled divinity. He has sown not just one 'seed': we speak of a farmer 'sowing his seed' – he casts and scatters many many seeds; similarly the Lord has sown '*Godhead's seed*' throughout the boundless manifestation, with the intention that it might flower and bear countless glorious blossoms of divinity.

End of Canto Four

Canto Five
The Yoga of the King
The Yoga of the Spirit's Freedom and
Greatness

Section 1, lines 1-84

This knowledge first he had of time-born men.

This line gives the link with the previous Canto. As we go through the 49 cantos of the poem we often see that Sri Aurobindo makes a link, so that they are all joined in a single chain. Here a new canto is beginning, but the poet makes a connection with what has gone before. The previous canto was '*The Secret Knowledge*'; so now the poet tells us that of all human beings, of all men born in time, King Aswapati was the first to have the secret knowledge which was revealed in the previous Canto.

Admitted through a curtain of bright mind
That hangs between our thoughts and absolute sight,
He found the occult cave, the mystic door
Near to the well of vision in the soul,
And entered where the Wings of Glory brood
In the silent space where all is for ever known.

Aswapati is '*admitted*', he is allowed to enter, to cross a threshold that is veiled by a curtain, '*a curtain of bright mind*'. Even the most illumined mind that we can achieve is still a curtain, a veil, hanging '*between our thoughts*' and the power of absolute vision, of true knowledge. He is allowed to pass through that curtain of mind into another space; and in that space '*he found the occult cave*': a hidden cave. Later on, we shall find that Savitri in the course of her yoga also finds that '*cave*'. That '*cave*' has a '*door*' and near to it is a '*well*', a place where water rises up. In the Vedic symbolism water is always a symbol of flowing energies. This is a '*well of vision*': it gives a power of subtle sight, the source of the soul's vision. He can pass through that '*curtain*' and enter a region where '*the Wings of Glory*

brood'. We have already mentioned that the word '*brood*' evokes the image of a mother bird sitting on her nest with her eggs underneath her: eventually the eggs will hatch and the little ones come out. She covers the eggs with her wings, protecting them and keeping them warm until it is time for them to hatch. Here, the protecting and nurturing '*Wings of Glory*' are brooding over new things, new possibilities, new realisations, until they are ready to emerge, '*in the silent space where all is for ever known*'. Beyond our limited mental knowledge, there is a space of consciousness where everything can be seen and known '*for ever*'; now Aswapati can enter that space.

Indifferent to doubt and to belief,
Avid of the naked real's single shock
He shore the cord of mind that ties the earth-heart
And cast away the yoke of Matter's law.

Aswapati is not interested in '*belief*' or in '*doubt*' – he is indifferent to them, for they are mental states. He is eager to experience what is real. '*Avid*' means eager, even greedy. He wants to experience the '*shock*' that only the '*naked real*' can give, the contact of reality that is not covered or hidden by anything. In order to have that experience he is ready to cut '*the cord of mind*'. '*Shore*' is the past tense of the verb '*to shear*' meaning to cut; '*shears*' are tools that are used for cutting. There is a '*cord of mind that ties the earth-heart*' to the way things are here. Aswapati is ready to cut that cord; and he is ready to throw off the '*yoke*'. We have talked about this word '*yoke*' before: we put a yoke on a bullock to link it to the plough or to the cart that it has to pull. Here we are all wearing the heavy yoke of the law of Matter, but Aswapati throws it off, he is not willing to go on wearing the yoke that keeps us bound to material existence, preventing our soul and our inner being from moving freely in the subtler and higher realms of consciousness. Here on earth we are

yoked; we are bound to '*Matter's law*' like the bullock to the plough: the dominance of Matter rules everything that we do: our actions, our feelings, our thoughts. King Aswapati is able to free himself from the cord which is tying his being to the mental level of consciousness, and he is able to throw off the domination of matter. When he does that, a tremendous consequence follows:

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.

If we are no longer bound by the law of Matter, this possibility comes. The rules of our physical body no longer bind the powers of our spirit; so even if the heart stops beating, it does not mean that the individual must die. It is possible to continue to live even when the brain stops working, the heart stops working. There are those who have proved this; scientists have examined yogis who could suspend their breathing, the action of the physical brain and heart. When she read these lines with Huta, the Mother commented that Sri Aurobindo has written this because he experienced it. The soul and spirit can continue to be in contact with the body and keep it alive, even when the normal life processes have been suspended.

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.

In this way Aswapati can pass through the '*curtain*' of mind into '*that magic place*' which few human beings can even catch a glimpse of. If we can turn away for a moment from this labour of the mind and our usual poor way of seeing things, limited by the physical senses, we might just get a '*hurried glance*' at that wonderful world of consciousness '*where all is for ever known*'. Aswapati is not only

able to get a glimpse of it, he is able to step into it. In that space,

All that the Gods have learned is there self-known.

We did not know that Gods have to learn things, did we? It seems that even the cosmic powers, those great divine beings, have also had to make some effort to gain the state of consciousness that they are in. When one can enter that space, everything is known, not by the mind but by identity. Everything is known within oneself.

In Chapter 8 of *The Life Divine*, Sri Aurobindo points out that the rishis, the sages, the scriptures speak to us about supraphysical truths; he asks 'How can we know, how can we verify those things that we are told? How can we know that they are true?' We may doubt or we may believe, but King Aswapati is not interested in that, he wants to know with certainty, through his own direct experience. Sri Aurobindo tells us that the mind cannot give us this kind of knowledge; the only mental faculty we have which can give it to us, is our sense of who we are; the sense of our own existence.¹⁹ By various disciplines and by grace, this sense of what we are can be expanded, so that things which we now know indirectly in the mind, can be known directly in the way that we are aware of our own subjective feelings and experiences.

There in a hidden chamber closed and mute
Are kept the record graphs of the cosmic scribe,
And there the tables of the sacred Law,
There is the Book of Being's index page;

In that silent space, that magic place, there is a '*hidden chamber*', a hidden room; it is kept closed, it is silent, no voice comes from there. It is a store room where '*the record graphs of the cosmic scribe*' are

¹⁹... an extension of that form of knowledge by identity which gives us the awareness of our own existence.' *The Life Divine*, CWSA volumes 21 and 22, p.71

kept. A '*scribe*' is a person who writes things down and keeps records. It seems that there is a '*scribe*' recording everything, noting everything down, for example in the form of '*graphs*'. Graphs are used in mathematics, and in sociology too. A graph is a diagram on which points are made to represent individual items of data, and when these are linked they provide us with certain information. Records of everything that has ever happened in the universe are kept in that secret room. Another kind of record is also kept there: not only events that have happened, but also '*the sacred Law*' that governs the whole manifestation; also the '*index page*' of the '*Book of Being*': the book of existence. If there is an '*index page*' in a book, it shows us where to look for the information we want to find. The '*Index page*' to the '*Book of Being*' is a very important page. It is kept in that secret '*hidden*' place. Also other things:

The text and glossary of the Vedic truth
Are there; the rhythms and metres of the stars
Significant of the movements of our fate:
The symbol powers of number and of form,
And the secret code of the history of the world
And Nature's correspondence with the soul
Are written in the mystic heart of Life.

First the '*text*' of the '*Vedic truth*', the essence of what is written in the Vedas. '*Veda*' means knowledge, sacred knowledge. And there is not only the text: the '*glossary*', the explanation of what all the words mean, is also there. Also '*the rhythms and metres of the stars*': the word '*metres*' is connected with measuring things; here it refers to regular rhythms in poetry. The highest form of poetry is mantra; in mantra, the rhythm is essential to its effect; the rhythm has to be correct, the sound vibrations have to be in the right order for the mantra to have its full effect. Here Sri Aurobindo tells us that there

are *'rhythms and metres of the stars'*. All the shining lights we see when we look out into space are ruled and kept in their place by rhythmic vibrations. The stars are symbols for the many truths in the universe. And since the whole universe is all one, those *'stars'* are *'significant'*; even though they are far away in space, they have effects here on our little globe, and they can indicate the meaning *'of the movements of our fate'*. This is what astrologers try to find out: how the stars are *'significant of the movements of our fate'*. When he first came to Pondicherry, Sri Aurobindo started to write something about astrology and, as with everything else that he has written about, he has shown a new dimension, something completely different, far beyond the surface knowledge that we normally come into contact with. He does not say that astrology is not true; he shows that there is a deeper truth behind this study of the planets and their connections with us. Then there is another set of things that are very important for the manifestation of material form in the universe: *'the symbol powers of number and of form'*. There are scientists who explain the whole universe in terms of equations. There is some truth in that: mathematical relationships, quantities, geometrical relationships and forms all have deep significance. Also, the whole history of the world is written there in *'secret code'*, in special characters so that only a person who has the key to the code will be able to read those records. Not only is the history of the world written in code, but also a *'correspondence'*. This is another word with two meanings: there is a *'correspondence'* when two things are connected in such a way that when one of them moves, the other one also moves; that is one kind of *'correspondence'*; but the word can also mean a collection of letters exchanged by two people. Perhaps messages have been going backwards and forwards between Nature and the soul, so that what Nature does corresponds to what is willed and intended by the soul. That correspondence

between Nature and the soul, as well as the history of everything that has ever happened in the universe and the laws and rhythms governing the manifestation are all recorded there in '*secret code*'; they are all '*written in the mystic heart of Life*', that magic space which Aswapati can now enter.

In the glow of the spirit's room of memories
He could recover the luminous marginal notes
Dotting with light the crabbed ambiguous scroll,
Rescue the preamble and the saving clause
Of the dark Agreement by which all is ruled
That rises from material Nature's sleep
To clothe the Everlasting in new shapes.

That '*room*' holds all the '*memories*' of the spirit; there is a special light in that room, a '*glow*'. When Aswapati is in the secret space where '*all is forever known*', he is able to find something that has been lost. He could '*recover*', find back something that has been lost or forgotten. It is recorded in a '*scroll*'. Before the invention of books with pages, important knowledge was written on scrolls: long sheets of parchment or papyrus that were kept rolled up; in order to read them, you would unroll with one hand, and keep rolling up with the other. In that room Aswapati finds such a scroll. Something has been written there. It has been written in letters that are very difficult to read: it is not only that the words have been written in code; the letters are also '*crabbed*' which means they are written in such a way that it is difficult to read them; people with bad handwriting or using a bad pen make '*crabbed*' letters that are difficult to distinguish. Even when it is deciphered, what is written on this '*scroll*' is '*ambiguous*': the meaning is unclear. This is a legal '*scroll*' containing a contract: an '*Agreement*' by which everything is ruled that has arisen out of the sleep of material Nature. Aswapati is

able to look at that '*scroll*' in a new light, and he sees that all along the edges, in the margins, notes have been written in light which explain what the Agreement really means. The '*Agreement*' applies to everything '*that rises from material Nature's sleep*', everything that emerges '*to clothe the Everlasting in new shapes*'. The many different forms which Nature gives birth to in the evolutionary process are all '*new shapes*' for the Divine to wear, to inhabit. Aswapati reads the '*luminous marginal notes*', the shining notes in the margins of the text which cast light on what this '*dark Agreement*' means. He also finds the '*preamble*' to the Agreement. In a legal document, a law or a contract, there will often be a paragraph at the beginning which states the purpose of the document. That is the '*preamble*'; it explains at the beginning what this agreement is all about. In legal documents they have this: a summary that explains the purpose of the document. Also in a legal document, there may be a '*saving clause*'. The agreement states certain terms which rule the agreement, but it may also mention certain conditions under which those terms do not apply, a '*saving clause*' that limits the contract and allows exceptions. Aswapati finds the '*saving clause*' which states the special conditions under which things can be free from the rule of this '*dark Agreement*'. This agreement contains '*marginal notes*', a '*preamble*', and a '*saving clause*' which states the conditions under which the agreement will not be applicable.

He could re-read now and interpret new
Its strange symbol letters, scattered abstruse signs,
Resolve its oracle and its paradox,
Its riddling phrases and its blindfold terms,
The deep oxymoron of its truth's repiques,
And recognise as a just necessity
Its hard conditions for the mighty work,—
Nature's impossible Herculean toil

Only her warlock-wisecraft could enforce,
Its law of the opposition of the gods,
Its list of inseparable contraries.

The secret knowledge which he has gained gives Aswapati the possibility to look again and to read in a new way, to '*re-read*' and to re-interpret everything that is written in this '*dark Agreement*' and all the complicated, mysterious things that are mentioned in the first five lines of this sentence. We shall look at them one by one soon, but first let us look at the meaning of the sentence as a whole. When he '*re-reads*' the agreement in the light of his new knowledge, he recognises '*as a just necessity / Its hard conditions for the mighty work*': all this great work of evolution, all this impossible toil of Nature, her '*Herculean toil*'. Hercules was a strong hero, a demigod, a yogi who performed apparently impossible tasks. Similarly Nature has done impossible things: out of unconscious matter, she has brought living forms; instinctive living forms have developed into conscious individual beings; and she has many more marvels and impossibilities still to do. That '*Herculean toil*' can only be carried out by her knowledge: only '*her warlock-wisecraft*' can '*enforce*' it. A '*warlock*' is a male witch; the knowledge that witches and magicians have is '*wisecraft*': occult knowledge. They can do things that seem miraculous to ordinary people. Only this magic of Nature could bring about and '*enforce*' all the '*hard conditions*' that are mentioned in the '*Agreement*': for example, the '*law of the opposition of the gods*'. The gods oppose each other and they oppose us; sometimes they oppose and prevent our evolution until we have fulfilled certain conditions. Amongst the conditions for the amazing work which Nature is doing, there is a '*list of inseparable contraries*': good and evil; north and south; light and dark; hot and cold ... : our whole world is ruled by dualities; we can never have one of those contraries without the other, for they are '*inseparable*', they cannot be

separated. This makes our existence here seem very hard and difficult and we wonder why it has to be so; But when Aswapati understands what is written there, when he understands the secret knowledge intuitively, by identity, then he sees that all this is justified: it is exactly the way that it has to be: *'a just necessity'* for all the work that Nature is doing.

So let us go back to the beginning of the sentence and see what makes this Agreement so difficult to understand. First, the letters that it is written in: Now, in this special light in the *'spirit's room of memories'* Aswapati is able to *'re-read now and interpret new its strange symbol letters'*. The letters on the scroll are symbols – perhaps like ancient Egyptian writing or Chinese writing; here and there are *'scattered abstruse signs'*, like mysterious mathematical signs; these signs are *'abstruse'*: almost nobody knows their meaning, but now Aswapati can understand them. He can also understand the *'oracle'* contained in the agreement. An *'oracle'* is a way of getting an answer from other worlds to a difficult question; you go to somebody who is in communication with other worlds and in response to your question they give you a message; but very often you cannot understand the message when it comes: it may be ambiguous or contradictory, its meaning is not clear. Now Aswapati is able to resolve the *'oracle and its paradox'*. A *'paradox'* is the statement of a contradiction; if we can find out how to resolve the paradox, the contradiction, we gain a new and deeper knowledge. The scroll also contains *'riddling phrases'*. Often sacred texts were written in such a way that only an initiate could understand them, a person who had been taught the key to the secret meaning; they were written like a riddle; in a riddle you give a mysterious description and your partner or opponent is supposed to guess what you mean. There are also *'blindfold terms'*: words and expressions which are put in on purpose to mislead the reader, so that anyone who is not an initiate

will not be able to understand; but Aswapati can now decipher all these devices. He can understand '*the deep oxymoron of its truth's repliques*'. Similar to a paradox, an oxymoron is an apparently contradictory phrase, such as 'cruel kindness' or 'hot ice'. In the Agreement there are also phrases in two parts: '*replique*' is a French word meaning a reply or response. Here Sri Aurobindo seems to mean a statement that comes in two parts: the two parts belong together, and yet they seem to be contradictory, like an oxymoron or a paradox: in fact they have to be understood together for the truth to be fully expressed. All that makes for a very, very complicated text. Only when he sees all these hidden connections, all these hidden significances, can he understand this '*dark Agreement*' by which everything in the material world is ruled. But when he understands it, he sees immediately that it has to be exactly like that, it could not be any different. He accepts it as '*a just necessity*': this is the only way that the work can be done.

Then comes a long and difficult sentence. We cannot cut this sentence in the middle; we shall have to read it in full.

The dumb great Mother in her cosmic trance
Exploiting for creation's joy and pain
Infinity's sanction to the birth of form,
Accepts indomitably to execute
The will to know in an inconscient world,
The will to live under a reign of death,
The thirst for rapture in a heart of flesh,
And works out through the appearance of a soul
By a miraculous birth in plasm and gas
The mystery of God's covenant with the Night.

Here is the Mother involved in inconscient matter: '*The dumb great Mother in her cosmic trance*'. In reality, the Mother is the supreme

conscious Force of the Supreme, but when she manifests this material universe she involves herself into the apparent unconsciousness of the cosmos, the universe and loses her power of expression; she is *'in her cosmic trance'*, her consciousness indrawn into Matter and all the happenings of the universe. Sri Aurobindo says that in that state, *'for creation's joy and pain'*, for the purpose of this creation of duality with its happiness and suffering, she exploits or makes use of the *'sanction'* of *'infinity'*. The infinite existence, infinite consciousness, infinite bliss has said *'Yes'* to the *'birth of form'*, and for *'form'* to be born, all these things have to happen. She makes use of *'Infinity's sanction to the birth of form'* to create all these many forms. Beyond the manifestation there is formlessness, pure existence and consciousness and bliss, but no individualised forms, so in response to the fiat of the Supreme, his creative Force *'accepts indomitably'* to *'execute'* or work out, four different things: first, *'the will to know in an inconscient world'*: the world of matter seems to have no consciousness in it, but because the infinite consciousness is involved within it, even in the *'inconscient world'* there is a *'will to know'*; she has accepted to work out *'the will to know'* in the material universe through her evolutionary processes. Then secondly, *'the will to live under a reign of death'*: under the conditions of the material universe, forms have to die and be replaced by new ones; one of the rules of Matter is *'entropy'*, which means that everything must decay; but the Mother has accepted to work out in evolution *'the will to live'* even under this *'reign of death'*, so living forms have evolved in Matter, first simple ones and then more and more complex ones. Thirdly, *'the thirst for rapture in a heart of flesh'*: how is it that in this living matter, in these physical bodies that we have, whose consciousness is hidden from us, amazingly and miraculously we can feel emotions, we can feel longings? We are all longing for bliss, thirsting for rapture. If somebody removes our

heart, if there is a heart transplant, the heart is just something material, physical, it cannot live without the rest of the body; and yet, miraculously, in the physical form we can feel emotion and longing and aspiration. These are impossible miracles that the Mother is working out against all obstacles in this material world. Most miraculous of all, she is working out '*the appearance of a soul / By a miraculous birth in plasm and gas*'. In material forms, a soul emerges; it has been emerging ever since Matter was only the primal, pre-atomic soup that is called '*plasm*'. '*In plasm and gas*' a soul is born by the Mother's '*wizard-wisecraft*'. In these miraculous ways she is working out '*God's covenant with the Night*'. A '*covenant*' is a promise or an agreement. God has made a promise to the Night of inconscience and non-existence, and the cosmic Mother is working out his promise that what has been unconscious will become conscious, what has been insensible will experience bliss. Aswapati sees the great truth of this work that the Mother is doing in the universe.

Once more was heard in the still cosmic Mind
 The Eternal's promise to his labouring Force
 Inducing the world-passion to begin,
 The cry of birth into mortality
 And the opening verse of the tragedy of Time.

It as if he hears, again, in the silence of the '*cosmic Mind*' the '*promise*' which the Supreme Lord made at the very beginning '*to his labouring Force*', to the Mother, the conscious Force who is working out all these hidden things. He made her a '*promise*' which we read about at the end of Canto Four: '*As long as Nature lasts, he too is there*' – he will not leave her. It was that '*promise*' of the Supreme to his own Force that '*induced*', stimulated, this whole '*world-passion to begin*'; '*passion*' perhaps in the sense of a story or a drama of great

suffering. Part of that drama is '*the cry of birth into mortality*': when children are born, we expect them to give a cry as a first sign of life; this suggests that at the very beginning of the manifestation, when immortal beings accepted '*birth into mortality*', there was a cry just as when a new baby is born, and this cry was '*the opening verse*' of the long story of Time, which he says is a '*tragedy*'. There are two different types of literature, tragedies and comedies: tragedies usually end up badly, comedies make us laugh. When we look at everything that is happening and has ever happened in Time we are inclined to think that this drama we are involved in is a tragedy. It is only when we have the secret knowledge that we can say "Maybe it's not a tragedy after all. Maybe it only looks like that now; perhaps something wonderful is going to happen in the end".

Out of the depths the world's buried secret rose;
He read the original ukase kept back
In the locked archives of the spirit's crypt,
And saw the signature and fiery seal
Of Wisdom on the dim Power's hooded work
Who builds in Ignorance the steps of Light.

'He', in this sentence, is Aswapati; we are coming back to him. In the light of the spirit's '*room of memories*' he sees so many things. One of them is the '*buried secret*' of the world. He sees it rising up out of the depths of time and evolution. Also he is able to read something else. The word 'read' and its past tense, 'read' are spelled in the same way, but they are pronounced differently. We cannot tell just by looking at the word whether it is present tense or past tense. We have to have a look at the context, at the other verbs in the sentence; here they are in the past tense: '*rose*', '*saw*'; and from the way the sentence is constructed we know that this one too is in the past tense and so we have to pronounce it 'red' like the colour. Aswapati

read *'the original ukase'*, a very unusual word from Russian which is pronounced 'ookaz'. The Tzar used to give an *'ukase'*, an absolute command that nobody could disobey. Aswapati read *'the original ukase'*, the word of command that was given right at the very beginning of things and which has been hidden, *'kept back / In the locked archives of the spirit's crypt'* along with all the other secret records which we have been reading about. Now, Aswapati is able to read the original document; and there he sees the *'signature'* and *'the fiery seal / Of Wisdom'*, of the supreme Wisdom which has given this command. A *'seal'* is a special mark that identifies the person who has authorised a document. In the old days, a king would have a special seal-ring; when he gave a command it would be written down, and then he would put his signature and mark it with the imprint of his seal in red wax, to show that he has given this command. Nowadays we use rubber stamps in the same way. (Please notice the word *'fiery'*: it is the adjective from 'fire' and should logically be spelt f-i-r-e-y: 'fiery'; but the 'e' has got misplaced; this is the most frequently misspelled word in the English language because of its illogical spelling.) The *'seal'* on the command is a sign of acceptance, of consent, to the work of the *'dim Power'*: the Mother involved in matter. She is doing her work in secret, covered with a hood, which hides what she is doing and how she is working. The work that she is doing is to build *'in Ignorance the steps of Light'*.

A sleeping deity opened deathless eyes:
 He saw the unshaped thought in soulless forms,
 Knew Matter pregnant with spiritual sense,
 Mind dare the study of the Unknowable,
 Life its gestation of the Golden Child.

Here is a very suggestive and mysterious line: *'A sleeping deity*

opened deathless eyes'. Who is that '*sleeping deity*'? It reminds me of something that the Mother has said in connection with a line in Canto One.²⁰ There we read about the Dawn coming, as if the darkness fell away and revealed '*the reclining body of a god*'. In connection with that line, the Mother spoke about a vision that she had in 1906 or 1907 when she was studying occultism. As part of her studies of occultism, she went deep into the inconscient. When she was working with Huta on the *Meditations on Savitri* paintings and they came to this line, she told her about an experience she had there. She found herself going as if deep, deep down into the ocean and seeing there all kinds of wonderful forms; reaching the very bottom, she saw a light in the distance. Moving towards the light, she found that it was shining out of a deep dark cave. She looked inside and saw that at the back of the cave a Being was lying asleep; the Mother said it was neither a man nor a woman, and it did not look like any of the gods, Shiva or Vishnu or whoever. It was a wonderful divine being radiating a rainbow light. She has spoken of this experience on more than one occasion, and once she said that she thinks of it as the first avatar, the divine soul involved in matter; because that divine soul is there in a kind of trance, sleeping, radiating all his light and consciousness and bliss and force, evolution happens. Another time, I think when she spoke to Satprem about this experience, she said that as she stood there and looked at the being it opened its eyes, which signified that at that moment a new awareness was awakening in the evolutionary process. So here, when Sri Aurobindo says '*A sleeping deity opened deathless eyes*' perhaps we can think of it like that: Aswapati sees a divine power hidden deep within matter opening its eyes and

²⁰The darkness failed and slipped like a falling cloak

From the reclining body of a god.

Savitri, CWSA volumes 33 and 34, p. 3

becoming aware. Another thing which he saw was '*the unshaped thought in soulless forms*'. We do not think of material forms such as stones and liquids, gases and stars as having a soul; but none of them could exist unless some divine thought had given birth to them. Aswapati now sees that '*unshaped thought*' within the soulless forms and realises that matter is '*pregnant*', preparing to give birth to the spiritual significance and meaning that it is carrying within itself. In that perspective, he can see that Mind will dare to study '*the Unknowable*', which lies beyond reach at its present stage of development; and he sees that Life too is preparing to give birth to something: '*gestation*' is the period of pregnancy. Life will give birth to '*the Golden Child*', the '*Hiranyagarbha*' or golden embryo, the Divine on the subtle levels of existence dreaming into existence the forms he will take in future in the world of matter; Life is preparing those forms within her.

In the light flooding thought's blank vacancy,
Interpreting the universe by soul signs
He read from within the text of the without:
The riddle grew plain and lost its catch obscure.

When thought falls absolutely silent, leaving the mind in a state of '*blank vacancy*', a light of higher consciousness can pour in like a flood; and in that light Aswapati is able to interpret the material universe, '*by soul signs*'. He can see the signs of the soul appearing even in the appearances of our world; he is able to read '*the text of the without*', the external, the outside, '*from within*', in the light of the inner vision; so then the '*riddle*' of our existence grows plain to him, he can understand it clearly, it has '*lost its catch obscure*'. When we cannot understand a riddle it is because there is a catch in it somewhere that we have not understood.

A larger lustre lit the mighty page.

'A larger lustre', a greater vaster light lit up the page that he is reading, the '*mighty page*' of the universe: he is reading the universal page from within, and as he reads, he sees something wonderful:

A purpose mingled with the whims of Time,
A meaning met the stumbling pace of Chance
And Fate revealed a chain of seeing Will;
A conscious wideness filled the old dumb Space.
In the Void he saw throned the Omniscience supreme.

First let us look at the word '*mingled*'. When two rivers come together, it takes some time for their waters to mingle. We can see the colour of the water of one river and the colour of the water of the other and gradually they mix or mingle. Sometimes it may seem as if things happen without rhyme or reason, by chance, by the '*whims*' or fancies of Time; but Aswapati now sees that there is a purpose mingling with the '*whims of Time*', a direction, an intention. There is also a meaning, a significance that meets '*the stumbling pace of Chance*'. Materialists say that everything happens by chance, there is no purpose, no meaning, the universe just is like that and certain things just emerge. There is a certain truth in that view: on the surface, there is a random play of events and circumstances; but from behind, a veiled significance is guiding that play. '*Chance*' moves at a '*stumbling pace*', with many mis-steps and errors: many attempts have to be made before the right solution is found as if by chance; but behind that '*stumbling pace*' there is a purpose and an intention which goes on driving Chance until the intended result is achieved. We think of '*fate*' as something that just happens; it cannot be avoided; these bad things, they just happen; but Aswapati can see that whatever happens is the outcome of a chain of events; what actually happens has been prepared by a sequence of links that express a '*seeing Will*'. There is a Will behind and within which

sees the thing that happens, the possible consequences of it, and chooses which consequences to accept, in preference to other possible consequences. So as Aswapati looks out at the universe, all that empty silent space, he no longer sees it as '*the old dumb Space*', but as a '*conscious wideness*': it is all full of consciousness. In what seems to be empty, the emptiness of the '*Void*', he saw the all-knowing consciousness, the '*Omniscience*', '*throned*' there, ruling supreme over the entire universe and everything that happens in it.

End of Section 1

Section 2, lines 85-168

Through the previous cantos we have been following the yoga of King Aswapati: we saw the liberation of his soul which brought about a first transformation of his mind and body, and then an exploration of the knowledge he gained as a result of this process, the '*Secret Knowledge*' described in Canto Four. That knowledge was then again briefly summarised in the first section of Canto Five. As a result of the '*Secret Knowledge*' which Aswapati gained in the light of '*the spirit's room of memories*' he saw a great new possibility opening up before him. The first sentence of Section 2 refers to that:

A Will, a hope immense now seized his heart,
And to discern the superhuman's form
He raised his eyes to unseen spiritual heights,
Aspiring to bring down a greater world.

As a result of the '*Secret Knowledge*' that Aswapati gained, a '*Will*', and an immense hope, now seized hold of him. Wanting to '*discern*', to perceive, the superhuman form which the Divine is going to manifest in the future, he '*raised his eyes to unseen spiritual heights*': he has conceived the aspiration '*to bring down a greater world*'. This is a very significant moment in the poem, for it is where we read for first time of the aspiration which is going to carry Aswapati on his immense quest, all the way through to the end of Book Three, where he is finally able to ask a boon of the supreme Mother. He has glimpsed the possibility that if there is a purpose in the '*whims of Time*', if there is an evolutionary direction, then maybe it is possible for him to collaborate, to help that future '*greater world*' to manifest sooner. Why should evolution take so long, why should it follow '*the stumbling pace of Chance*'? Maybe, if he can join his will with the supreme Will, he can help it to happen more quickly. This

'Will' for a divine life upon earth lies at the heart of Sri Aurobindo's Integral Yoga. In the poem, it is Aswapati's aspiration and tapasya which compels the birth of Savitri, in answer to the world's desire for a higher destiny. This moment, when his heart is seized by this Will and this immense hope, releases the spring that sets the whole course of the story moving.

The glory he had glimpsed must be his home.

Through his yoga Aswapati had received a glimpse of this high possibility. He had seen the presence of the Divine in the world; he saw that Nature and the Divine Lord are One, that there is a purpose to the evolutionary unfolding in time: the full manifestation of God in the material world. He has had a glimpse of that glorious possibility, seen higher worlds and higher levels of consciousness. Now he says "That must be my home": he wants to bring down into the material world all the wonderful possibilities that he seen on the heights.

A brighter heavenlier sun must soon illumine
This dusk room with its dark internal stair,
The infant soul in its small nursery school
Mid objects meant for a lesson hardly learned
Outgrow its early grammar of intellect
And its imitation of Earth-Nature's art,
Its earthly dialect to God-language change,
In living symbols study Reality
And learn the logic of the Infinite.

These lines tell us what Aswapati wants to happen; he sees that in the present state of human consciousness we are like young children. When I read this sentence, I think of Sri Aurobindo himself at the age of seven being taken to Manchester in the north of England and living there in a house where he was taught at home:

he was not sent to school; in those days it was quite normal for young children from prosperous families to be taught at home. A room in the house would be set aside as the schoolroom and a teacher would come there and work with the children of the family. He describes the school room as '*dusk*', meaning 'dim', without much light; and it has a '*dark internal stair*': there are different levels in the same room, with a dark stairway leading up and down inside it. In our present state of consciousness we are like young children learning in a dim room. We can move up and down to other levels of our being, using this '*dark internal stair*'. Our schoolroom is ourself, and within us there are different levels, with a stairway leading up and down. Aswapati wants '*a brighter heavenlier sun*' to bring light into this dusky room, and he wants it to happen '*soon*': a new consciousness must bring a greater light than that of the mind. In that dim room, the '*infant soul*', the undeveloped human soul is learning '*in its small nursery school*'; a nursery school is for infants, very young children. In this nursery schoolroom, there would be interesting objects for the children to learn about: perhaps a stuffed bird, different kinds of stones and some pressed flowers, things that would be used for 'object lessons', in which the children learn about things which they can see and touch. This is an image for the way that we learn and grow: everything that we see and experience in our lives is presented to us as 'object lessons' in our '*nursery school*' of the world. Gradually the '*infant soul*' must grow out of '*its early grammar of intellect*'. In those days, when a young child first started lessons, it would be taught to speak correctly: similarly our logical mind, our intellect has to outgrow its '*early grammar*', its childish way of expressing itself, to gain a more advanced consciousness. The children in those Victorian schoolrooms would be given things to copy, they were taught to draw. In one of his essays on education Sri Aurobindo has written that this is a very good thing for children

to do because it teaches them accurate observation and trains the hand to express what it sees. But the soul has to grow beyond copying; it has to learn a higher creativity. When children first start lessons, they may not speak correctly. In Manchester, in those Victorian times when Sri Aurobindo was there, ordinary children spoke a '*dialect*', a local version of English that was not suitable for an educated person to use, they had to be taught to speak Standard English. Similarly the language that we now speak in our present human state is a '*dialect*', an imperfect form of the language that is local to earth; we have to change that way of speaking for '*God-language*', a diviner speech; instead of those object lessons in the schoolroom, we have to '*study Reality*' in the form of '*living symbols*', learning to see all forms in the world around us as '*living symbols*' of the underlying Reality; going beyond the '*early grammar of intellect*' we must learn '*the logic of the Infinite*'. Aswapati wants to help bring about this great change: human beings who are now infant souls, learning in a dim enclosed room from objects that have been brought in there, copying things, speaking a primitive language, must '*outgrow*', grow out of, our present state to reach a much higher one.

The Ideal must be Nature's common truth,
The body illumined with the indwelling God,
The heart and mind feel one with all that is,
A conscious soul live in a conscious world.

This is an expression of Aswapati's aspiration for what the world should be like in future: '*the Ideal*', the perfect form of the world which exists on a higher plane, must become '*Nature's common truth*', our spontaneous way of living. The body, this dark room that we live in, must be '*illumined*', filled with the light of '*the indwelling God*': the divine Presence dwelling in the body must fill it with light;

our hearts and minds that now feel separated from the rest of the world must learn to '*feel one with all that is*'; the '*infant soul*' must grow up to become fully conscious and '*live in a conscious world*'. This is the '*Ideal*'; this is the '*Will*' and the '*hope*' that have seized hold of Aswapati.

As through a mist a sovereign peak is seen,
The greatness of the eternal Spirit appeared,
Exiled in a fragmented universe
Amid half-semblances of diviner things.

If we are travelling in the mountains with clouds and mist all around, through the mist we might catch a glimpse of a great high peak, higher than all the others: '*a sovereign peak*', like a king-mountain. Aswapati gets a glimpse like that: as if seeing a high mountain peak through mist, he gets a glimpse of '*the greatness of the eternal Spirit*'. Here in our material universe, the eternal Spirit is '*exiled*' from its own perfection. This universe is '*fragmented*', it consists of many separate small pieces, fragments. A fragment is a small piece: if you drop a beautiful glass vase, all you will have left is many small fragments. The Divine has fragmented himself to enter into all these forms of the universe, as an exile. An exile has left his own country and is living in a strange land which is not his native place. Here, '*the eternal Spirit*' is '*exiled in a fragmented universe / amid half-semblances of diviner things*.' Even the most beautiful things that we see in our world are only '*half-semblances of diviner things*': they have some resemblance to the higher Ideal forms that lie behind them, but we cannot see their full original beauty. Just as we do not see the full glory of the mountain but only a glimpse of it through '*mist*', Aswapati sees '*the greatness of the eternal Spirit*' hidden by a veil of '*mist*', and exiled here in the fragmented material universe.

These now could serve no more his regal turn;
The Immortal's pride refused the doom to live
A miser of the scanty bargain made
Between our littleness and bounded hopes
And the compassionate Infinitudes.

These '*half-semblances of diviner things*', this '*dusk room*' and all the imperfect things that we now experience are no longer enough for Aswapati: '*These now could serve no more his regal turn*'. He is a king, but more than that he has become a free soul, a self-ruler and a world ruler also; these '*half-semblances*' and the imperfect fragments of our world are no longer good enough for him. The immortal self within him refuses to live in the way that we ordinary human beings live. It is a '*doom*', a terrible fate for the Immortal to live as we human beings do, like misers. A '*miser*' is a person who holds on to whatever little wealth he has; he will not share it, he will not even really enjoy it, he just holds on to it tight. Sri Aurobindo says that we human beings live as misers of a '*scanty bargain*'. When you go shopping and the shop-man asks a price that you know is too high, you will bargain with him until you reach a price that you both agree on; but if you do not get enough for the price that you have paid, then you may feel that you got a '*scanty bargain*'. '*Scant*' or '*scanty*' means '*not enough*', '*insufficient*'. A bargain has been made '*between our littleness*', our limited human nature with its limited hopes, and '*the compassionate Infinitudes*': as if the infinite compassionate beings in their compassion have agreed to a '*bargain*' with us limited human beings. Like misers, human beings cling to the little things that are allowed to them under this bargain; but it is no longer good enough for Aswapati, he is aspiring for much more.

His height repelled the lowness of earth's state:
A wideness discontented with its frame

Resiled from poor assent to Nature's terms,
The harsh contract spurned and the diminished lease.

We were told at the beginning of Canto Four that Aswapati had reached a high level of consciousness that looked up to even higher levels. The '*height*' that he has attained now '*repelled*', pushed away and rejected the '*lowness*' of the earthly condition. Within him was '*a wideness*' that felt '*discontented*', unsatisfied '*with its frame*' of earth nature; it '*resiled*' from its '*assent to Nature's terms*'. '*Resiled*' is a word that lawyers use. If you have entered into a contract and then want to withdraw from it, you '*resile*', saying 'I want to withdraw from this contract now'. Sometimes we may have to agree to a '*scanty bargain*' and accept unfavourable terms; but when our situation improves, we may *resile* from the contract we made and demand a better deal. Aswapati no longer agreed to accept the terms which Nature has set for our human existence. He '*spurned*', proudly rejected, the '*harsh contract*': its '*terms*' are too harsh, too severe; he rejects '*the diminished lease*'. A '*lease*', is the contract you enter into when renting a house or a room or a farm; the '*lease*' agreement states how much and how often you have to pay the landlord. When Aswapati realises the height and fullness of his immortal spirit, he feels that the '*lease*' that Nature has given to us is so '*diminished*', such a small restricted thing, that he says "No! I cannot accept these terms any longer".

Only beginnings are accomplished here;
Our base's Matter seems alone complete,
An absolute machine without a soul.

In the state that we human beings are in now, '*only beginnings*' have been achieved, '*accomplished*'. In fact, only Matter looks complete, and it seems to be following the laws of physical Nature mechanically, like an '*absolute machine without a soul*' which is

dominating our lives.

Or all seems a misfit of half ideas,
Or we saddle with the vice of earthly form
A hurried imperfect glimpse of heavenly things,
Guesses and travesties of celestial types.

Or, if we do not accept the purely materialist view of our universe, it may look to us as if there are many different '*half ideas*' in play here which do not fit together, are not in harmony. Or maybe we get a '*hurried imperfect glimpse of heavenly things*': we glimpse them for a brief moment and then we try to force them into an '*earthly form*'; there are two words to look at here: '*saddle*' and '*vice*'. A '*saddle*' is the seat that we put on a horse when we want to ride it; when we '*saddle*' somebody with something, we give him a responsibility he is unwilling to accept, but cannot refuse. The word '*vice*' has several different meanings but I think that here it refers to a tool which is used to hold two pieces of metal or wood tightly together so that they cannot move. We get a '*glimpse of heavenly things*' and then try to screw them tightly into our '*earthly*' conception, our '*earthly form*' of how they should be. Our ideas about the things we see around us in the universe are only '*guesses*'; we do not know what they really are in their higher reality, we just guess what they are. Our ideas about them are '*travesties*'; a '*travesty*' is a distorted representation, a caricature. Our perceptions are just '*guesses*' and '*travesties*' of ideal forms, '*celestial types*', '*heavenly things*' that exist on higher planes.

Here chaos sorts itself into a world,
A brief formation drifting in the void:
Apings of knowledge, unfinished arcs of power,
Flamings of beauty into earthly shapes,
Love's broken reflexes of unity

Swim, fragment-mirrorings of a floating sun.

'Chaos' means utter disorder; yet '*chaos sorts itself into a world*': out of apparently complete disorder and fragmentation, an organised order and harmony emerges in the form of '*a world*'; but this world is only '*a brief formation drifting in the void*'. Of course, in terms of our human lives, it is not so '*brief*', maybe billions of years; but the astronomers, the scientists who really study these things tell us that all this is changing, our sun will blow itself up and go out, and this material world that seems so real to us is really only a '*brief formation*' in the emptiness of '*the void*'. In this world, there are only '*apings of knowledge*': to '*ape*' somebody or something means to imitate them in a crude way, as a monkey might do; we have only a pretence or imitation of knowledge; so we do not have true power, we do not have a full range of mastery, only an '*unfinished arc*' of it; an '*arc*' is only part of the circumference of a circle. Wonderful '*flamings of beauty*' get expressed in imperfect '*earthly shapes*'. Here Love and oneness is expressed only by '*broken reflexes*'. '*Reflexes*' here means 'reflections'; these reflections have been broken up, as happens on water sometimes: if a patch of water is very still, you may see an almost perfect mirror-image reflected in it; but if the water is moving, the image is broken up into many '*broken reflexes*'. These '*apings of knowledge*', these imperfect '*earthly shapes*', these '*broken reflexes*' of oneness and Love, are all '*fragment-mirrorings of a floating sun*'. The sun is the symbol of the complete divine Consciousness and Power and Bliss and Love, but its reflections, floating on the waters of life, are only distorted '*fragment-mirrorings*' of that Glory.

A packed assemblage of crude tentative lives
Are pieced into a tessellated whole.

Our lives here in this material world are '*crude*'; they are not fine,

not yet fully developed, but only first rough attempts, hesitant '*tentative*' trials; all these lives are '*packed*' closely together into an '*assemblage*', pieced together into '*a tessellated whole*'. The image is of a mosaic, a pattern or picture assembled out of many small coloured pieces of glass or ceramic or stone; each of those small pieces is a '*tessella*'; when something is '*tessellated*' it has been put together out of many small pieces. Our world is like a mosaic: each of these '*crude tentative lives*' is one tiny piece, which has been packed '*into a tessellated whole*': the fragmented world we live in.

There is no perfect answer to our hopes;
There are blind voiceless doors that have no key;
Thought climbs in vain and brings a borrowed light,
Cheated by counterfeits sold to us in life's mart,
Our hearts clutch at a forfeited heavenly bliss.

The '*tessellated whole*' we live in is a world of fragments, and so there seems to be '*no perfect answer to our hopes*'. Our hopes may get fulfilled to a certain extent, but there is always some imperfection and dissatisfaction. As we move forward in our lives we come up against doors that will not open, that do not express anything to us, we do not know what is lying beyond, where that door might lead to; they seem to have no key, we have reached a dead end. We make use of our minds, our thought tries to climb up and find a solution; it may find something, but all it can find is a '*borrowed light*'; the image of the higher mind is the moon, which does not have any light of its own: it gives only a reflected light, a light that is borrowed from the sun. On the life level, we are always looking for '*bliss*'; always '*our hearts*' are trying to seize '*heavenly bliss*'; but instead we are offered and accept things that are '*sold to us in life's mart*' or market, which are not the real thing but '*counterfeits*', fakes and forgeries; they cannot give us the ananda our hearts are longing

for, but we accept them as substitutes.

There is provender for the mind's satiety,

There are thrills of the flesh, but not the soul's desire.

'*Provender*' is dry food for animals, like hay or straw. '*Satiety*' means feeling so full that you cannot take any more; but it does not mean that you are satisfied: you are just full. We stuff our minds full with all kinds of '*provender*' and experience physical delights, '*thrills of the flesh*'. The mind gets sated, the flesh gets thrilled, but the soul is dissatisfied: it does not find what it is longing for.

Here even the highest rapture Time can give

Is a mimicry of ungrasped beatitudes,

A mutilated statue of ecstasy,

A wounded happiness that cannot live,

A brief felicity of mind or sense

Thrown by the World-Power to her body-slave,

Or a simulacrum of enforced delight

In the seraglios of Ignorance.

'*Here even the highest rapture*', the highest form of delight that '*Time can give / Is a mimicry*': a copy, a poor imitation of the '*beatitudes*', the blissful states which lie beyond our grasp, out of our reach. The '*rapture*' that '*Time can give*' is not the real thing, but a damaged image of it, a '*mutilated statue of ecstasy*'. '*Mutilated*' means 'damaged', 'spoiled', 'defaced'; maybe the nose is missing or the arms have been broken off; it is not complete, we do not experience its full beauty. The incomplete happiness that we experience is '*wounded*', it cannot live. It is a very short-lived '*felicity*': some brief happiness of the mind or of the senses which the '*World-Power*' allows us, like an empress throwing some tit-bit to her slave. A '*seraglio*' is another word for the 'harem', the palace where the ruler houses his wives and concubines. It may be a very beautiful and

comfortable place, and those women may be given lovely clothes and delicious food, and have an easy luxurious life, but really they are slaves; they have to pretend to be happy, they cannot show that they are not happy. Whatever delight we enjoy in the world is only a pretence, a '*simulacrum*' or imitation of true ananda and beatitude, because it is '*enforced*'. We are not free; we are all here, slaves '*in the seraglios of Ignorance*'; as long as we are in the ignorance we are not free, so we cannot experience true delight.

For all we have acquired soon loses worth,
An old disvalued credit in Time's bank,
Imperfection's cheque drawn on the Inconscient.

Here is an image from banking. Sri Aurobindo is showing us the comparative worthlessness of all our human achievements once we have glimpsed the higher spiritual possibilities. Whatever we have '*acquired*' or gained soon loses its value. In time, our savings go on losing value until they become quite worthless: '*an old disvalued credit in Time's bank*'. In your passbook, whatever you have gained and saved may be written there as a credit, but that credit has no value anymore. When we write a cheque to somebody, it is drawn on our bank, from our account. But since our achievements are all drawn from the '*Inconscient*', that cheque is imperfect, it has no value.

An inconsequence dogs every effort made,
And chaos waits on every cosmos formed:
In each success a seed of failure lurks.

Here the word '*dogs*' is a verb. If you go for a walk, your dog follows you. That is what the verb means: something is following closely behind us. Whatever efforts we may make, following behind them, just at their heels, is '*an inconsequence*', something unexpected, unpredictable, so our efforts often do not turn out the way that we

planned or expected: something unpredictable happens. The ancient Greeks had these two important words: '*chaos*' and '*cosmos*'. '*Chaos*' means complete disorder and '*cosmos*' means order, harmony, beauty. A '*cosmos*' is an orderly, harmonious universe. In our lives we try to form orderly universes around ourselves; but '*chaos*' is waiting, disorder: at any moment, our little '*cosmos*' may collapse back into '*chaos*'. '*In each success a seed of failure lurks*': hiding in our greatest successes like a little seed ready to sprout is the possibility, even the likelihood, of failure, because we live in this world of imperfection.

He saw the doubtfulness of all things here,
The incertitude of man's proud confident thought,
The transience of the achievements of his force.

Aswapati saw '*the doubtfulness of all things here*'; we human beings are so proud of our minds and the achievements of our minds, we are confident that we can work things out with our reason, with our science and technology; but Aswapati saw the opposite of that: '*the incertitude*', the uncertainty '*of man's proud confident thought*'. Certitude is the sense of being absolutely sure of something; but with the mind, with our thoughts, we can never be absolutely certain of anything; somebody can always come and prove the opposite, or life may prove to us how wrong we were. Aswapati sees '*the transience*', the impermanence of human achievements; we do have some limited force, so we can and do achieve things; but our achievements do not last very long, they are transient, passing, short-lived.

A thinking being in an unthinking world,
An island in the sea of the Unknown,
He is a smallness trying to be great,
An animal with some instincts of a god,

His life a story too common to be told,
His deeds a number summing up to nought,
His consciousness a torch lit to be quenched,
His hope a star above a cradle and grave.

These lines describe Man, the mental being. Humans are thinking beings '*in an unthinking world*'; that is what makes us different from the rest of nature. At the same time, each of us is '*an island in the sea of the Unknown*': all around us are so many things, both material and subtle, that we do not know anything about; we are surrounded by a sea of unknown things. Each of us is small, but we are trying to be great; in every human being is something which knows that it should be greater than this present '*smallness*' and tries in different ways to be greater and better than it is. A human being is '*an animal with some instincts of a god*': we have animal bodies, but also '*some instincts of a god*'. 'Instinct' is a power of knowledge; in animals the power of instinct is their main guidance; human beings too have instincts, but we also have minds, so our instincts are often not as reliable as they are for animals; some of our instincts are animal instincts, but some belong to our higher being: certain kinds of courage and nobility, some sense of what is true and right, some aspirations for higher realities are '*instincts*' that belong to a diviner existence. Human life is '*a story too common to be told*': so ordinary that it is hardly worth telling. Occasionally there are people who do something exceptional; or some people are very good storytellers who can tell their ordinary story in a way that makes it interesting; but otherwise a human life is '*a story too common to be told*': the things that happen to us, happen to everybody else as well. '*His deeds a number summing up to nought*': '*deeds*' are the things that you do, your actions; in a lifetime you may have done some positive things, but then you have surely done some negative things as well, so in the end, when you add up all the things you have done, it

comes to nothing; when we do the sum, when we do the addition of all the 'deeds' we have performed in our lives, plus and minus, it adds up to nothing or next to nothing. Human beings have some 'consciousness' which is like a 'torch lit' in the universal darkness; but how long do we live? Our torch of consciousness is lit, but soon it is going to be 'quenched', it is going to be put out again. We may have some high 'hope' that is guiding us like a 'star', our ideals, our hopes for a better life and a better world'; that 'star' of hope shines over a 'cradle' and a 'grave': we have just a little time in between.

And yet a greater destiny may be his,
For the eternal Spirit is his truth.

Sri Aurobindo shows us one side of the picture and then he shows us the other: we have this sad story of cradles and graves, of a small torch of consciousness that is lit only to be quenched, but there is the possibility of a greater destiny for us: '*A greater destiny may be his*'. This is true for each human being and for the race as a whole, because the truth of each and all of us is '*the eternal Spirit*': our truth is neither the body that dies, nor the limited force and knowledge that we have, but what we really are in our essence, '*the eternal Spirit*'.

He can re-create himself and all around
And fashion new the world in which he lives:
He, ignorant, is the Knower beyond Time,
He is the Self above Nature, above Fate.

We do not usually realise that we can 're-create', make ourselves new. And if we can 're-create' ourselves, we can 're-create' our environment, we can even 're-create', remake or reshape and '*fashion new*' the world in which we live. Man is '*ignorant*'; but in essence, he is the Supreme, '*the Knower beyond Time*'; the One knows all this because he is all this. He is beyond Time, beyond Space, beyond the

entire manifestation; but he is also the Self of each of us and the entire creation. He is above Nature and above what we call '*Fate*' or Destiny; because he dwells within us, we can recreate ourselves and everything that is around us, and shape our world anew: that is the other aspect of humanity which we too often forget.

End of Section 2

Section 3, lines 169-239

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.

When Aswapati looked at the world and saw the doubtfulness of everything here, '*his soul retired from all that he had done*': it detached itself, withdrew, stepped back, '*retired*'. As it did so, all the noise of the world, '*the futile din of human toil*' was '*hushed*' and fell silent. '*Din*' means a lot of noise, especially the noise of many people working. To the soul, perhaps, all this human effort seems '*futile*' or useless. Time went on; '*the circle of the days*', the years, the seasons, continued turning around and around like a wheel, but he had stopped paying attention to it, he had '*forsaken*' it. The sound of the '*crowded tramp of life*', all the many feet of all the living beings moving around in the world, faded away into the distance.

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.

Aswapati's consciousness entered into '*the Silence*'; he had no other companion, he was all alone with the Silence; in it he lived '*impassive*', undisturbed and unmoved. He was no longer disturbed by anything because he had become '*immune from earthly hopes*'. We hope for this and that and the other, and when our hopes are disappointed we get distressed and upset; but Aswapati was

'immune', protected, he had detached himself. *'Immune'* is a word that we hear a lot these days in connection with disease. Our body has an *'immune system'* that protects us or resists things that are harmful to us. The doctors may test us to find out whether we have immunity to tuberculosis or some other disease; Aswapati has become *'immune'* to the disease of *'earthly hopes'*. He has become *'a figure in the ineffable Witness' shrine'*. A *'shrine'* is a sacred space. This shrine is dedicated to *'the ineffable Witness'*, the divine Purusha who is detached from Nature, just quietly observing everything. There Aswapati is *'pacing'*: this word makes us think of Sri Aurobindo meditating as he walked in his room, pacing up and down; he depicts Aswapati like that, pacing up and down in this vast, sacred space which is created by *'his thoughts'*. A *'cathedral'* is a huge sacred building with very high columns; six or seven hundred years ago, great cathedrals were built with high arches that seem to be trying to reach heaven. Aswapati's consciousness is now moving in a vast sacred space like that, under immense *'arches'* which are so tall that they are *'dim with infinity'*: they are stretching up and fading from sight into infinite distance. In that sacred space *'invisible wings'* are brooding, hovering there as if they want to go up towards heaven, the wings perhaps of aspirations, of great thoughts rising up into infinity.

A call was on him from intangible heights;
Indifferent to the little outpost Mind,
He dwelt in the wideness of the Eternal's reign.

'A call was on him', almost like a kind of spell, an enchantment; he has heard a *'call'* which is holding his full attention; it has come to him *'from intangible heights'*, high levels that cannot be touched: if something is *'intangible'*, it cannot be felt by our physical sense of touch. To Aswapati now, Mind seems like a *'little outpost'*, a small

outlying camp at a great distance; and he is not very interested in what is happening there; he is '*indifferent*' to '*the little outpost Mind*' because he is living, dwelling '*in the wideness of the Eternal's reign*', in the Silence, in this immense shrine of the witness Spirit.

His being now exceeded thinkable Space,

His boundless thought was neighbour to cosmic sight:

'*His being*' is no longer the little being that we are conscious of, and no longer like the little soul in us that is the size of a thumb; it has become vaster and wider even than all '*thinkable Space*'. When people show us pictures of the universe and try to explain how vast it is, we can try to imagine it, and try to encompass something of it with our thought, but Aswapati's being has now become much vaster than our thought could ever reach. His thought is '*boundless*', and very close to the '*cosmic sight*' which can see the entire universe in a single glance. A '*neighbour*' is a person who lives very close to us.

A universal light was in his eyes,

A golden influx flowed through heart and brain;

A Force came down into his mortal limbs,

A current from eternal seas of Bliss;

He felt the invasion and the nameless joy.

'*A universal light was in his eyes*', a light that comes from being universal, from feeling one with the whole universe; '*a golden influx*' or stream was pouring down through his brain, through his heart, into his body. Sri Aurobindo has written a sonnet about this experience that he had. This '*influx*' is not only a flow of golden light coming in, it is also a Power: '*A Force came down into his mortal limbs*', into his human body. That '*Force*' is a '*current*', a stream flowing '*from eternal seas of Bliss*'. In the sea, there are currents where the water flows strongly in a certain direction. This '*Force*' flowing

into Aswapati's body is bringing a flow of delight '*from eternal seas of Bliss*'; he feels that current invading him, pouring into him, and experiences the '*nameless joy*' which it brings.

Aware of his occult omnipotent Source,
Allured by the omniscient Ecstasy,
A living centre of the Illimitable
Widened to equate with the world's circumference,
He turned to his immense spiritual fate.

Aswapati has become aware of his '*Source*', his Origin. That '*Source*' is '*occult*', hidden, and all-powerful, '*omnipotent*'. He is being '*allured*', attracted by the '*omniscient Ecstasy*', the all-knowing bliss, the intense delight, that belongs to the '*Source*'. He is experiencing himself as '*a living centre of the Illimitable*', and that centre has widened '*to equate with the world's circumference*': he feels himself as wide as the '*circumference*' of the whole world, and that means not only the earth, but the entire manifestation. He is living as a '*centre of the Illimitable*', and because there is no limit, the consciousness of that '*centre*' can be widened to become equal with the entire manifestation and universal in consciousness. In that state, Aswapati '*turned to his immense spiritual fate*': his journey is not yet over, he has some enormous task still to do; even though he has gained this high spiritual realisation, he still has more work to do. He wants to bring that state down to the earth and make it normal here.

Abandoned on a canvas of torn air,
A picture lost in far and fading streaks,
The earth-nature's summits sank below his feet:
He climbed to meet the infinite more above.

Aswapati has reached the '*summits*', the highest levels, of the '*earth-nature*', the highest levels that the earth evolution has reached, and

now he is going beyond, he is leaving the earth-nature behind, abandoning it. As he soars up, the earth beneath him looks like a picture painted not on canvas but on air. As he rises upwards the air is *'torn'* and the earth fades away, like *'a picture lost in far and fading streaks'*. He leaves it far behind. He is climbing *'to meet the infinite more'* that is above. He had reached *'the earth-nature's summits'* and now he is going much further.

The Immobile's ocean-silence saw him pass,
An arrow leaping through eternity
Suddenly shot from the tense bow of Time,
A ray returning to its parent sun.

He is mounting like an *'arrow'* that has been *'suddenly shot from the tense bow of Time'*. In order for an arrow to fly fast, the bow has to be *'tense'* or taut; watching him, seeing him pass, is the *'Immobile's ocean-silence'*, the vast unmoving divine presence. The archer who has loosed this arrow is *'Time'*. It is as if all the aspiration that has been accumulating throughout earth-time has created a huge *'tense bow'* which is shooting Aswapati off into the higher levels like an *'arrow'*. As he mounts up, he is *'a ray returning to its parent sun'*. Every individual consciousness is a *'ray'* of the divine *'parent sun'* of infinite rays; now one *'ray'* is returning to its origin.

Opponent of that glory of escape,
The black Inconscient swung its dragon tail
Lashing a slumbrous Infinite by its force
Into the deep obscurities of form:
Death lay beneath him like a gate of sleep.

These lines must describe an experience that Sri Aurobindo had. We can hardly imagine it. In that moment of intense aspiration, as Aswapati leaves the earth's atmosphere, shooting off like an arrow or a rocket towards the heights, there is a resistance from below,

something is opposing that 'escape'. Aswapati's aspiration has been so strong and swift that he has escaped from the pull of the earth's gravity, but there is a recoil from below: *'the black Inconscient swung its dragon tail'*. The 'Inconscient' is sometimes imaged as a black 'dragon', a fierce darkness. When the dragon's tail swings, it lashes a *'slumbrous Infinite' 'into the deep obscurities of form'*. The Inconscient is infinite, but asleep: 'slumbrous' means 'sleepy' or 'sleeping'. There is a sudden movement as the dragon lashes its tail, things move, there is friction and as a result obscure forms appear. And then the poet says: *'Death lay beneath him like a gate of sleep'*: Aswapati has gone beyond the mortal state, beyond the power of 'Death'; maybe that darkness is still visible like some great black hole below him.

One-pointed to the immaculate Delight,
Questing for God as for a splendid prey,
He mounted burning like a cone of fire.

Like an arrow, Aswapati is 'one-pointed'; he is aiming for *'the immaculate Delight'*, the divine Delight that is pure and stainless. He is searching, *'questing for God as for a splendid prey'*. We might think of one of those modern missiles that can seek out its target; like that, he is searching for God *'as for a splendid prey'*. A hunter will shoot an arrow at his 'prey', the animal that he wants to catch. God is the most splendid prey that can be hunted after. On that quest, Aswapati shot up like a rocket: *'burning like a cone of fire'*.

To a few is given that godlike rare release.
'To a few': only a very, very few people are granted the great blessing of that *'rare release'* from the pull of the earth atmosphere. A 'release' happens when someone or something is set free; 'rare' implies that this does not happen often but is something very unusual and exceptional. Sri Aurobindo says this 'release' is 'godlike': it goes beyond human limitations, becoming like a god, able to

leave the earth atmosphere and the pull of earth's gravity.

One among many thousands never touched,
Engrossed in the external world's design,
Is chosen by a secret witness Eye
And driven by a pointing hand of Light
Across his soul's unmapped immensitudes.

This release comes only very rarely, to one person out of '*many thousands*' who are '*never touched*'. Most of us are '*engrossed in the external world's design*': all our attention is absorbed in the way that things are happening here, on the surface of things, in '*the external world's design*'; we are '*engrossed*', as if swallowed up by all these happenings on the surface. That is normal for human beings; but out of '*many thousands*' just one person will be '*chosen*' by a higher power, '*a secret witness Eye*': a higher power who is keeping an eye on everything that happens in the universe will say, "Yes! This one is ready. Let us take this one." First one is '*chosen*', and then he is '*driven by a pointing hand of Light*'. Something inside him wakes up and he feels the push and sees the '*pointing hand of Light*' which shows him, "Go that way!" That one is driven '*across his soul's unmapped immensitudes*'. While we are engrossed in the external world's design, we may feel that our soul is just a very tiny part of us. The Upanishads say that it is no bigger than a man's thumb, a tiny little being of light; but if we once enter into contact with that being of light, we find that it opens out to vast spaces, '*unmapped immensitudes*'. 'Immense' means 'very big', 'huge'. This word '*immensitudes*', meaning 'largenesses', has been coined by Sri Aurobindo. The spaces within the soul are so wide that nobody has ever been able to make a map of them. There is no map to follow, only the '*pointing hand*' which indicates "Go this way; this way; this way." The chosen one is '*driven*' across the vast distances of his

inner being. This happens only to '*one among many thousands never touched*'.

A pilgrim of the everlasting Truth,
Our measures cannot hold his measureless mind;
He has turned from the voices of the narrow realm
And left the little lane of human Time.

That chosen '*one*' who is travelling through the '*unmapped immensitudes*' of his soul is a '*pilgrim*', a person who is on a journey towards a sacred place. This '*pilgrim*' is not going to Sabarimalai or Kedarnath or Benares; he is travelling towards '*the everlasting Truth*'. '*Our measures cannot hold his measureless mind*': when that one has been chosen and has started on his journey to the everlasting Truth, our human '*measures*', our standards, no longer apply to him. We have ideas about how human beings should behave and what they should do; but when someone has come into contact with his soul's '*unmapped immensitudes*' and his mind has widened to Infinity, when he is being guided by a '*pointing hand of Light*', none of our normal human standards apply to him any longer, because '*he has turned from the voices of the narrow realm*', the laws and customs of our narrow human world, and from all the voices that try to tell him, 'You should do this', 'You should do that'. He has that '*pointing hand*' to show him where he should go and what he should do. He has '*left the little lane of human Time*'. If we look at '*human Time*' the scientists tell us that for a few hundred thousand years there have been human beings on earth; but Sri Aurobindo says that compared with the vastnesses of the soul, this is just like a narrow little path, '*the little lane of human Time*'. When the pilgrim sets out on his quest for the everlasting Truth, he has turned away from that narrow little lane and entered a vaster dimension.

In the hushed precincts of a vaster plan

He treads the vestibules of the Unseen,
Or listens following a bodiless Guide
To a lonely cry in boundless vacancy.

If you are walking along a narrow little lane, you might come to a temple entrance and step off the lane into the temple, and then suddenly it is as if you are in a much vaster world. Sri Aurobindo says that the pilgrim enters the '*hushed precincts of a vaster plan*'. '*Precincts*' means '*premises*', literally premises that are surrounded by a wall. Here in South India, there are many temples which have the central shrine in the middle and around it a wall, and then another wall and another wall; the outermost wall defines the '*precincts*' of the temple; as soon as you have stepped across the threshold of one of the outer gates you can tell that you have entered a sacred space. Most of our temples here in South India are very busy and crowded full of people, but if we go to an old temple that is far away from anywhere – for example at Gingee there is a beautiful old temple where often nobody is around – then the '*precincts*' of the temple may be '*hushed*', silent; that gives a very special feeling: you are in a vast building and there is almost no sound at all. First the pilgrim enters the '*precincts*' and then '*he treads the vestibules of the Unseen*'. '*Vestibule*' is an architectural term: in ancient Roman houses there was a small room just inside the entrance, the '*vestibule*', where people would take off their street clothes and probably their shoes before entering the main part of the house. Here Sri Aurobindo uses the word to suggest that although the pilgrim has entered a vast space, he is still only in the '*vestibules*', just the first small rooms of the vast house of the '*Unseen*'. Or he may not find himself in a building at all, but in a huge open space, a '*boundless vacancy*', a great empty space with no horizon, no limits. How will he know where to go? There is a '*Guide*': the '*Guide*' does not have a body but still it shows him

where to go, and the '*pilgrim*' hears a '*lonely cry*' in that huge empty space; perhaps it is the voice of an unseen bird, calling out in the emptiness.

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.

For that pilgrim all the noise of the universe, '*all the deep cosmic murmur*' falls still. Here on earth there is all the noise of life, but even out in space there are asteroids crashing around and banging into things, there are planets whirling, explosions happening: all that makes a sound, the '*deep cosmic murmur*' caused by the movement of forces not only in the material world but in the subtle worlds too. All that suddenly falls silent for him, he does not hear it any more: '*he lives in the hush before the world was born*', before there was any universe, before there were any suns or stars or planets, before there was anything; he experiences the hush that reigned before the world was born. In that Silence his soul has no coverings; all the instruments, the body, the life, the mind, are stripped away so that only the soul, the true individual being, is '*left naked*', without any covering in the presence of '*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.

'*Compulsion*' is what we experience when we are forced to do something and have no choice in the matter; when you are studying, for example, certain subjects are '*compulsory*': you have to study them whether you like it or not, if you do not study them then you will not get your certificate; but there are also other compulsions in daily life, things we feel we have no choice about,

we just have to do them, we cannot help it, whether we like or not. In the world of '*created things*' there are forces which compel us; now the pilgrim is free from all that, he is '*far from compulsion of created things*'; he has gone beyond this universe with all its compelling circumstances and forces. There, '*thought*' and all the things that '*thought*' believes in, its '*shadowy idols*', disappear. An idol is a form for a deity that we worship; we worship many '*idols*'; but now for this pilgrim all these '*shadowy idols*' disappear. '*The moulds of form and person are undone*'. We have come across the word 'mould' before; when we want to make a candle or a metal statue, we create a mould and into it we pour the bronze or the wax. Sri Aurobindo tells us that all forms in the world, even our own individualities, are '*moulds*' for spirit, for soul: soul and spirit are formless; in order to take form they are poured into a mould. There are not only physical moulds such as our bodies, there are also psychological ones; there is a person who has a name, Shraddhavan or Kumari or Lella; the person is a kind of form; but when the pilgrim steps beyond the manifestation into '*the precincts of a vaster plan*' all those forms '*are undone*', dissolved, non-existent as far as he is concerned.

'*The ineffable Wideness knows him for its own.*' '*Ineffable*' is another word that we have come across many times: it means 'beyond description', 'beyond expression'. There is a '*Wideness*', an immensitude, which we cannot describe in any way; that '*Wideness*' is conscious and it recognises the pilgrim, the chosen one as belonging to it, it knows him as '*its own*'.

A lone forerunner of the Godward earth,
 Among the symbols of yet unshaped things
 Watched by closed eyes, mute faces of the Unborn,
 He journeys to meet the Incommunicable,

Hearing the echo of his single steps
In the eternal courts of Solitude.

That chosen one, that pilgrim, is '*a lone forerunner of the Godward earth*': the whole earth is moving towards God, moving towards its fulfilment. When we put this syllable '*ward*' at the end of any word it implies a direction: we say '*toward*' or we can say that we travel northwards or southwards, or even skywards. The earth is moving '*Godward*': towards God; and this one who has been chosen, this pilgrim, is a '*forerunner*' of the rest of the earth: he is going ahead and gradually the whole earth will follow him. He is alone, ahead of all the rest of the earth-evolution. He is journeying '*among the symbols of yet unshaped things*', the signs of things and beings that do not yet have any shape because they have not yet manifested; they are '*the Unborn*', immortal beings who will, in the future, manifest in transient forms. He feels as if he is being watched by those unborn beings, even though their eyes are still closed and their faces are '*mute*' and expressionless because they are not yet born. He passes them as he journeys '*to meet the Incommunicable*'. We try to communicate; just now I am trying to communicate to you my understanding of these lines; but in these lines there are many, many things that I cannot communicate: I can only try to give you some indication of the surface meanings of the words. Underneath, beyond, is something '*incommunicable*' which cannot be communicated and which you would have to experience and feel for yourselves. The pilgrim is travelling towards '*the Incommunicable*', which is beyond all our powers of explanation or communication or expression. As the pilgrim moves on, he hears the '*echo of his single steps*', the sound of his own footsteps; he is all alone, there are no other footsteps, he can only hear his own '*single steps*' that echo as he moves through '*the eternal courts of Solitude*'.

A nameless Marvel fills the motionless hours.
His spirit mingles with eternity's heart
And bears the silence of the Infinite.

Sri Aurobindo is describing from his own experience what it is like to be that pilgrim, the chosen one, and what he experiences in those *'eternal courts of Solitude'*: *'a nameless Marvel fills the motionless hours'*: although it is beyond time, there are hours, but they are *'motionless'*, unmoving; *'a nameless Marvel'*, fills those *'motionless hours'*: something miraculous and wonderful which has no name, and cannot be named. *'His spirit mingles with'*, merges into, the *'heart'* of eternity: *'he bears the silence of the Infinite'*.

End of Section 3

Section 4, lines 240-328

The lines that we were looking at in the previous section were a general statement, applying to the rare individuals who are chosen by the Divine from amongst many thousands never touched; they did not refer directly and solely to Aswapati. In the section which we are starting now, the poet returns to his narrative and tells us more about Aswapati.

In a divine retreat from mortal thought,
In a prodigious gesture of soul-sight,
His being towered into pathless heights,
Naked of its vesture of humanity.

'In a divine retreat from mortal thought', Aswapati withdraws from our human ways of thinking and looks up *'In a prodigious gesture of soul-sight'*. *'Prodigious'* means *'extraordinary'*, extremely unusual, exceptional and outstanding. When there is a young child who writes beautiful poetry or plays the piano or the violin wonderfully well, we say that the child is a *'prodigy'*, meaning that it has very outstanding and unusual abilities. This *'gesture of soul-sight'*, the upward gesture of Aswapati's soul, is something exceptional. With these two movements, of *'retreat from mortal thought'* and *'a prodigious gesture of soul-sight'*, his whole being rose up like a great tower *'into pathless heights'*: high levels which cannot be reached easily because there are no paths. His being has become *'naked of its vesture of humanity'*. *'Vesture'* means *'clothing'*. Aswapati's true being no longer needs the clothing of the human form; that *'vesture'* has been removed to allow his inner being to rise up into the heights in a tremendously powerful upward movement of aspiration.

As thus it rose, to meet him bare and pure
A strong Descent leaped down. A Might, a Flame,
A Beauty half-visible with deathless eyes,
A violent Ecstasy, a Sweetness dire,
Enveloped him with its stupendous limbs
And penetrated nerve and heart and brain
That thrilled and fainted with the epiphany:
His nature shuddered in the Unknown's grasp.

Sri Aurobindo has told us that the characteristic movement that helps us to progress in the spiritual life is aspiration: if there is a sincere aspiration from below, a response will come from above. In the last sentence we saw Aswapati towering up into higher levels of consciousness in a prodigious upward movement of aspiration; now a powerful response comes from above: *'to meet him bare and pure / A strong Descent leaped down.'* Something comes pouring down: *'a Might'*, a strength, something very powerful and dynamic, like *'a Flame'*. He feels himself being seized by *'a Beauty'* which he cannot see fully because it is only *'half-visible'*, but he is aware of its *'deathless eyes'*. It brings with it *'a violent Ecstasy'*, an intense delight, and *'a Sweetness dire'*: it is so sweet that it is *'dire'*, terrible, difficult to bear. This Power of Flame and Ecstasy and Sweetness *'enveloped him with its stupendous limbs'*: it surrounded him, as if in an immense embrace, and then it entered into him, penetrated his whole being, his nerves and heart and brain. It is a tremendously intense experience for these physical parts, they thrill with this powerful influx that is coming in, and they almost cannot bear it, they faint, they seem to lose consciousness because of this *'epiphany'*. *'Epiphany'* is the revelation of the Divine. It is a word from Greek which means something like our word *'darshan'*: a moment when the Divine is revealed to us. Here Aswapati experiences an *'epiphany'* in his whole nature: his natural parts, body, life and mind, all *'shuddered*

in the Unknown's grasp'. His whole being has been seized and embraced and penetrated by the Divine, and that is such a powerful experience that his nature '*shuddered*'. A 'shudder' is a convulsive quivering of the body, usually because of terror or horror; but here it is because of the intense shock of ecstasy brought by the '*grasp*' of the Unknown.

In a moment shorter than death, longer than Time,
By a Power more ruthless than Love, happier than Heaven,
Taken sovereignly into eternal arms,
Haled and coerced by a stark absolute bliss,
In a whirlwind circuit of delight and force
Hurried into unimaginable depths,
Upborne into immeasurable heights,
It was torn out from its mortality
And underwent a new and bourneless change.

Something tremendous happened to Aswapati in a moment which he experienced as '*shorter than death, longer than Time*'; there is something paradoxical here, a moment that is very short, instantaneous, and yet seems to contain more experience than all Time. In that moment Aswapati is '*taken sovereignly*': there is no possibility of resistance to the mastering strength of the '*eternal arms*' of this Power that is '*more ruthless than Love*'. '*Ruthless*' means 'pitiless'; we speak of a '*ruthless*' tyrant, but love too can be like that, seizing hold of you and not allowing you to resist. This Power is also '*happier than Heaven*'. Aswapati has been caught up by something immensely powerful, but also very beautiful and ecstatic. It feels like being caught up in a cyclone or a tornado: he is '*haled*', dragged along, and '*coerced*', not given any choice: he is forced by '*stark absolute bliss*': there is nothing else but that bliss and it cannot be resisted. It carries him '*in a whirlwind circuit*', whirling

him around and around as if caught by a tornado; but this is a *'whirlwind'* of *'delight and force'*. A tremendous energy and strength has seized him and carried him swiftly down *'into unimaginable depths'* and then up again *'into immeasurable heights'*. All this happened to his body: it was *'torn out from its mortality'*, out of its deathbound state, and experienced *'a new and bourneless change'*: *'bourneless'* means without any limits or borders.

At the end of Canto Three, Sri Aurobindo told us about a first transformation that Aswapati experienced. On page 44 we read about *'his mind and body's first spiritual change'* which came about as the result of his *'soul's release'*. This is a second and much more powerful transformation of his nature.

An Omniscient knowing without sight or thought,
An indecipherable Omnipotence,
A mystic Form that could contain the worlds,
Yet make one human breast its passionate shrine,
Drew him out of his seeking loneliness
Into the magnitudes of God's embrace.

This Power which is embracing him and transforming him is *'an Omniscient knowing without sight or thought'*: it knows absolutely everything, but does not need the powers of sight or thought; it knows everything by containing everything within itself. It is also *'an indecipherable Omnipotence'*: it is All-Powerful, mysterious and unknowable. He experiences it as *'a mystic Form that could contain the worlds'*: not a material form, but a mystic one, that is wide and vast enough to contain within it all the worlds and planes of existence. At the same time, it could *'make one human breast its passionate shrine'*: it enters his heart and dwells there, like a deity in a shrine; his heart accepts this mysterious powerful being into itself and worships it passionately. That *'mystic Form'* takes hold of him

and draws him out of the state of '*seeking loneliness*' that he has been experiencing '*into the magnitudes of God's embrace*', the vastness and greatness of the divine embrace.

As when a timeless Eye annuls the hours
Abolishing the agent and the act,
So now his spirit shone out wide, blank, pure:
His wakened mind became an empty slate
On which the Universal and Sole could write.

Here Sri Aurobindo evokes an experience that we might have in meditation or at some special moment, of an '*Eye*' looking at us and the world, an '*Eye*' which is not limited by time, but is beyond time and timeless; when we become aware of that '*Eye*' it is as if time no longer exists: it '*annuls the hours*'. To '*annul*' means to cancel out, abolish. There is no movement at all; all action, all sense of being a doer, is also abolished. Aswapati has an experience like that: there is no time, there is no person who is acting, and so '*his spirit shone out wide, blank, pure*'. '*Blank*' means '*empty*'. He becomes pure spirit, pure existence; his '*wakened mind*', his mental awareness, has become absolutely quiet, blank, like '*an empty slate*'. When small children are learning to write, we may give them a '*slate*', a miniature blackboard; when the lesson is finished whatever is written on the slate can easily be wiped off so that the slate is empty. Aswapati's mind becomes like that: everything that was written there, all the memories and thoughts and knowledge, everything has been wiped away; it has become '*an empty slate*' on which '*the Universal and Sole could write*'.

All that represses our fallen consciousness
Was taken from him like a forgotten load:
A fire that seemed the body of a god
Consumed the limiting figures of the past

And made large room for a new self to live.

Another aspect of the transformation that has come to Aswapati is evoked here: *'All that represses our fallen consciousness / Was taken from him like a forgotten load'*. There may be things that we do not want to think about or remember, so we 'repress' them, we press them down into the subconscious levels so that we will not have to think about them. Here Sri Aurobindo tells us that many things are repressing *'our fallen consciousness'*, keeping things hidden and preventing parts of our consciousness from coming into our waking awareness. Our normal surface consciousness is not the only consciousness that we have. Repressed within us are other parts of our consciousness that have fallen down here into the world of matter, and many things are pressing them down, preventing us from becoming aware of them. Now for Aswapati all this pressure is taken away from him like a *'load'* that he did not even remember that he was carrying until it was taken away. That is one result of this *'strong Descent'*. Another thing is that a purifying power comes: *'a fire that seemed the body of a god'*. This fire comes to burn up all the *'limiting figures of the past'*: all the things that he has been in the past, all the things that have kept him limited; a flame of Agni comes in and burns them all up. When there is a big forest fire we often think of it as a disaster, but it may also be beneficial; the fire sweeps through and leaves a large empty space where many seeds that were lying in the ground can sprout; the ash left by the fire gives them lots of nourishment and many new trees will grow up. It is something like that: the *'fire'* comes in and burns up all those limiting formations of his past and makes *'large room for a new self to live'*: space is opened up for a new expression of his soul to appear.

Eternity's contact broke the moulds of sense.

A greater Force than the earthly held his limbs,

Huge workings bared his undiscovered sheaths,
Strange energies wrought and screened tremendous hands
Unwound the triple cord of mind and freed
The heavenly wideness of a Godhead's gaze.

The contact of the Eternal, the 'god-touch' which came with the '*Descent*', '*broke the moulds of sense*'. We have spoken about this word 'mould' several times already: we experience the world through our senses of touch, sight, hearing, smell, taste; these senses are '*moulds*' for our experience. If the moulds are broken, then completely new experiences become possible. '*A greater Force than the earthly held his limbs*': our bodies, our limbs, are held and controlled by the earth-Force, the force of Nature; but now a greater Force takes hold of Aswapati and starts to work on him: '*huge workings bared his undiscovered sheaths*'. A 'sheath' is a cover; we keep a sharp knife in a 'sheath' to avoid being cut by the blade. The ancient Indian teachers taught that our body is our most material outer sheath, and that we have more such coverings: a life sheath, a mind sheath, a soul sheath, a bliss sheath: many layers of subtle bodies. When this '*greater Force*' takes hold of Aswapati's body and starts to work, it lays bare those '*undiscovered sheaths*', the subtler coverings and layers within him that he had been unaware of. '*Strange energies wrought*', worked on him, '*and screened tremendous hands*', powerful invisible hands '*unwound the triple cord of mind*'. The Vedic rishis spoke about the '*triple cord of mind*' which keeps us bound to the sacrificial post of matter: the physical mind, the vital mind and the rational mind; Now for Aswapati '*screened tremendous hands*' come and unwind the '*triple cord*' so that his whole consciousness is set free and gains '*the heavenly wideness of a Godhead's gaze*': now he can see the way that a divine being sees, because he is no longer bound by the '*triple cord*' of limiting mind.

As through a dress the wearer's shape is seen,
There reached through forms to the hidden absolute
A cosmic feeling and transcendent sight.

When we look at person we can make out the general shape of their body through the clothes they are wearing; similarly Aswapati now experiences '*a cosmic feeling and transcendent sight*' which enable him to see and feel through ordinary material forms the '*hidden absolute*', the divine Presence which is wearing and inhabiting them all.

Increased and heightened were the instruments.
Illusion lost her aggrandising lens;
As from her failing hand the measures fell,
Atomic looked the things that loomed so large.

As a result of the transforming descent that Aswapati experienced, his '*instruments*' were '*increased*' in power and '*heightened*', becoming more sensitive and precise; for him '*illusion lost her aggrandising lens*'. Because of the imperfection of our '*instruments*', our senses and our understanding, we see the world through the '*aggrandising lens*' or magnifying glass of Illusion, which makes small, unimportant things look very big and important. Because Aswapati's '*instruments*' have been '*heightened*' and '*increased*', the magnifying glass of Illusion is removed; the tools that she uses to measure things fall from her hand. She has lost all power over Aswapati; so for him the ordinary material necessities that look so important to us suddenly looked tiny, '*atomic*', not important at all. The '*things that loomed so large*', that looked big and important and threatening, were now seen as they really are: '*atomic*', minute, tiny; all the values changed.

The little ego's ring could join no more;
In the enormous spaces of the self
The body now seemed only a wandering shell,

His mind the many-frescoed outer court
Of an imperishable Inhabitant:
His spirit breathed a superhuman air.

Our individuality is limited, constricted, by the little ring of the ego. But now for Aswapati the ring has been broken open, so the spirit can flow freely, it is no longer limited or separated. *'In the enormous spaces of the self'*, he was aware of the physical body, but now it seemed only *'a wandering shell'*, a thin outer covering. He perceived his mind as *'the many-frescoed outer court / Of an imperishable Inhabitant'*. 'Frescos' are paintings done on walls while the plaster is still wet. In the temple at Thanjavur for example, many ancient frescos have been found on some of the interior walls. To Aswapati now his mind seemed like the outer entrance courtyard of an immense house that belongs to *'an imperishable Inhabitant'*; in that courtyard are walls decorated with many paintings: all the pictures that the mind shows to us, thoughts, ideas, and images. These pictures are on the walls of the outermost courtyard; beyond lives an *'imperishable Inhabitant'*. Now Aswapati's spirit breathed a much wider and purer atmosphere than the air we are used to here: *'a superhuman air'*.

The imprisoned deity rent its magic fence.
As with a sound of thunder and of seas,
Vast barriers crashed around the huge escape.

The *'deity'* which was *'imprisoned'* in the material mould escapes, tearing *'its magic fence'*. Here again is the Vedic idea that our spirit is kept prisoner by the material body. The rishis gave the image of a sacrificial animal tied to a stake or surrounded by a *'fence'*: but now it has been untied, the *'fence'* is broken: *'rent'* means *'torn'*. The *'imprisoned deity'* has broken out of the *'magic fence'* of illusion that was keeping him bound. The *'escape'* of the divine being from its

imprisonment is such a tremendous thing that there comes a huge sound '*of thunder and of seas*', the roaring of mighty waves: '*vast barriers crashed around the huge escape*'; immense powerful barriers fall with a huge crash as the imprisoned deity escapes.

Immutably coeval with the world,
Circle and end of every hope and toil
Inexorably drawn round thought and act,
The fixed immovable peripheries
Effaced themselves beneath the Incarnate's tread.

This sentence has several difficult words in it. It is continuing and developing the idea about the fence and the boundaries that were mentioned in the previous one. This sentence is about '*peripheries*'. '*Peripheries*' are the outer boundaries of a property or estate. Sri Aurobindo says that '*fixed immovable peripheries*' have been drawn around us which limit our possibilities of thought and action. They are '*inexorably drawn round thought and act*': it is done very strictly, no exceptions or concessions are made; those limits to what we can think and what we can do are very strict and very strong. They are the '*circle and end of every hope and toil*'. Whatever our hopes and our efforts to fulfil them, whatever we do, whichever direction we try to go, we cannot cross beyond those limits. They are '*coeval with the world*': as long as the world has existed, those '*fixed immovable peripheries*' have been there; and they do not change, they are '*immutably coeval with the world*'. '*Coeval with*' means 'lasting as long as' or 'existing at the same time as'; we are all 'coevals', because we are all alive at the same time. Those '*fixed immovable peripheries*' cannot be moved; they have been there since the world began; but for Aswapati now they have suddenly '*effaced themselves*': they have just vanished. When you 'efface' yourself, you withdraw into the background so that nobody notices you. They have effaced

themselves '*beneath the Incarnate's tread*'; '*the Incarnate*' means the Divine in a human body. Aswapati has now realized his own divinity; when he sets foot on those '*immovable peripheries*' they efface themselves; they simply disappear. They have been effaced because the Incarnate has set his foot on them. We saw Aswapati going up like a rocket in a powerful movement of aspiration, and then in response there was a transforming '*Descent*' which seized hold of him, whirled him round and round and dissolved all the limitations of the human nature so that a new self could grow in him. We saw that, as a result, '*the little ego's ring could join no more*' and his being became boundless and free. He realised his own divinity, and even the '*fixed immovable peripheries*' that have existed as long as the world, vanish when he sets foot on them. In the next sentence Sri Aurobindo tells us more about these peripheries which limit the spirit in the material world.

The dire velamen and the bottomless crypt
 Between which life and thought for ever move,
 Forbidden still to cross the dim dread bounds,
 The guardian darknesses mute and formidable,
 Empowered to circumscribe the wingless spirit
 In the boundaries of Mind and Ignorance,
 Protecting no more a dual eternity
 Vanished rescinding their enormous role:
 Once figure of creation's vain ellipse,
 The expanding zero lost its giant curve.

There are two unusual words here, '*velamen*' and '*crypt*'. Both of these are words associated with sacred places. Beneath European cathedrals there is a space in the foundations of the building, a room called the '*crypt*'; often relics are kept there, and it is considered to contain the source of power of the cathedral. It is not

open to everyone. The word suggests something mysterious, hidden, and secret. Here, *'the bottomless crypt'* perhaps refers to the inconscience, the dark foundation of our world and our consciousness. *'Velamen'* is a Latin word meaning 'veil'. It is specifically used in a religious sense meaning the veil that hides something sacred; beyond it lies something sacred that ordinary people are not allowed to see. Here Sri Aurobindo says that our world is bounded by a *'dire velamen'* as if some terrible punishment might await anyone who violates the sacred secret which it hides, and a *'bottomless crypt'*; between these two *'peripheries'*, *'life and thought forever move'*. *'Life and thought'* are forbidden to cross these *'dim dread'* boundaries. There is something dreadful, something dim and difficult to understand about these limits that have been fixed since the beginning of the world, which *'life and thought'* are not allowed to cross. These peripheries take the form of two darknesses: a darkness above and a darkness below; but he says that they are *'guardian darknesses'*, they are protecting something. They are *'mute and formidable'*: they do not express themselves, they do not tell us what they are hiding; and they are *'formidable'* which may mean 'powerful' but also 'frightening'. These *'guardian darknesses'* have been *'empowered'*, given the power, *'to circumscribe the wingless spirit'*. *'To circumscribe'* means to draw a circle around something, to limit it, keep it inside. As long as the spirit is *'wingless'*, bound here in the material world, it is limited by these *'guardian darknesses'*, it is kept within *'the boundaries of Mind and Ignorance'*. But now, in the case of King Aswapati, these *'guardian darknesses'* no longer have to protect a *'dual eternity'*; they vanish, *'rescinding their enormous role'*. *'To rescind'* is an unusual verb that means 'to annul' or 'to abandon'. The *'guardian darknesses'* have a role, a purpose to fulfil in the universe; but now, in the case of Aswapati, they are no longer needed, so they vanish. The *'expanding zero'* which seemed to grow

larger and larger, which had been the '*figure of creation's vain ellipse*' making the creation seem futile and meaningless, lost '*its giant curve*'. An '*ellipse*' is the curved form which planetary orbits describe, an oval or stretched circle. The dark limits marked by '*the dire velamen*' and '*the bottomless crypt*' vanished because they no longer had to protect '*a dual eternity*'; so the circle that they made '*to circumscribe the wingless spirit*', the '*expanding zero*' which was the '*figure*' of the futile course of the creation, also vanished, losing its curve. For Aswapati those peripheries, those boundaries, no longer existed.

The old adamantine vetoes stood no more:

Overpowered were earth and Nature's obsolete rule;

The python coils of the restricting Law

Could not restrain the swift arisen God:

Abolished were the scripts of destiny.

'Veto' is a Latin word, meaning "I forbid". Nowadays we come across it in political contexts, for example from the Security Council of the United Nations: any one of the countries permanently represented there can 'veto' a proposal, even when all the other countries agree to it. Here Sri Aurobindo speaks of some '*adamantine vetoes*'. *Adamantine*' means as strong or as hard as diamond or steel; '*adamant*' is the hardest substance that exists. It is derived from a Greek word, which means 'that which cannot be overcome or conquered'. Aswapati sees that '*the old adamantine vetoes*', the old strong prohibitions that used to apply, now '*stood no more*': they no longer applied to him. Also the rule of '*earth*', the material world, the rule of '*Nature*', now became '*obsolete*'. '*Obsolete*' means 'out of date', 'no longer relevant'. With the transformation that has come to him, this '*rule*' of '*earth*' and '*Nature*' gets '*overpowered*'. He is freed from the domination of matter and earthly

nature. The symbol for that domination, that old Law, is the '*python*'. A python is an enormous snake; it is not venomous, but kills its prey by winding its coils around and squeezing it to death. This is an old symbol for the grip of matter, and Sri Aurobindo uses it in several places in the poem. The '*coils*' of the '*python*' represent '*the restricting Law*' of Matter and the earth-nature, which does not allow the soul to move freely. But now those '*python coils*' are not strong enough to '*restrain*', to hold back '*the swift arisen God*', the newly revealed divinity in Aswapati; they cannot restrain him any longer. '*Abolished were the scripts of destiny*': we sometimes speak of destiny or fate being written down, recorded somewhere; but those '*scripts of destiny*', those predetermining words, apply only to the earth nature; once the inner divinity is released it becomes the Master of Nature, and so those '*scripts*' also get abolished, erased, annulled: they too no longer apply to Aswapati.

There was no small death-hunted creature more,
No fragile form of being to preserve
From an all-swallowing Immensity.

The '*little ego's ring*' preserves the '*fragile form of being*' of the '*small death-hunted creature*' that a human being is. Something that is '*fragile*' will break easily. For Aswapati now the ego is no longer needed to protect and '*preserve*' his '*fragile form of being*' from being swallowed up by the '*all-swallowing Immensity*' of the rest of the universe, because he is no longer a mortal creature hunted by death: he has become a '*swift arisen God*'.

The great hammer-beats of a pent-up world-heart
Burst open the narrow dams that keep us safe
Against the forces of the universe.

Here in Auroville we have quite a lot of dams, made to protect the earth of Auroville from being swept away into the sea by the

monsoon rains. In our mortal being, we have some '*dams*' which protect our growing individuality from being swept away by powerful universal forces. But now Aswapati, as a result of the transforming Descent which has come to him, experiences the powerful beating of a '*world-heart*', one heart that is beating for the whole world, for the whole universe. That great '*world-heart*' has been '*pent-up*', confined and held back behind those '*narrow dams*'; but now it bursts them open. He can feel the powerful '*hammer-beats*' of the '*world-heart*'.

The soul and cosmos faced as equal powers.

A boundless being in a measureless Time

Invaded Nature with the infinite;

He saw unpathed, unwalled, his titan scope.

'The soul and cosmos faced as equal powers': '*cosmos*' is the universe. When we say '*soul*', we think of the individual soul in us which the Upanishad tells us is no bigger than a man's thumb. But when this great transformation comes about and Aswapati experiences the Spirit's freedom and greatness, he sees that the '*soul*' and the universe are '*equal powers*'. We find it hard to imagine, because we feel so small in the face of the universe; but in essence every individual soul is one with the Origin; the immanent Divine in each form in the universe, however tiny, is just as powerful as the universe itself. Now he experiences himself as '*a boundless being*', with no boundaries, no limits, existing in '*a measureless Time*', so vast that it cannot be measured in minutes and hours, days and years, not even in aeons and light-years. He feels his '*boundless being in a measureless Time*' pouring into '*Nature*', into the limited human nature; his greater self invades it, comes pouring in with all the power of the Infinite, and he is able to see all his limitless possibilities. Your '*scope*' is what you can envisage, the range of

what you could do, what would be possible for you. For Aswapati now there are no paths left, no little tracks that have to be followed, he can go anywhere; and there are no walls to limit him. His scope has become a '*titan scope*' with an immense superhuman range. All this has come about as the result of his intense aspiration and of the responding '*Descent*' that has revealed to him the Freedom and Greatness of the Spirit.

End of Section 4

Section 5, lines 329-475

All was uncovered to his sealless eye.
A secret Nature stripped of her defence,
Once in a dreaded half-light formidable,
Overtaken in her mighty privacy
Lay bare to the burning splendour of his will.

'All was uncovered to his sealless eye.' As a result of the transformation which we read about in the previous section, Aswapati's *'eye'*, his power of vision, has become *'sealless'*: it is no longer sealed, closed; he can see everything *'uncovered'*, revealed. As a result, he becomes aware of *'a secret Nature'*: not the nature that we know here in the material world, but the power that is in charge of the inner worlds, the subtle worlds. In 1908 Sri Aurobindo wrote a poem called the *'Mother of Dreams'*²¹. I think that here he is telling us about that Mother of Dreams. Usually she is hidden, occult, but now Aswapati can see her; she is *'stripped of her defence'*: her protective coverings have been removed. When she was hidden by her *'dreaded half-light'* she seemed *'formidable'*, very powerful and frightening, but now she has been *'overtaken in her mighty privacy'*. Then she was hidden, veiled, but now everything about her is laid bare, revealed *'to the burning splendour of his will'*: through the transformation which he has undergone, Aswapati has become powerful enough to master this *'secret Nature'*, the Mother of the dream-worlds.

In shadowy chambers lit by a strange sun
And opening hardly to hid mystic keys
Her perilous arcanes and hooded Powers
Confessed the advent of a mastering Mind

²¹*Collected Poems*, volume 2, pp. 273-74

And bore the compulsion of a time-born gaze.

Her house has '*shadowy chambers*', dim private rooms which are '*lit by a strange sun*' that is not the material sun we are used to here; those chambers are locked and it is difficult to open them, even if you have the right '*mystic keys*'; the keys are hidden and not easy to find. Inside are kept '*her perilous arcanes and hooded powers*'. The word '*arcane*' is normally used as an adjective meaning '*secret*'; it comes from a Latin word meaning a chest or box, so it suggests something that is kept hidden; here Sri Aurobindo is using it as a noun: inside those rooms are dangerous secrets and mysterious powers in disguise. '*Perilous*' means '*full of danger*' or '*peril*'; '*hooded*' means veiled, disguised. When Aswapati entered there and found them, they '*confessed the advent of a mastering Mind*': they accepted that he is powerful enough to master and control them with his mind. '*Advent*' means '*arrival*' or '*coming*'. Those secret powers '*bore the compulsion of a time-born gaze*': although Aswapati has been born in human time, he is able to control them with a look. The next sentence tells us more about them.

Incalculable in their wizard modes,
Immediate and invincible in the act,
Her secret strengths native to greater worlds
Lifted above our needy limited scope,
The occult privilege of demigods
And the sure power-pattern of her cryptic signs,
Her diagrams of geometric force,
Her potencies of marvel-fraught design
Courtied employment by an earth-nursed might.

Those occult powers are the '*strengths*' of the secret Nature, and they are '*native to greater worlds*' than this limited material world we live in; those worlds are '*lifted above our needy limited scope*', the

limited range of possibilities that we can access here. 'Needy' means 'poor', lacking things which are needed for a full life; our limited human scope is impoverished and lacks many possibilities. Those 'secret strengths' are '*the occult privilege of demigods*'. A 'demigod' is a half-god, a half-divine being; those secrets and hidden powers are '*the occult privilege*' of such semi-divine beings; a '*privilege*' is not accessible for everyone but reserved for only a few; those hidden powers are very powerful, '*immediate and invincible in the act*': when they act, the effect happens immediately, and cannot be resisted or overcome: '*invincible*' means 'unconquerable'. They act in surprising and unpredictable ways, like magic: they are '*incalculable in their wizard modes*'. Other secret things are also found in those '*shadowy chambers*': powerful signs and patterns and diagrams, the '*power-patterns of her cryptic signs*', '*her diagrams of geometric force*', '*her potencies of marvel-fraught design*'. 'Fraught' means 'filled with', 'heavily loaded with': these designs and diagrams are loaded with marvellous powers and significances. All these '*perilous arcanes and hooded Powers*' offered themselves to be used by Aswapati; they '*courted employment by an earth-nursed might*': even though Aswapati is '*time-born*' and '*earth-nursed*', they are eager for him to use them.

A conscious Nature's quick machinery
 Armed with a latent splendour of miracle
 The prophet-passion of a seeing Mind,
 And the lightning bareness of a free soul-force.

Our material Nature seems to be unconscious, but this secret Nature that Aswapati has discovered is conscious; like our earth-Nature, she too has her '*machinery*' by which she gets things done, but this is a '*quick*' machinery. The word '*quick*' sometimes means '*alive*' and perhaps it means that here. The '*quick machinery*' of the '*conscious Nature*' which rules the subtle worlds provides power to Aswapati,

arming his '*seeing Mind*' and his '*free soul-force*' with '*a latent splendour of miracle*', allowing him the possibility of performing miracles. Aswapati possesses '*the prophet-passion of a seeing Mind*': with the intensity of a prophet, he can foresee the future; he also has '*the lightning bareness of a free soul-force*'. The conscious secret nature which Aswapati can now perceive with his '*sealless*' power of inner vision, arms him with her '*quick machinery*', which works in an immediate and invincible way; that gives to the action of his '*seeing mind*' and his soul's free force '*a latent splendour of miracle*': he will be able to work miracles if that is needed for the divine purpose, because now he has gained mastery over the secret Nature which rules the subtle worlds.

All once impossible deemed could now become
A natural limb of possibility,
A new domain of normalcy supreme.

'*Deemed*' means '*supposed*'. Everything that earlier seemed impossible now became '*a natural limb of possibility*' and '*a new domain of normalcy*': those magical occult powers now become part of Aswapati's normal range of action.

An almighty occultist erects in Space
This seeming outward world which tricks the sense;
He weaves his hidden threads of consciousness,
He builds bodies for his shapeless energy;

An '*occultist*' is one who understands and uses subtle inner powers of consciousness. '*This seeming outward world which tricks the sense*', the material world, is built up, erected '*in Space*' by an all-powerful occultist; it is a '*seeming outward world*': we think all this is real, but in fact we are just being tricked by a kind of magic; it feels real to our senses but they are being tricked: the reality is different from what they perceive. The occultist is building up the world that we

perceive, by weaving '*threads of consciousness*'; in this way '*he builds bodies for his shapeless energy*'; the reality underlying this '*seeming outward world*' is the '*shapeless energy*' of the occultist, and by the amazing magic of his consciousness he conjures up this apparently firm and stable substance we call '*matter*' to provide bodies through which his shapeless energy can express itself.

Out of the unformed and vacant Vast he has made
His sorcery of solid images,
His magic of formative number and design,
The fixed irrational links none can annul,
This criss-cross tangle of invisible laws;

Out of '*the unformed and vacant Vast*', out of an empty and shapeless vastness, the almighty occultist has created his '*sorcery*', his magic, '*of solid images*': all the material forms of the universe, stars and atoms and everything in between. He has done this by a '*magic of formative number and design*': underlying all the apparent forms that our senses experience are mathematical formulas and geometric configurations. Modern physicists need to understand mathematics deeply; they have to use not only algebra but also geometry as they try to penetrate the mysteries of matter and understand how it is formed. He has created '*fixed irrational links*': fixed connections that do not depend on rational logic, but which '*none can annul*', nobody can dissolve them. The entire world is a '*criss-cross tangle of invisible laws*': everything is connected to everything else by invisible rules which hold this '*seeming outward world*' together. If you go out on a windy day with your hair loose it will get into a '*tangle*' that will be difficult to comb out; or if there are many creepers in a garden, they may grow together, entwined into an inextricable '*tangle*'. The poet says that this whole '*seeming outward world*' is a complex, irrational tangle of fixed connections and relationships set up by '*an almighty*

occultist'.

His infallible rules, his covered processes,
Achieve unerringly an inexplicable
Creation where our error carves dead frames
Of knowledge for a living ignorance.

The '*rules*' of this '*occultist*' are '*infallible*': they cannot fail. His '*processes*', his ways of doing things are '*covered*', occult and hidden. Together these '*rules*' and '*processes*', achieve this creation '*unerringly*', without any mistake. The creation is '*inexplicable*': it cannot be explained because it is so magical. The almighty occultist is making this creation unerringly; but in it '*our error carves dead frames / Of knowledge for a living ignorance*'. We form theories to explain the appearances that we perceive: that is what science is doing all the time. We could even say that this is what science is: '*dead frames / Of knowledge for a living ignorance*'. Our ignorance is living, it is evolving, it is continually exploring, but reason fixes what it finds into '*dead frames*' which we call knowledge; that is why the '*frames*' are constantly having to be broken: because our ignorance is growing and living, the frames get broken, and then we make new ones in our attempts to explain this '*inexplicable Creation*'. This is what the '*almighty occultist*', the Creator, does in the material world. In the subtle worlds, the '*secret Nature*' is doing something similar:

In her mystery's moods divorced from the Maker's laws
She too as sovereignly creates her field,
Her will shaping the undetermined vasts,
Making a finite of infinity;

The '*secret Nature*' which Aswapati has can now perceive is cut off, '*divorced from*' the laws of the Maker that we read about in the previous sentence; she is not ruled by the laws of the material

universe. In her own realm, the hidden subtle worlds, she is just as powerful as the '*almighty occultist*' who has created the material world: '*she too as sovereignly creates her field*': she creates her own field with just as much authority as he creates his field of matter. With '*her will*' she shapes the '*undetermined vasts*' of the subtle realms, '*making a finite of infinity*', just as '*the Maker*' does in the material world.

She too can make an order of her caprice,
As if her rash superb wagered to outvie
The veiled Creator's cosmic secrecies.

Just as '*the Maker*' does, '*she too can make an order of her caprice*': she has the power to arrange an order that is based on her fancy, '*her caprice*'. It seems as if she does her magic with reckless pride. Sri Aurobindo uses the expression '*her rash superb*'. The word '*superb*' is normally used as an adjective meaning 'extremely good'; but in Latin '*superbus*' means 'proud' and here Sri Aurobindo uses it to mean 'pride'. He suggests that the secret Nature feels so powerful that she has made a bet, '*wagered*' that she can do even better than the Creator: '*to outvie*' his material creation. To '*vie*' means to compete, to see who can do better. It is as if in her reckless pride she has made a bet that she will outdo '*the veiled Creator's cosmic secrecies*'.

The rapid footsteps of her fantasy,
Amid whose falls wonders like flowers rise,
Are surer than reason, defter than device
And swifter than Imagination's wings.

The secret Nature follows her '*fantasy*', her wish or whim, her imagination, and wherever she sets her foot, wonderful things spring up and blossom like flowers. The '*rapid footsteps*' of her fantasy '*are surer than reason*': they are not rational, but more reliable

than reason; and they are '*defter than device*': people who have very skilful hands which can do very delicate things are '*deft*'; they may make '*devices*', skilful inventions; but her fantasies are '*defter*', more deft than any '*device*'; and the '*rapid footsteps of her fantasy*' move very quickly, '*swifter than Imagination's wings*'. Imagination flies fast, but she acts faster; how does she do it?

All she new-fashions by the thought and word,
Compels all substance by her wand of Mind.

The secret Nature '*new-fashions*', reshapes and changes everything '*by the thought and word*': she does not have to use hands, she can change everything using only the powers of thought and word. She '*compels all substance by her wand of Mind*'. A '*wand*' is the stick or rod that a magician waves to do his magic. The secret Nature does her magic by the power of Mind. With Mind she can compel '*all substance*' to do whatever she wants. Now Sri Aurobindo will tell us more about the power of Mind and what it can do.

Mind is a mediator divinity:

Its powers can undo all Nature's work:

Mind can suspend or change earth's concrete law.

'*Mind is a mediator divinity*': a divine power which works between spirit and matter; it has powers which '*can undo all Nature's work*'; whatever is done by material nature, Mind has the power to undo it, and it can '*suspend or change earth's concrete law*', all the apparently fixed laws of matter. To '*suspend*' means to set aside for a short time, while '*change*' implies a lasting effect. We have heard the phrase "mind over matter", and know that to a certain extent mind can control matter; it helps us to arrange things the way we want to have them: mind gives us technology by which we can control matter to a certain extent; but it is difficult for us to believe that mind has the power to change the laws of nature. With our limited

surface mind and the feeble will that goes with it, with our limited life energies, we cannot do it; but if the full power of Mind is set free, or if we go to inner planes where mind can work more freely, then apparently miraculous things can happen.

Affranchised from earth-habit's drowsy seal
The leaden grip of Matter it can break;
Indifferent to the angry stare of Death,
It can immortalise a moment's work:

'*Affranchised*' means 'liberated', 'set free'. In ordinary language, if you are '*affranchised*' it means that you are a free citizen with the right to vote; here Sri Aurobindo uses it about the mind becoming free from '*earth-habit*'. In the material world, the power of mind is dominated by the grip of matter; it acts through the physical brain and is restricted by our belief in the power of matter; that domination by the material principle is like a '*drowsy seal*' on the power of mind. '*Drowsy*' means 'sleepy'. Mind should not be sleepy, it should be always alert and awake with the power of vision, but because of '*earth-habit's drowsy seal*' the power of mind is limited here in our world. Once set free from this '*seal*' which makes it sleepy, Mind can break the '*leaden grip of Matter*'. 'Lead' is a very heavy metal; so long as Matter is dominant, it is as if something very heavy is gripping us, holding us tight; but Mind has the power to break that '*leaden grip of Matter*'. When it does so, it becomes '*indifferent to the angry stare of Death*'. Death is the power that dissolves material forms, breaks them up, destroys them; it has the power to dissolve even minds, ideas, achievements; but when Mind is set free from the '*leaden grip of Matter*' and the '*drowsy seal*' of '*earth-habit*', then '*it can immortalise a moment's work*': something that is done in a brief moment by the mind can go on having its effect for a very, very long time.

A simple fiat of its thinking force,
The casual pressure of its slight assent
Can liberate the Energy dumb and pent
Within its chambers of mysterious trance:

We have come across this word '*fiat*' several times already: it is a command; in Latin this word means 'let it be done'. Mind has the power to simply say 'let it be done', give '*a simple fiat of its thinking force*' and the thing will be done; or it may not even give a '*fiat*': simply '*the casual pressure of its slight assent*' is enough; even if it agrees only casually, it can '*liberate*', set free, '*the Energy*' which lies hidden '*within its chambers of mysterious trance*'. Mind is a form of consciousness; consciousness and force always go together, so within Mind there is a latent energy which is not normally expressing itself, which is '*pent*', closed up and repressed inside; that energy which is sleeping in Mind's inner chambers in '*mysterious trance*', can be awoken and set free by a simple command, or even the '*casual assent of its thinking force*'.

It makes the body's sleep a puissant arm,
Holds still the breath, the beatings of the heart,
While the unseen is found, the impossible done,
Communicates without means the unspoken thought;

One of the amazing things that the power of Mind can do is to put the body into a state of apparent sleep or trance, and use that sleep-state of the body as a powerful weapon. Here '*arm*' means a weapon. By Mind, the breath can be held still; even the '*beatings of the heart*' can be stopped, so that Mind can escape from the body and find '*the unseen*' and do '*the impossible*'. This is a yogic achievement. Someone who has undergone a great transformation as Aswapati has, can experience this. Earlier on we read that he could continue to live even when the breath had stopped and the

heart had stopped beating. Yogis can do this using the power of Mind over the body. A more familiar use of the Mind is to communicate an '*unspoken thought*' without any outer means; without speaking or writing a letter, sending an e-mail or anything like that, it is possible to share a thought with someone at a distance simply by the '*thinking force*' of Mind.

It moves events by its bare silent will,
Acts at a distance without hands or feet.

The power of Mind can affect events even at a distance just by the power of '*its bare silent will*'. It can act at a distance by its own power, '*without hands or feet*'.

This giant Ignorance, this dwarfish Life
It can illumine with a prophet sight,
Invoke the bacchic rapture, the Fury's goad,
In our body arouse the demon or the god,
Call in the Omniscient and Omnipotent,
Awake a forgotten Almightiness within.

We are living in a state of '*giant Ignorance*', and our life-force is '*dwarfish*': very small, like a '*dwarf*'. But Mind can '*illumine*' this '*giant Ignorance*' and this '*dwarfish Life*'. It can fill them with light, give them a '*prophet sight*', the sight of a prophet, who can see into the future or at a distance. It can '*invoke*', call things into the being. When we '*invoke*' the blessings of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother we call them into ourselves. Mind has the power to '*invoke*' all kinds of things: first, '*bacchic rapture*'. '*Bacchic*' is an adjective from the name '*Bacchus*', the Roman god of wine, of intoxication; he is connected with the Greek god Dionysus and maybe with the Vedic Soma; he is the god who brings bliss, rapture, intense delight. His worshippers are called Bacchants or Bacchantes. They get into a state of intoxicating delight as they worship him. Mind can call that divine

intoxication and '*rapture*' into the consciousness. On the other hand, there are the Furies; these are terrible vengeful beings in ancient Greek mythology: when something wrong has been done, something that is against the Divine Law, these terrible beings come like angry birds and torment the person who has done wrong with their powerful wings and beaks and claws, driving them mad. A '*goad*' is a sharp instrument used to drive an animal. Mind can call up those terrifying beings. It can '*arouse*', awaken, the demon that is sleeping in our body, or the god, the divine being; it can '*call in the Omniscient and Omnipotent*', the Supreme; and it can '*awake*' within us a '*forgotten Almightiness*'. We have completely forgotten that an '*Almightiness*' of all-power and all-knowledge is within us. That is surely one of the reasons why Sri Aurobindo and Mother have done so much to '*illumine*' our minds: to help us to remember and recover our inner '*Almightiness*' to serve their Work.

In its own plane a shining emperor,
Even in this rigid realm, Mind can be king:
The logic of its demigod Idea
In the leap of a transitional moment brings
Surprises of creation never achieved
Even by Matter's strange unconscious skill.

There is a plane of universal Mind. On that plane, Mind is a '*shining emperor*': it rules everything there; on that plane, life, substance and soul are ruled by '*Mind*'. Here, in '*this rigid realm*', life and mind and soul are ruled by matter; the characteristic of matter is inertia, stability, it is '*rigid*'; but Sri Aurobindo says that even here '*Mind can be king*'. Mind works with '*Idea*', with mind formations; and here Sri Aurobindo gives a capital 'I', referring to the creative '*Idea*', a mental formation that contains a creative truth and power of self-expression. '*Idea*' is a '*demigod*', it is half divine; it has its own logic,

its own way of acting and expressing itself; in a '*transitional moment*', when things are ready to change, when with a little pressure things or circumstances can tip and alter, the Mind can bring about new things, '*surprises of creation*', unexpected things that have never before been achieved '*even by Matter's strange unconscious skill*'. What miracles Matter has worked out by its '*strange unconscious skill*'! Nowadays we can see films of outer space, galaxies and nebulae that are vast and beautiful, and here on earth too, if we look around there are such surprising and amazing things that Matter has achieved. Material energy has done so much, but the power of Mind can bring about even more surprising things.

All's miracle here and can by miracle change.

This is that secret Nature's edge of might.

We are used to the way things are in the world around us and usually take them for granted, but in fact everything here is a miracle, and can change miraculously. This fact is the '*edge of might*' used by the '*secret Nature*' that Sri Aurobindo is showing us in this section, this is her weapon, her magic wand by which she can compel all substance. Because everything here is really miraculous, it can be changed by miracles brought about by a power stronger than that of matter, the power of Mind. This is her weapon, her '*edge of might*', the blade of her sword we might say, this is how she does her work.

On the margin of great immaterial planes,
In kingdoms of an untrammelled glory of force,
Where Mind is master of the life and form
And soul fulfils its thoughts by its own power,
She meditates upon mighty words and looks
On the unseen links that join the parted spheres.

She has her station '*on the margin*', on the edge, of '*great immaterial*

planes' planes of being that are '*immaterial*': not expressed in matter. On those planes, there are many different '*kingdoms*', realms and countries where there exists '*an untrammelled glory of force*': conscious-force can express itself there freely, '*untrammelled*', unhindered and unobstructed. If you are '*trammelled*', you are tied up, you cannot move freely, but there '*force*' is glorious and powerful and free. There '*Mind is master of the life and form*'. In the material world Matter makes forms, but on those '*immaterial planes*' Mind is the master: there are subtle forms and there the soul can fulfil its thoughts by its own direct power; it does not have to express itself through a brain that is dependent on a physical body as it does here, it can carry out its thoughts directly. There, on the edge of those '*great immaterial planes*' the secret Nature meditates, concentrates on '*mighty words*', words of power and creation, '*and looks / On the unseen links that join the parted spheres*'. There are different realms or '*spheres*' that are complete in themselves; a sphere is a complete form; she sees the invisible connections that link the separate spheres of the universe.

Thence to the initiate who observes her laws
She brings the light of her mysterious realms:
Here where he stands, his feet on a prostrate world,
His mind no more cast into Matter's mould,
Over their bounds in spurts of splendid strength
She carries their magician processes
And the formulas of their stupendous speech,
Till heaven and hell become purveyors to earth
And the universe the slave of mortal will.

'Thence', from there, from her station '*on the margin of great immaterial planes*', the secret Nature brings '*to the initiate who observes her laws*' many wonderful forms of knowledge. An '*initiate*' is a

person who has been given some special knowledge. Our scientists and technologists are initiates of the laws of physical nature; they know how to observe her laws and make nature obey their will. Similarly the secret Nature has her own laws, and if there is an 'initiate', like Aswapati, who knows her laws and obeys them, she will give to that person *'the light'*, the knowledge, *'of her mysterious realms'*. Sri Aurobindo pictures the initiate standing here in the material realm with the whole world at his feet, *'his feet on a prostrate world'*: the world lies flat beneath him because he has gained all these subtle powers; *'his mind'* is no longer cast into the mould of Matter; he is no longer shaped by the material way of thinking and seeing things. To him she carries *'magician processes'* from other worlds and planes, bringing them *'over their bounds'*, over the frontiers or boundaries of the subtle realms *'in spurts of splendid strength'*, like jets of flame. Those processes seem magical to us, achieving things that seems miraculous and impossible; but the Mother has explained that what seem like miracles to us are results of interventions from other levels of knowledge and power. The secret Nature conveys those processes and *'the formulas of their stupendous speech'* to the chosen initiate; there are powerful mantras, sequences of words or sounds belonging to the subtle realms; she carries them to the human being who has become an initiate. As a result of her action, *'heaven and hell'*, the higher and lower subtle realms, *'become purveyors to earth'*. A 'purveyor' is a supplier who provides certain commodities. Through the action of the secret Nature and the mediation of the 'initiate' the subtle realms, both higher and lower, supply their riches to the earth. In this way, the entire universe becomes *'the slave of mortal will'*: everything must serve the will of that initiate. This power can be used or misused: occultism can be used by a great soul for great good, but it can also be misused by magicians and sorcerers.

A mediatrix with veiled and nameless gods
Whose alien will touches our human life,
Imitating the World-Magician's ways
She invents for her self-bound free-will its grooves
And feigns for magic's freaks a binding cause.

Earlier Sri Aurobindo described Mind as a '*mediator divinity*'; here he speaks of the secret Nature as a '*mediatrix*'. We are familiar with the word '*mediator*' which is the masculine form of the word; '*mediatrix*' is its feminine form. This Shakti of the subtle worlds, this Mother of Dreams, is a '*mediatrix*': she communicates with '*veiled and nameless gods*', powers '*whose alien will touches our human life*'. '*Alien*' means foreign, coming from outside. Those '*nameless gods*' belong to other worlds but their will affects our human lives. The secret Nature is in touch with powers that are beyond our normal human action. Also she imitates the '*World-Magician's ways*'. We read about the '*almighty occultist*' who erects this material world in Space. She copies the way that he does things: he makes fixed processes and physical laws to bind his creation together; in a similar way, she invents certain '*grooves*', certain tracks and lines to limit '*her self-bound free-will*': she could do anything she wishes but she binds her free-will and limits its action. She '*feigns*', pretends that there is a '*binding cause*' for the '*freaks*' of her magic, for the impossible things that she does; she pretends that there is a fixed process, that certain words have to be recited, certain rituals and processes have to be performed in order to get a particular result. It is not really like that, but she makes it seem like that.

All worlds she makes the partners of her deeds,
Accomplices of her mighty violence,
Her daring leaps into the impossible:

She involves '*all worlds*', and makes them '*the partners of her deeds*',

the '*accomplices of her mighty violence*'. An 'accomplice' is someone who helps a crime to be committed. The poet speaks of '*her mighty violence*' because she is breaking the physical laws and taking '*daring leaps into the impossible*'. She uses the powers and possibilities of many worlds to achieve that.

The lines we are reading now are really not easy to understand. There are many difficult words and Sri Aurobindo is explaining things that we do not usually experience. This section is about occultism, the knowledge and control of subtle powers. The secret Nature, the Shakti of the subtle worlds, is a '*mediatrix*' working on the borderline between the realm of matter and the subtle realms, making use of possibilities from all the planes to bring about effects here in our world.

From every source she has taken her cunning means,
She draws from the free-love marriage of the planes
Elements for her creation's tour-de-force:

We read in the previous sentence that she makes all the worlds, all the planes and levels of existence '*the partners of her deeds*', of her action. Here we are told that she has taken her '*means*', her instruments, her methods and ways of doing things '*from every source*', from all the planes of existence. Her means are '*cunning*': the word implies that she has clever and unexpected ways of getting things done. She uses '*the free-love marriage of the planes*': she marries or unites powers and possibilities from different planes in an unofficial way, a '*free-love marriage*'. She draws together elements from many worlds, something from here with something from there, '*for her creation's tour-de-force*'. '*Tour-de-force*' is a French expression meaning a very difficult, striking and impressive achievement.

A wonder-weft of knowledge incalculable,

A compendium of divine invention's feats
She has combined to make the unreal true
Or liberate suppressed reality:

The word '*weft*' refers to weaving; weavers talk about the warp and the woof of the fabric that they make; the threads that are fixed on the loom are called the 'warp' and the threads that are carried through them by the shuttle are called the 'woof'; together they form the '*weft*' or the 'web' of the fabric; the threads are interwoven in two directions, all interconnected, and in this way things are woven and held firmly together. The world can be thought of as a '*weft*', a web or a net. The ancient Egyptian symbol for wisdom or gnosis was a woven mat, because in a '*weft*' everything is connected with everything else. If you achieve gnosis, wisdom, you can see the interconnections binding together everything in the universe. This may be one reason why magicians have a magic carpet, a mat they can sit on which will carry them wherever they choose to go: it is a symbolic way of showing that they have knowledge and power which can connect them with anything, anywhere in the universe. Here Sri Aurobindo tells us that the secret Nature who rules the subtle planes creates such a '*wonder-weft*' of incalculable knowledge. If we proceed by reason, by logic and calculation, one step after the other, we cannot weave one of those mats: the knowledge of the way that everything is connected to everything else is '*incalculable*' and a great mystery. She creates '*a compendium of divine invention's feats*': a '*compendium*' is a book which brings together different kinds of knowledge from many different sources, something like an encyclopaedia. She has made a collection from here and there of all the wonderful things that the divine has invented, and combined them in a compendium; using all these different kinds of knowledge from many different sources she can make things that appeared unreal become true; or perhaps what she is really doing is

setting free realities which have been hidden and 'suppressed' and bringing them to light.

In her unhedged Circean wonderland

Pell-mell she shepherds her occult mightinesses;

Here we have the word 'Circean'; it comes from the name 'Circe', an enchantress who appears in the old Greek epic *The Odyssey*, which recounts the travels of Odysseus, also known as Ulysses. Ulysses took an important part in the war against Troy; on his way back across the sea to his home on the west coast of Greece he wanders with his crew, his companions, for fourteen years and has many amazing adventures. They reach an island which seems to be uninhabited. His sailors go ashore to explore and find a wonderful feast laid out. There does not seem to be anyone around, but there is music playing in the air and a huge table spread with all sorts of wonderful food and drink; they cannot restrain themselves: they eat up all the food and drink themselves into a stupor, and when they wake up they have all been turned into pigs. Circe is the ruler of that island; she is an enchantress, a magician; she offers you temptations, all sorts of wonderful possibilities, and then she reveals your true nature – that you are a greedy pig. Ulysses has to rescue his men. He does this in a way which is shown in many fairy tales, for example in the old Russian fairy tales. In several of those stories, a Prince goes searching in the subtle worlds and comes to a place where there is a little hut at the edge of the forest: a little hut on chickens' legs. That is where the enchantress lives – Baba Yaga. The Prince has been warned in advance what he must do. He has to say: "Little hut, little hut, turn your back to the forest and your face to me." He has to show his power over that little hut, and when he has shown his power he can enter it; there he meets the sorceress and she asks him all kinds of questions; but he must not answer any

of her questions. First of all, he must tell her "Make me a hot bath and a meal to eat, then I will answer your questions." In this he shows that he is stronger than she is. This is exactly what happens here with Aswapati. If we are undertaking the inner spiritual journey and find ourselves in the occult worlds, we must not allow the Mother of Dreams to bewitch us and make us do what she wants. We have to show that we have a purpose, that we know where we are going and what our aim is. In the same way Odysseus had to seduce the enchantress Circe and make her fall in love with him, and then he could rescue his men: he could get her to do his will instead of all of them being prisoners of her will. The secret Nature that Sri Aurobindo is telling us about in this section is like that. Like Circe, she rules over her '*wonderland*' which is '*unhedged*': there is no boundary to it; there she has many '*occult mightinesses*' at her command; like a shepherdess guiding a flock of sheep she tells them which way to go; the word '*pell-mell*' suggests an unruly crowd of animals, pushing and jostling each other headlong this way and that way, but behind is the shepherdess, driving them the way she wants them to go. Then Sri Aurobindo gives us a list of examples of her '*occult mightinesses*'.

Her mnemonics of the craft of the Infinite,
Jets of the screened subliminal's caprice,
Tags of the gramarye of Inconscience,
Freedom of a sovereign Truth without a law,

Each of these lines refers to a different occult mightiness that the secret Nature has under her control. First, '*her mnemonics*': a '*mnemonic*' is a way of remembering something. The only one I can recall at the moment is about the days of the month: 'Thirty days have November, April, May and September; all the rest have thirty-one, saving February alone, which has twenty-eight'. That is a

rather long mnemonic, but in a way you could say that when we use initials, like NASA for example, they form a kind of mnemonic; or in mathematics there are formulas that help you to remember particular things. In magic, you need to know the formulas that help you to remember exactly what has to be done. Her mnemonics refer to *'the craft of the Infinite'*. To remember how the *'Infinite'* organises things, there must be formulas, phrases and mantras that carry a power of control.

Then: *'Jets of the screened subliminal's caprice'*. The subliminal is the level of consciousness just below our threshold of awareness. 'Limen' is a Latin word meaning a threshold, the sill that you step over to pass through a door; it marks a borderline, and in many cultures it is regarded as sacred: you are not supposed to touch the threshold with your feet, but must carefully step over it, because there are gods guarding that passage into and out of the house. In modern psychology 'the subliminal' refers to a level of consciousness that lies below the threshold of our normal waking awareness; only in dreams or some indrawn state of muse we might become aware of images or indications rising up from the subliminal. The poet says that in the screened subliminal levels a principle of *'caprice'*, unpredictable fantasy, is operating and *'jets'* of knowledge may spurt up from there into our awareness, like water bursting up out of a broken underground pipe or a volcanic geyser.

Then: *'tags of the gramarye of Inconscience'*. 'tags' are short phrases that can be easily remembered: proverbs, or a few well-known words from a foreign language. 'Gramarye' is an old word for magic. It has given us the modern words 'glamour', which also means magic, and 'grammar'; 'grammar' refers to the rules about how the language is constructed and the correct way to link words together; at a time when most people did not know how to read or write,

knowing how to use language effectively seemed an almost magical power. Spells and mantras have power: you can get results if you know exactly which words to say and how to say them; a trivial example is the word that conjurors use when they do a trick: they say 'abracadabra' and wave their magic wand and then the magic happens; or there is 'open sesame', the words that open the door to the cave in the stories of the Arabian Nights; but here Sri Aurobindo is referring to words or movements that have a greater power: '*tags of the gramarye of the Inconscience*': the vast level deep below the subliminal and the subconscious, the dark foundation from which everything we know of has arisen, and where the roots of our evolutionary world lie, as if in a state of complete oblivion.

And then, from another level, a much higher level, comes the '*freedom of a sovereign Truth without a law*': a Truth that is '*sovereign*' and rules by its own power, and so is not bound by any laws, whether of material nature or subtle nature or any of the worlds in between; it is free and sovereign in its own right. Please notice that all these different '*occult mightinesses*' are drawn from different levels or planes. The secret Nature uses them all.

Thoughts that were born in the immortals' world,
Oracles that break out from behind the shrine,
Warnings from the daemonic inner voice
And peeps and lightning-leaps of prophecy

Next: '*thoughts that were born in the immortals' world*', in the world of the deathless gods. Then: '*oracles that break out from behind the shrine*'. An '*oracle*' is something or someone that answers your questions by revealing a higher or deeper knowledge, a way of receiving guidance from another realm, or the message itself can be called '*an oracle*'. Here Sri Aurobindo mentions '*Oracles that break out from behind the shrine*' which suggests revelatory messages coming

unexpectedly from behind '*the shrine*', the place where the figure of the deity stands, disclosing snatches of secret knowledge from other worlds.

A different kind of message also comes: '*Warnings from the daemonic inner voice*'. Please notice the spelling of this word, it is not 'demonic' which would mean from a 'demon', an evil spirit; these warnings are coming from '*the daemonic inner voice*'. 'Daemon' is a Greek word meaning a guiding spirit. Sri Aurobindo even seems to say that the 'daemon' can be an expression of our psychic being. It is a spirit within us that tells us what we should do. The famous example is the Greek philosopher, Socrates, who always had to follow the guidance of his 'daemon'; even if it was just a matter of turning right or left in the street, he had to follow that inner guidance. Sri Aurobindo uses this word for the inner guiding spirit in several places in the poem. This too is one of the means that the secret Nature uses. Another is '*peeps and lightning-leaps of prophecy*': '*prophecy*' is the power of seeing the future; among her '*occult mightinesses*' she can also offer these '*peeps*', brief glimpses of what is to come, or a vision of the future that comes like a leaping flash of lightning.

And intimations to the inner ear,
Abrupt interventions stark and absolute
And the Superconscient's unaccountable acts,
Have woven her balanced web of miracles
And the weird technique of her tremendous art.

Another way in which messages may come from other worlds is in the form of '*intimations to the inner ear*': an '*intimation*' is a hint, an indication or communication; these '*intimations*' are heard by '*the inner ear*' as a voice, a suggestion. An '*intimation*' is a subtle hint, but sometimes there are '*abrupt interventions stark and absolute*': powerful

actions which cannot be resisted, because they are so strong and absolute. And then there are the '*unaccountable acts*' of the Superconscient: '*unaccountable*', means that they cannot be explained in any way; it is not possible to say what they mean or why they happen or what intention lies behind them; when the Superconscient acts it can only be accepted.

These many different kinds of occult mightiness, coming from many different planes and worlds, are woven together by the secret Nature as part of '*her balanced web of miracles*'. When we speak of a '*web*' we usually mean a spider's web, but the word can also mean a piece of weaving, like the '*wonder-weft*' that was mentioned before. All these unconnected things are brought together to make up '*her balanced web of miracles*'; they are brought from many different worlds to become part of her miraculous tapestry and '*the weird technique of her tremendous art*'. '*Weird*' means strange, ghostly, uncanny. This is the method that the Mother of Dreams uses, the '*technique of her tremendous art*'.

This bizarre kingdom passed into his charge.

'*Bizarre*' means very strange, puzzling, unusual. The strange kingdom ruled over by the secret Nature now '*passed into his charge*': Aswapati becomes responsible for ruling this realm. How does this come about?

As one resisting more the more she loves,
Her great possessions and her power and lore
She gave, compelled, with a reluctant joy;

Sometimes when a young lady is in love, the more she is in love the more she resists; she does not want to yield too easily; but finally she has to, she is '*compelled*'; then she yields '*with a reluctant joy*': she is happy to yield, but still makes a show of some resistance. As in

the Russian fairy-tales I mentioned, the enchantress has no alternative: she has to do what Aswapati asks her to do. The secret Nature cannot help giving all '*her great possessions and her power and lore*' to Aswapati; she yields up her '*bizarre kingdom*' to him. '*Lore*' means '*learning*' or knowledge, and especially secret knowledge.

Herself she gave for rapture and for use.

Absolved from aberrations in deep ways,

The ends she recovered for which she was made:

Like a conquered queen, for example in the story of Arjuna and Chitrangada, or like Cleopatra and Anthony, the secret Nature yields herself to Aswapati '*for rapture and for use*', for him to enjoy and to use. By this surrender she is '*absolved*', released, set free, '*from aberrations in deep ways*'. '*Aberrations*' are '*wanderings*'. It is as if she were lost and had strayed from the right path: she had all these great powers but she did not know what they were for, so she was using them according to her fancy and sometimes in very wrong ways. By yielding to the spiritual will of Aswapati, she '*recovered*' or rediscovered '*the ends*', the true purposes '*for which she was made*'. She has been created for a reason, and by surrendering to the mastery of Aswapati she rediscovers the reason for her existence.

She turned against the evil she had helped

Her engined wrath, her invisible means to slay;

She had helped all kinds of wrong things – '*evil*': magic can be used in very harmful ways. But now she will serve a '*spiritual will*'; so against '*the evil that she had helped*' she turns '*her engined wrath*' and '*her invisible means to slay*'. When she sends out a movement of anger, a powerful machinery goes into action against whatever she is angry with, and she has invisible ways to kill and destroy; now she turns that '*wrath*', anger, and '*her invisible means to slay*' against

all the wrong things, '*the evil*' that she was helping before.

Her dangerous moods and arbitrary force
She surrendered to the service of the soul
And the control of a spiritual will.

She is a great enchantress, so her moods are dangerous; she can use her force in '*arbitrary*' ways, without needing any justification; but now she surrenders all her moods and her force '*to the service of the soul / And the control of a spiritual will*'. There are people who are very interested in magic and occultism; they find books and teachers and gain some powers; but this is a very dangerous business and the Mother did not encourage people to study occultism at all. Both she and Sri Aurobindo have told us that if your purpose is pure, if you truly want to serve the Divine and surrender to the Divine Will and develop in a spiritual way, then some of these occult powers may come to you by themselves, if and when needed. This is what is happening to Aswapati: these occult possibilities are being given to him to use for a higher purpose.

A greater despot tamed her despotism.
Assailed, surprised in the fortress of her self,
Conquered by her own unexpected king,
Fulfilled and ransomed by her servitude,
She yielded in a vanquished ecstasy,
Her sealed hermetic wisdom forced from her,
Fragments of the mystery of omnipotence.

A '*despot*' is a ruler who has absolute power. In her own realm the secret Nature is a '*despot*', an absolute ruler; but now a '*spiritual will*' has come which is more powerful and absolute: '*a greater despot tamed her despotism*'. It '*tamed*' her, calmed her wildness, and made her use her powers in an orderly and useful way. She has been '*assailed*', attacked, and '*surprised in the fortress of herself*': she is like a

'fortress', a stronghold for an army; now she has been attacked and 'conquered by her own unexpected king'; when she yields to him, she is 'fulfilled and ransomed by her servitude'. 'Ransomed' means 'redeemed' and 'set free'. Kidnappers or pirates will capture someone and 'hold them for ransom'. If the ransom is paid, they will set their prisoner free. The secret Nature is 'ransomed', set free by serving the 'spiritual will'; she is set free from her 'aberrations', and by being conquered, she is fulfilled. She yields, the poet says, 'in a vanquished ecstasy'. 'Vanquished' means 'conquered', but she feels intensely delighted to be 'conquered' and surrenders in 'ecstasy'. When she is vanquished, all 'her sealed hermetic wisdom' is 'forced from her'. The word 'hermetic' refers to occult secret wisdom, but it is also used in a scientific sense: if you need something to be absolutely water-tight, absolutely leak-proof, you make a 'hermetic' seal, so that nothing can get in or out; something that is 'hermetic' and 'sealed' is completely secret. Now that seal is opened and all her 'sealed hermetic wisdom' is given to Aswapati; that wisdom consists of 'fragments of the mystery of omnipotence'. 'Omnipotence' is all-power. The secret Nature, the Mother of Dreams, does not have all-power, but 'fragments of Omnipotence'. Out of those 'fragments' she makes her 'wonder-weft' of miracles, and now all those powers and 'occult mightinesses' are given to Aswapati.

End of Section 5

Section 6, lines 476-511

In the previous section we read about how Aswapati came in contact with a '*secret Nature*' which seems to be what we could call the Shakti of the subtle worlds. In 1908 Sri Aurobindo wrote a poem called '*The Mother of Dreams*' which is addressed to a Mother-power who stands at the threshold between the physical world and the subtle worlds. This secret Nature can be quite dangerous and very misleading: we do not know whether the dreams and the visions that she gives are true or not. We read that she surrendered herself and all her powers to Aswapati, turned against all the evil that she had done and used her powers to serve his '*spiritual will*'. In this next section, Sri Aurobindo will tell us more about this '*Mother of Dreams*'.

A border sovereign is the occult Force.
A threshold guardian of the earth-scene's Beyond,
She has canalised the outbreaks of the Gods
And cut through vistas of intuitive sight
A long road of shimmering discoveries.

She is '*a border sovereign*': a '*sovereign*' is a ruler, and she rules the border lands between one world and another; she is '*the occult Force*', the secret creative power that we meet when we first enter the subtle worlds. She is '*a threshold guardian of the earth-scene's Beyond*'. The '*threshold*' is the sill that we step over when we go through the doorway at the entrance to a building, a temple or a house; although we do not see them, guardian beings are protecting the threshold; the secret Nature who was described in the previous section, the '*occult Force*', is '*a threshold guardian*' ruling the border between the earth-scene that we know and the '*Beyond*' that is unknown to us. '*She has canalised the outbreaks of the Gods*': she has

made channels to carry energies that are overflowing or breaking out from the worlds of the Gods. By making a canal or channel we can guide water to where it is needed; similarly she channels forces from the higher worlds. She has '*cut through vistas of intuitive sight*': a 'vista' is a long view through a narrow opening: down a street with tall buildings on either side, or through a clearing in the forest. Typically in a vista we see different layers: a foreground and a middle ground and then a far distant view: a vista, a view. We look at a vista with our physical eyes; this border sovereign has cut vistas for the intuitive vision to see far distances, '*a long road of shimmering discoveries*' which gives a prospect of many marvellous discoveries; those who travel that road can experience one wonderful discovery after another as they pass through the different layers of the vista. '*Shimmering*' describes the movement of light, light that is moving on water, or on silk cloth that shines as it is moved; on a very hot day we may see air shimmering above the surface of a dark road: the air above the road heats up and moves, reflecting light and shimmering in the heat. The long road through the intuitive vista is shimmering with the light of the marvellous discoveries that lie along the way.

The worlds of a marvellous Unknown were near,
Behind her an ineffable Presence stood:
Her reign received their mystic influences,
Their lion-forces crouched beneath her feet;
The future sleeps unknown behind their doors.

Aswapati feels the nearness of '*worlds of a marvellous Unknown*', and senses that behind the '*threshold guardian*' there is an '*ineffable Presence*', a powerful '*Presence*' which cannot be described. The secret Nature that we have been reading about is a '*border sovereign*' who only rules the borderland. She is the representative of a much

greater power, the '*ineffable Presence*' that Aswapati senses behind her. '*Her reign*', her rule over this borderland received the '*mystic influences*' of the nearby '*worlds of a marvellous Unknown*' and of the '*ineffable Presence*' behind. '*Their lion-forces crouched beneath her feet*': the image is of a goddess with lions crouching obediently at her feet, a sign of great power and majesty. Behind the doors of those '*worlds of a marvellous Unknown*' the future is sleeping until the time comes for it to manifest.

Abysms infernal gaped round the soul's steps
And called to its mounting vision peaks divine:
An endless climb and adventure of the Idea
There tirelessly tempted the explorer mind
And countless voices visited the charmed ear;
A million figures passed and were seen no more.

This borderland is a realm where many different worlds meet. In the previous section Sri Aurobindo mentioned that the secret Nature was working on the margin of many meeting planes. There are '*abysms infernal*': very deep, dark, black holes; '*infernal*' refers to the lower worlds and means 'hellish'. The Italian word for hell is '*inferno*'; it is the name of the first part of *La Divina Comedia*, the three-part epic of the great Italian poet Dante in which he describes going down into the infernal regions and exploring them before moving on and up into higher worlds. '*Abysms*' are huge, deep gulfs. Aswapati sees them '*gaping*', opening up around the soul as it moves; but at the same time there are divine mountain peaks attracting the soul as it looks up into the heights. There the mind is constantly '*tempted*' and allured by the prospect of endless progress through exciting new possibilities of the '*Idea*'. The senses too are attracted and delighted: '*countless voices visited the charmed ear*'. '*A million figures passed and were seen no more*': endlessly passing, seen

for a moment and then disappearing again, forms from many subtle worlds appear and vanish.

This was a forefront of God's thousandfold house,
Beginnings of the half-screened Invisible.

This borderland is *'a forefront'*, a first approach to the entrance of *'God's thousandfold house'* where Aswapati sees the *'beginnings of the half-screened Invisible'*. *'God's thousandfold house'* contains countless rooms, but he is seeing it from outside and at a distance. The *'Invisible'* beyond is still *'half-screened'*: he gets a first glimpse, a hint of the glories that lie hidden beyond.

A magic porch of entry glimmering
Quivered in a penumbra of screened Light,
A court of the mystical traffic of the worlds,
A balcony and miraculous façade.

The entrance to a big house is usually covered by a *'porch'* above the doorway. *'God's thousandfold house'* has *'a magic porch of entry'* which is *'glimmering'* and *'quivering'*, shimmering *'in a penumbra of screened Light'*. A *'penumbra'*, is a half-light, twilight. Beyond the entry porch lies a huge courtyard, *'a court of the mystical traffic of the worlds'*. There, beings from many worlds are coming and going, passing and meeting each other, exchanging and communicating. Beyond that courtyard is a *'façade'*, the front wall of the building, and on it is *'a balcony'*. On the façade of a palace there will always be a balcony where the ruler and his entourage can show themselves to their subjects on special occasions. In ancient Egypt, the Pharaoh used to come out onto a balcony and show himself in his divine aspect, in his full regalia, so that everybody could see him as the representative of the Divine on earth. Heads of State still show themselves to their people on raised balconies at the front of state buildings. For us the balcony has a special significance, because the

Mother used to come out every morning to give darshan from her balcony and bless all the devotees standing below.

Above her lightened high immensities;
All the unknown looked out from boundlessness:
It lodged upon an edge of hourless Time,
Gazing out of some everlasting Now, ...

The border sovereign is standing on her balcony and '*above her lightened high immensities*', vast higher and greater levels, shedding their light; from them '*all the unknown looked out from boundlessness*': from those limitless levels, Aswapati sees unknown higher beings and powers looking out from their worlds. This description makes me think of our South Indian temples: at the entrances are porches and above them great gopurams tower up in many levels, carved and moulded and painted to represent worlds and the beings that inhabit them, looking down at us from their heavens. What Aswapati sees is something like that, but of course much more alive and magical: '*all the unknown looked out from boundlessness*'; it '*lodged upon an edge of hourless Time*', all the unknown is as if standing on a narrow platform of Time, a time that is different from ours; the beings there do not experience the passing of hours and minutes and seconds, nor past, present and future: they are on '*an edge of hourless Time*' and '*gazing out of some everlasting Now*'. They are looking down at the borderland between their worlds and our material universe.

Its shadows gleaming with the birth of gods,
Its bodies signalling the Bodiless,
Its foreheads glowing with the Oversoul,
Its forms projected from the Unknowable,
Its eyes dreaming of the Ineffable,
Its faces staring into eternity.

These lines suggest different aspects of the unknown which Aswapati sees. There are shadows, '*gleaming*', glowing, because in them gods are taking form, being born; he sees bodies that are '*signalling the Bodiless*', sending out signs and signals that represent and remind us of the '*Bodiless*', the unmanifest supreme Being behind and beyond them. Faces are seen there, whose foreheads are '*glowing with the Oversoul*', the great Soul of which we are all small souls. All those forms are being '*projected*', sent out, emitted or emanated from '*the Unknowable*', the transcendent mystery; there are '*eyes dreaming of the Ineffable*', which cannot be expressed, and '*faces staring into eternity*'. Such wonderful significant figures and beings are lodged there at the entrance to '*God's thousandfold house*'.

Life in him learned its huge subconscious rear;
The little fronts unlocked to the unseen Vasts:
Her gulfs stood nude, her far transcendences
Flamed in transparencies of crowded light.

When Aswapati perceived all these things, '*Life in him learned its huge subconscious rear*': his life-being became aware of its own greatness lying behind it, subconscious and unnoticed. The '*rear*' is the back part; we are not aware of our '*rear*' because it is '*subconscious*', lying below our consciousness; we are not aware of it but it is also a part of life. We live in the '*little fronts*' of our being, unaware of all that lies behind. Now for Aswapati his life parts are '*unlocked to the unseen Vasts*' which are lying behind and within. '*Her gulfs*', the hidden deep lower levels of Life '*stood nude*': all their coverings were removed and they could be clearly seen. Life has very high levels also, levels that are almost transcendent; Aswapati sees '*her far transcendences*', the divine levels of life, flaming '*in transparencies of crowded light*'. We can imagine one layer after another of glowing transparent light, packed closely together,

perhaps shining with different shades and colours.

End of Section 6

Section 7, lines 512-626

A giant order was discovered here
Of which the tassel and extended fringe
Are the scant stuff of our material lives.

In the previous section, we read how Aswapati saw the '*forefront of God's thousand-fold house*' with its façade in which there is an entry-porch and a balcony, and above '*All the unknown ... lodged upon an edge of hourless Time*' and gazing downwards. Now he sees that there is an orderly arrangement in those '*high immensities*': just as they are represented on the gopuram above the gateway to a South Indian temple, the levels are arranged in order: '*a giant order was discovered here*', of which our material lives are like the '*tassel*', the '*extended fringe*'. On the edges of a shawl or a bedcover the ends of the threads may be knotted to form a '*tassel*' or '*fringe*' hanging down from the main body of the cloth; our lives are like that: an insubstantial fringe hanging off the edge of the real thing, made of '*scant stuff*' on the edge of the universal order. '*Scant*' means '*insufficient*', '*poor*' '*deficient*'.

This overt universe whose figures hide
The secrets merged in superconscious light,
Wrote clear the letters of its glowing code:
A map of subtle signs surpassing thought
Was hung upon a wall of inmost mind.

In this '*overt universe*', the physical universe that we can see, its '*figures*', its material forms and shapes, hide the secrets which they symbolize, '*the secrets merged in superconscious light*'; but now to Aswapati's vision, this physical universe clearly showed '*the letters of its glowing code*'. A '*code*' is a secret script. The secrets of our

material universe are visible, but they are written in a secret script, in a 'code' which Aswapati could now read clearly. He was shown '*a map of subtle signs surpassing thought*' which hung '*upon a wall of inmost mind*': it is not accessible to the surface awareness, but only to the deepest '*inmost*' level of mind.

Illumining the world's concrete images
Into significant symbols by its gloss,
It offered to the intuitive exegete
Its reflex of the eternal Mystery.

That '*map of subtle signs*' casts light, illumines and makes sense of all the '*concrete images*' that exist here in the material world; in its light they are all seen to be '*significant symbols*'. Whatever we see here seems so ordinary to us: floor, camera, chair, flowers, walls ... but each of these things is a symbol with a deeper significance. For Aswapati the images become meaningful by the interpretation which is shown in the map of subtle signs. '*Gloss*' here means an interpretation or explanation. You may know the word 'glossary': a book which includes unfamiliar words may have a 'glossary' at the back which explains what they mean. In fact now when I try to explain what the words and lines in *Savitri* mean, I am giving a '*gloss*', an explanation for something that is difficult to understand. That is what the '*map of subtle signs*' does. Those subtle signs are '*surpassing thought*'. Now, as I am giving a gloss on these lines, it is addressed to your minds; but the '*map of subtle signs*' which Aswapati sees is offered to the intuition: it is '*offered to the intuitive exegete*'. An '*exegete*' is a person who explains and interprets a difficult text. The map will help an '*intuitive exegete*' to understand and interpret the '*concrete images*', the solid symbolic forms of this material world; it shows the connections between these concrete images and '*the eternal Mystery*', revealing how the physical

universe reflects and corresponds to the higher Reality; it gives the key to the code of the universe, so that its '*concrete images*' can be understood in their true significance. In our ordinary language, the word '*reflex*' refers to an action which comes automatically in response to another action: if you go to see the doctor he will test your reflexes by giving you a tap below your knee which makes the foot move by an automatic '*reflex*'; but in its origin this word is connected with the word 'reflection' and that is the sense in which Sri Aurobindo uses it here, as he does in several other places in the poem: the concrete signs of the material world reflect the eternal Mystery according to a certain code and the '*map of subtle signs*' makes the system of correspondences clear.

Ascending and descending twixt life's poles
The seried kingdoms of the graded Law
Plunged from the Everlasting into Time,
Then glad of a glory of multitudinous mind
And rich with life's adventure and delight
And packed with the beauty of Matter's shapes and hues
Climbed back from Time into undying Self,
Up a golden ladder carrying the soul,
Tying with diamond threads the Spirit's extremes.

This is the '*giant order*' which Aswapati sees and is able to understand in the light of the map of subtle signs which appeared on a wall of inmost mind. He sees '*the seried kingdoms of the graded Law*', '*ascending and descending*' between the '*poles*' or opposite ends of life. The kingdoms form an orderly series which corresponds to a '*Law*'; the '*Law*' is '*graded*', which means that it has successive steps; on one level certain rules apply, and above it there is another level where the rules are different; on each of the levels there are kingdoms which live by this '*graded Law*', so the kingdoms form an

orderly sequence, a series ranging upward and downward, between the ends or '*poles*' of life. First they descend: they plunge '*from the Everlasting into Time*'. That is how the manifestation comes into existence: the '*Everlasting*', the Supreme, projects himself as Time and Space, creating all these kingdoms and levels of existence, all the forms and forces and beings. First there is a plunge, in which the involutionary planes are created, the steps leading down '*from the Everlasting into Time*', and then the evolutionary planes '*climb back from Time into undying Self*', ascending back up the sequence of levels to the source. As they go up they are '*glad of a glory of multitudinous mind*'; if there had been no downward plunge, there would not have been any '*multitudinous mind*', there would not have been any of these multitudinous individual beings each with their own mind, their own way of seeing things, and there would not have been all these many, many individual lives and all the play of relationships between the different beings and forms. So as the series ascends, it is '*glad of a glory of multitudinous mind*', it is '*rich with life's adventure and delight*' and it is '*packed with the beauty of Matter's shapes and hues*'. The series of planes and kingdoms climbs '*back from Time into undying Self, / Up a golden ladder carrying the soul*'. It is the soul that moves up that '*golden ladder*' which ties and connects '*the Spirit's extremes*' to each other '*with diamond threads*'. There are two poles, two extremes: one is the pole of pure spirit and the other is the pole of inconscient matter; but they are connected by the many steps of the '*golden ladder*' which links one extreme to the other. First the soul plunges down, it dives down into the inconscience and forgets itself; and then it begins to remember: it moves one step upwards, becoming a simple life form, and then shapes and inhabits higher and higher steps until finally it has climbed all the way back up to recover its own '*undying Self*' again. On the way back to its source, it accumulates and carries with it the

essence of all it has experienced in the course of its adventure into time and space. One extreme is pure Spirit and the other extreme is Matter, but they are always connected by the '*golden ladder*': there is no break anywhere in the series of planes and worlds and kingdoms, the '*giant order*' of the manifestation.

In this drop from consciousness to consciousness
Each leaned on the occult Inconscient's power,
The fountain of its needed Ignorance,
Archmason of the limits by which it lives.

These lines explain the downward process by which the All-conscious becomes the Inconscient. It comes down step by step, one at time, gradually limiting itself more and more. '*In this drop from consciousness to consciousness*' each level or plane '*leaned on the occult Inconscient's power*'. Each level is more unconscious than the one above it. The Inconscient is '*the fountain of its needed Ignorance*', the source of the unconsciousness that it needs in order to forget and limit itself further; so the Inconscient is also the '*Archmason*', the master-builder '*of the limits by which it lives*'. Each level has its own limitations.

In this soar from consciousness to consciousness
Each lifted tops to That from which it came,
Origin of all that it had ever been
And home of all that it could still become.

Going in the other direction, upwards, '*in this soar from consciousness to consciousness*', each plane, each kingdom raises its tops, its highest peaks, its skies, towards the level above it, '*from which it came*' in the downward journey; the level above it is the '*Origin of all that it had ever been*' as well as the '*home of all that it could still become*'.

In these few sentences Sri Aurobindo gives us the secret of the

evolutionary manifestation in a wonderful picture that we can remember and grasp. How can the conscious soul plunge into the total inconstance that was there before Matter as we know it even existed? It has to forget: at each downward step of the involutory process it has to forget a little bit more, a little bit more, a little bit more. In the process, the planes of consciousness get manifested. In *The Life Divine* Sri Aurobindo explains that there could not be any world as we experience it, unless the soul had accepted the adventure of ignorance, forgetting its Origin, who it is and where it has come from; so when it begins to emerge from the Inconscient it looks up towards the next step, it does not see the very highest level which is really its Origin, it just looks up to the next level. When Aswapati sees that golden ladder of planes, he sees that each plane, each step of the ladder, is looking up towards the next higher level, from which it came into existence, which was the '*Origin of all that it had ever been*' and is the '*home of all that it could still become*'. All this is summed up in the next sentence:

An organ scale of the Eternal's acts,
Mounting to their climax in an endless Calm,
Paces of the many-visaged Wonderful,
Predestined stadia of the evolving Way,
Measures of the stature of the growing soul,
They interpreted existence to itself
And, mediating twixt the heights and deeps,
United the veiled married opposites
And linked creation to the Ineffable.

Here Sri Aurobindo images this series of kingdoms, ascending and descending between the Spirit's extremes, as a musical scale played on an organ, one note after another, up and down the keyboard. A big organ with all the stops pulled out, played at full volume, gives

a magnificent sound, very rich and varied and powerful; starting at the lower end with the deep notes of the scale and mounting higher and higher, it is very thrilling and moving. This series of worlds is like '*an organ scale of the Eternal's acts, / Mounting to their climax in an endless Calm*': at the top of the scale is the perfect everlasting '*Calm*' of Eternity, which is also the '*climax*', the point of greatest intensity. Each of the notes, each of the kingdoms, is a pace, a step, taken by the '*many-visaged Wonderful*': he who has many faces. They are '*paces*' or steps that the divine Soul takes as it moves up and down the series of planes. The poet also says that these kingdoms are '*predestined stadia of the evolving Way*'. In the process of evolution, following the '*evolving Way*' the planes which the soul experiences are '*predestined stadia*', stages which it cannot avoid travelling through: matter, life, mind, different levels of mind and so on. The word '*stadia*' comes from the measurement the Romans used for their roads; it has come to mean '*a stage of development*'. Each of the planes and levels marks a certain stage of development in evolution; they are the predestined steps that evolution follows. At the same time they are '*measures of the stature of the growing soul*'. When a child is growing up, on his birthday every year his parents may stand him against a wall and make a mark to show how much taller he has grown in the course of the year. These planes mark the progress of the soul as it grows; they are milestones in the unfolding of the soul in evolution. They also interpret '*existence to itself*': they provide the pure supreme existence with many different ways of expressing itself, experiencing itself, discovering itself. They also mediate between '*the heights and deeps*', connecting the very highest levels of manifestation with the very deepest ones. In this way they unite '*the veiled married opposites*', the opposite extremes of Spirit and Matter, or Nature and Soul, which are really always One although their oneness is '*veiled*', hidden from view. The orderly sequence of

planes links all the levels and stages of the creation to the One who is beyond all manifestation, *'the Ineffable'*.

A last high world was seen where all worlds meet;
In its summit gleam where Night is not nor Sleep,
The light began of the Trinity supreme.

At the very top of this ladder of planes, Aswapati gets a glimpse of *'a last high world ... where all worlds meet'*. It is shining at the very summit of the series of worlds where there is no *'Night'* and no *'Sleep'*: no darkness of unconsciousness, no forgetfulness, no ignorance; in the *'summit gleam'* of that world, *'the light began of the Trinity supreme'*: Sat-Chit-Ananda.

In the *Life Divine* we can read about how the *'Ineffable'*, the Transcendent, expresses himself as Satchidananda and starts the work of creation. Sri Aurobindo tells us that the first level which is projected is the level of Supermind, the Truth-Consciousness that gives rise to all the rest of the manifestation. As Aswapati sees the order of planes from below, he perceives that last high world where all worlds meet and find their fullness as well as their oneness.

All there discovered what it seeks for here.
It freed the finite into boundlessness
And rose into its own eternities.

In that last high world where all worlds meet, everything discovered what it is seeking for, more or less blindly, here; all the worlds are searching for something and in that last high world everything finds its fulfilment. That world *'freed the finite into boundlessness'*. Everything in the manifestation is *'finite'*, defined, limited, not infinite; and yet all these things that are *'finite'* have their origin in the infinite Satchidananda. In that last high world everything *'finite'* gets liberated into *'boundlessness'*; and just as each

of the worlds raises its tops towards the level above it, this highest world too rises up '*into its own eternities*' which lie beyond the manifestation altogether.

The Inconscient found its heart of consciousness,
The idea and feeling groping in Ignorance
At last clutched passionately the body of Truth,
The music born in Matter's silences
Plucked nude out of the Ineffable's fathomlessness
The meaning it had held but could not voice;

Within the '*Inconscient*', in the core of what seems absolutely unconscious, there lies a secret '*heart of consciousness*': in the light of that highest Truth-world, the '*Inconscient*' finds '*its heart of consciousness*'. In the Truth-world all the mental activity and all the sensations and feelings that here are '*groping in Ignorance*', fumbling around to find something real and meaningful, are at last able to catch hold of and cling to '*the body of Truth*' they have been blindly seeking. Then the poet speaks about '*music*', '*the music born in Matter's silences*'. He seems to be saying that in the silences of Matter there is a hidden harmony, a kind of music; in that last high world the hidden harmony in Matter is able to find the '*meaning*' which it had been holding within itself without being able to express it; it seizes that meaning '*nude*', without covering of any kind, out of the '*fathomlessness*' of the '*Ineffable*'.

The perfect rhythm now only sometimes dreamed
An answer brought to the torn earth's hungry need
Rending the night that had concealed the Unknown,
Giving to her lost forgotten soul.

One aspect of music is '*rhythm*'; in that last highest world '*the perfect rhythm*', that here is only sometimes dreamed of, brings '*an answer*', a solution, '*to the torn earth's hungry need*'. Earth is '*torn*', wounded,

suffering, divided, hungry, but that '*perfect rhythm*' brings '*an answer*' to all the neediness of the earth, because it tears apart '*the night*', the darkness of unconsciousness that has been hiding '*the Unknown*' from her. When the night is rent, torn apart, the earth can get back '*her lost forgotten soul*', the soul of divine meaning and power that has been embodied in the material principle, which has accepted to make this great sacrifice of forgetfulness for the purpose of the evolutionary manifestation. In that last high world where all worlds meet everything is given back, resolved, united.

A grand solution closed the long impasse
In which the heights of mortal effort end.

However much we try, whatever efforts we may make, we always seem to reach a limit, an '*impasse*', a barrier, a blockage that we cannot break through; but in that last high world, the closure is not an '*impasse*', it is not a blank wall, but '*a grand solution*' to all mortal striving and effort.

A reconciling Wisdom looked on life;
It took the striving undertones of mind
And took the confused refrain of human hopes
And made of them a sweet and happy call;

Aswapati perceives in that Truth-world a '*reconciling Wisdom*', which looked at life, and took '*the striving undertones of mind*', all the effort which underlies our thoughts and mental activity, along with '*the confused refrain of human hopes*', and made them into '*a sweet and happy call*'. A '*refrain*' is a phrase in a song that is repeated again and again; throughout human life similar '*hopes*' and wishes get repeated over and over, but in a '*confused*' and unclear way; but the '*reconciling Wisdom*' took those '*striving undertones*' and that '*confused refrain*' and made them into '*a sweet and happy call*', a sweet and joyful aspiration and appeal.

It lifted from an underground of pain
The inarticulate murmur of our lives
And found for it a sense illimitable.

The '*reconciling Wisdom*' also took all the pain of our lives, all the desires, all the sufferings, all the griefs, and lifted them up out of that '*underground of pain*'; '*the inarticulate murmur of our lives*', all the half-expressed wishes and desires and complaints, are also a form of aspiration; the '*reconciling Wisdom*' gives them '*a sense illimitable*', a limitless meaning and significance.

A mighty oneness its perpetual theme,
It caught the soul's faint scattered utterances,
Read hardly twixt our lines of rigid thought
Or mid this drowse and coma on Matter's breast
Heard like disjointed mutterings in sleep;

The '*perpetual theme*' of that '*reconciling Wisdom*', the theme which it is repeating over and over forever, is '*a mighty oneness*'. It can hear and grasp the '*soul's faint scattered utterances*': here in our world the voice of the soul can hardly be heard; it is very faint, and utters a word only now and again. Even if we do happen to hear something of what it says, we do not understand what it is saying, because it gets obscured by '*our lines of rigid thought*'. Here in the material world our mind and heart and soul are in a state of '*drowse and coma*' because of the dominance of Matter, so the soul's utterances are heard only '*like disjointed mutterings in sleep*'. We may hear a sleeping person trying to speak, but although in their dream they may know what they are trying to say, we cannot understand their '*disjointed mutterings*'; similarly we do not hear or understand '*the soul's faint scattered utterances*'. But the '*reconciling Wisdom*' hears and understands them. There is a phrase '*to read between the lines*' which means to understand what is implied by certain words and

phrases but is not expressed openly, grasping what is meant rather than what is said or written. Between the lines of our rigid thought are the '*faint scattered utterances*' of the soul; the '*reconciling Wisdom*' catches all that the soul is saying, which here in the material world can hardly be heard, in the midst of '*this drowse and coma on Matter's breast*'. Here on earth, it is as if we are in a state of '*coma*', of unconsciousness – or if there is any consciousness it has no way to express itself; we do not actually know how it is: people are in hospital for months and years, they go on living but nobody knows whether they are aware of anything or not: because of brain damage or for some other reason, they cannot express themselves. Here the poet says that Matter is in a state of '*coma*' or '*drowse*', half sleep. Under the domination of Matter the '*soul's faint scattered utterances*' cannot be heard, or if they are heard they sound '*like disjointed mutterings in sleep*'; but the '*reconciling Wisdom*' catches those scattered utterances and disjointed mutterings and brings them together; that is what is expressed in the next part of the sentence.

It grouped the golden links that they had lost
And showed to them their divine unity,
Saving from the error of divided self
The deep spiritual cry in all that is.

The '*reconciling Wisdom*' gathers the lost '*golden links*' that connect the '*soul's faint scattered utterances*', brings them together and shows them '*their divine unity*'; in this way it saves '*the deep spiritual cry in all that is*' from '*the error of divided self*'. In the Ignorance we make the error of seeing everything as separate, divided; we do not see the connecting oneness; we see separate appearances, and think that there are separate souls and selves; but in fact they are all one and their '*utterances*' are all expressions of one '*deep spiritual cry*' in everything that exists.

All the great Words that toiled to express the One
Were lifted into an absoluteness of light,
An ever-burning Revelation's fire
And the immortality of the eternal Voice.

'All the great Words', the great messages, the great scriptures, the Vedas, the great poems, all the wise *'Words'* that have tried here on earth *'to express the One'*, in that last high world are lifted up *'into an absoluteness of light'*. We think of those *'great Words'* as being Revelations, but here on earth they get revealed in limited forms of expression; there, they are lifted up into *'an ever-burning ... fire'* of Revelation, and get expressed in *'the immortality of the eternal Voice'*. That is the supreme Shastra, the supreme Veda that reconciles all the forms of the Truth that have ever attempted to find expression here on earth.

And then comes this wonderful line:

There was no quarrel more of truth with truth;

This is our problem: one truth is always quarrelling with another. There are so many different truths; each of us seems to express a different truth and here they quarrel, but there, in that last high world, there is no quarrelling any longer; there all truths complement each other and make a perfect whole.

The endless chapter of their differences
Retold in light by an omniscient Scribe
Travelled through difference towards unity,

All the differences between one truth and another, all the quarrelling between truth and truth, seems like an *'endless chapter'*; but when that story is *'retold in light'* by *'an omniscient Scribe'* who knows and understands everything, then it is seen that all these quarrelling truths are travelling *'through difference towards unity'*. In

evolution some clash and struggle between one truth and another is inevitable. Recently we read in *The Life Divine* that this quarrelling should become first of all a joyful wrestling of brothers in sport, and finally an embrace. All the terrible clashes that are going on in the world between one set of truths and another should first learn to wrestle in a sportsmanlike way, to learn from each other and become stronger through the wrestling, and finally embrace and discover that they complement and enhance each other.

Mind's winding search lost every tinge of doubt
Led to its end by an all-seeing speech
That garbed the initial and original thought
With the finality of an ultimate phrase:
United were Time's creative mood and tense
To the style and syntax of Identity.

Mind, moving through ignorance in search of knowledge, follows a zigzag path: '*Mind's winding search*'. It makes one discovery and then has to move on in almost the opposite direction. But in that highest Truth-world, '*every tinge of doubt*' is lost, every slight hint or mist of doubt gets '*led to its end*', because '*an all-seeing speech*' shows Mind what it was searching for. Speech seems to us to be an invention of mind; we think that speech has appeared in evolution along with mind. Speech 'garbs' thought, it clothes or dresses ideas in expressive words. But our mental speech is not an '*all-seeing speech*'; in fact at our mental level it is almost impossible to put any idea into words without seeming to exclude or contradict some other equally valid idea. But in that last high world there is an '*all-seeing*' speech that can therefore clothe thought, '*the initial and original thought*' that has given rise to everything, in '*the finality of an ultimate phrase*'. The thought that lies at the origin of the creation is expressed fully in '*the finality of an ultimate phrase*' which is so

complete and powerful that all doubt disappears.

Then come these two mysterious lines about '*Time's creative mood and tense*' being united with '*the style and syntax of Identity*'. To try to understand them, we shall have to think about grammar. '*Mood*', '*tense*', '*style*' and '*syntax*' are words that are used in grammar. '*Mood*' and '*tense*' refer to verbs, words that express movement and action. Time implies movement, and the words that express movement in our language are verbs; nouns are objects, things or people, and their movements and relationships are expressed by verbs. Verbs, in our grammar, have '*tenses*': past tense, present tense, future tense; they also have '*moods*', such as optative, conditional, subjunctive. In modern spoken English we do not use these moods very much but we express the optative mood when we say '*should*': '*it should be like this*', '*it should happen like this*': we are choosing something. The conditional mood goes with '*if*' and '*unless*': '*if this were to happen, that would follow*'. In many languages these meanings are expressed in different verb forms called '*moods*'. The poet relates this to Time: he says that Time uses '*mood*' and '*tense*' creatively and that in the last highest world, the movements of Time, the moods and tenses which time uses creatively, get united with '*the style and syntax of Identity*'. '*Syntax*' is the way in which words are put together to form meaningful sentences. The '*all-seeing speech*' unites the '*creative mood and tense*' of Time with the '*style and syntax of Identity*' because it sees and knows everything by identity, by being one with it. This is also how it can express the original thought in an ultimate phrase. We could say that everything originates from Oneness, from the One; manifestation happens when the One extends himself as Time and Space and projects his oneness into many individualities and forms, while still holding all the multiplicity within himself and inhabiting every part of it; in the evolution, we experience everything as

limited and separate, and the play between all these separate forms and beings and forces is the creative drama of Time; in that last high world, all this movement and play of relationships in Time is united with the original Oneness; the play is not dissolved back into oneness, but all its differences and doubts and clashes are reconciled in the direct knowledge that all are One: the One and the Many are united in Identity; the movements of the Many in Time are seen by the reconciling Wisdom to be ways of expressing the infinite possibilities of the One.

After this evocation of the Truth-world, Sri Aurobindo returns to the hierarchy of planes which Aswapati saw as a golden ladder of many worlds, ascending and descending between the Spirit's extremes, like a tremendously powerful piece of music, an '*organ-scale*' of many resounding notes. Now to this music he adds voices:

A paean swelled from the lost musing deeps;
An anthem pealed to the triune ecstasies,
A cry of the moments to the Immortal's bliss.

A '*paean*', is a song of praise, triumph and happiness. Aswapati hears this powerful song of praise and delight swelling, getting louder and louder as it rises up from the '*lost musing deeps*' where consciousness seems to have lost itself or to be in trance, from the depths of Matter. '*An anthem pealed to the triune ecstasies*': an '*anthem*' is a sacred song for many voices; the poet says that the anthem '*pealed*'; this is what bells do, ringing out in joyous celebration: the anthem pealed out praise and worship of '*the triune ecstasies*'. '*Triune*' means three-in-one; here it must refer to the trinity of Sat-Chit-Ananda: the Oneness of Existence-Consciousness-Bliss. The ultimate Existence and Consciousness and Bliss are not three things, but '*triune*': three essential attributes of the divine Oneness: that Existence is always full of Bliss and full of Consciousness, that

Consciousness is full of Bliss. The poet tells us that these glorious songs, this '*paeon*' and this '*anthem*', express the '*cry*', the appeal or call '*of the moments*', of all the moments in Time, to the bliss of the Immortal. In our present surface awareness we are not aware of it, but in fact the bliss of the Immortal is always behind our perception of time, our perception of appearances. Now Aswapati is aware of all the '*moments*' in cosmic time singing their praises to the bliss of the Supreme.

As if the strophes of a cosmic ode,
A hierarchy of climbing harmonies
Peopled with voices and with visages
Aspired in a crescendo of the Gods
From Matter's abysses to the Spirit's peaks.

An '*ode*' is another kind of poem or song, usually one with many verses, that is created to celebrate some special occasion. Here it is a '*cosmic ode*', a sung poem of the whole universe. The verses of an ode are called '*strophes*'. All the different levels, these worlds, these steps of the ladder, are like the '*strophes*' or verses of a universal ode, arranged in a '*hierarchy*'. This word implies an order of power and authority, with one leader at the top and a few ministers below and each of the ministers with the officers of their departments and so it goes on, level after level after level after level. Here it is '*a hierarchy of climbing harmonies*': each world is a harmony in itself and is in harmony with all the others, and they are getting more and more powerful as the scale rises. All of them are '*peopled with voices and with visages*'. We may remember the image of the gopuram, with the beings of each plane looking down; here they have voices, they are all singing. All those planes are aspiring upwards '*in a crescendo of the Gods*'. '*Crescendo*' is a term from music: when the composer wants the musicians to play louder and louder and louder and

louder, he writes this word in his score; it means 'growing' or 'increasing' in Italian. The musicians will start playing quietly and then louder and louder. This singing is getting more and more powerful as it swells up '*from Matter's abysses to the Spirit's peaks*' praising and adoring and worshipping the '*triune ecstasies*' above:

Above were the Immortal's changeless seats,
White chambers of dalliance with eternity
And the stupendous gates of the Alone.

Just as the gopuram goes up and up and up and above it is the sky, so above this climbing hierarchy of worlds there are the '*changeless seats*' of the Immortal. This seems to represent the frontier where the highest levels of manifestation meet the transcendence beyond. There are '*white chambers of dalliance with eternity*'; white is the colour of purity and of integrality because it contains all colours within it; in those white chambers '*dalliance*' is going on; this is a word we normally use to mean the play between lovers who tease each other, pretend to quarrel, flirt – all this is '*dalliance*'; in those white chambers on the frontiers of Time some playful exchange is going on with eternity. And there can be seen '*the stupendous gates of the Alone*', the entranceway to the Transcendent, the One, the Alone beyond manifestation.

Across the unfolding of the seas of self
Appeared the deathless countries of the One.

As Aswapati looks across all these levels of the unfolding of the self, all these planes of manifestation, through the '*gates of the Alone*', he sees '*the deathless countries of the One*'. All this can only be seen by identity, in the way that we see and experience ourself; it is by extending the sense of self, unfolding and widening the sense of self that these countries can be seen.

A many-miracled Consciousness unrolled
Vast aim and process and unfettered norms,
A larger Nature's great familiar roads.

The '*unfolding of the seas of self*' is the work of the '*many-miracled Consciousness*' of the One, which is unrolling all this in space and time, revealing '*vast aim and process and unfettered norms*'. There is an aim and a purpose in this '*unfolding of the seas of self*'; it is not just an accident or an illusion, and it is not just a play, not just for fun: there is a '*vast aim*', a purpose, a direction; there is a '*process*'; and there are '*unfettered norms*'. '*Norms*' are standards which define what ought to be '*normal*'; these '*norms*' are '*unfettered*', free and unbound; '*fetters*' are metal rings used to bind the hands and feet of slaves and prisoners; the norms which shape and rule '*the deathless countries of the One*' are '*unfettered*'; they have a vast scope, a vast range of movement. These are the '*great familiar roads*' of '*a larger Nature*': not our limited material nature, but the Nature which rules and shapes the higher realms.

Affranchised from the net of earthly sense
Calm continents of potency were glimpsed;
Homelands of beauty shut to human eyes,
Half-seen at first through wonder's gleaming lids,
Surprised the vision with felicity;

We have come across this word '*affranchised*' before; it means 'set free'. Aswapati is set free '*from the net of earthly sense*'. We experience the world around us through our senses of hearing and sight and taste and touch and smell; Sri Aurobindo speaks of the action of the senses as a '*net*': we use '*the net of earthly sense*' to catch perceptions of the world around us; but at the same time we are caught in that net, because the sense-perceptions form a barrier which prevents us from experiencing subtler realities. Now that Aswapati is

'*affranchised from the net of earthly sense*' he can see things that exist in a different kind of space. First he glimpses '*calm continents of potency*'. A 'continent' is a large solid mass that contains many different territories and peoples. These are '*continents of potency*': they are calm, and full of power and possibility. He also sees '*homelands of beauty*': your '*homeland*' is your native land; these are lands where '*beauty*' is at home, these are her native lands, the lands that Beauty comes from; but they are '*shut to human eyes*'; with our physical eyes we cannot see those '*homelands of beauty*'. Aswapati half-sees them '*through wonder's gleaming lids*'. Here '*lids*' refer to 'eyelids'; it is as if Aswapati's inner eyes are half-shut, perhaps dazzled by the wonderful things he is seeing. His power of vision is '*surprised ... with felicity*', surprised and delighted by what it sees; he is enjoying a sight beyond the '*net of earthly sense*' and his power of vision is surprised with delight at seeing all those beautiful things.

Sunbelts of knowledge, moonbelts of delight
Stretched out in an ecstasy of widenesses
Beyond our indigent corporeal range.

'*Belts*' suggests broad spread-out areas. He sees '*sunbelts*' and '*moonbelts*'. '*Sunbelts*' are areas of knowledge, vast expanses of knowledge stretching '*out in an ecstasy of widenesses*', in intense delight at such wide extension. The sun, of course, is the symbol of the full divine consciousness. There are '*Sunbelts of knowledge*', full of vast possibilities of knowledge, and '*moonbelts of delight*'. The moon in India is associated with bliss. Aswapati experiences not only the sunlight of knowledge, but also the cooling moonlight of delight; these are two major capacities of consciousness: knowledge and delight; they seem to correspond to our mental part and our life parts. He sees them extended '*Beyond our indigent corporeal range*'. The word '*corporeal*' is derived from the Latin word '*corpus*',

meaning a body. Our '*corporeal range*', the scope that our bodily senses allow us, is very limited. Sri Aurobindo says it is '*indigent*'; somebody who is '*indigent*' is very poor, they have next to nothing and live under very restricted, mean, poor circumstances. That is how he sees our possibilities of experience here in the material world. The continents and countries which Aswapati is seeing now extend far beyond the range of our physical senses.

There he could enter, there awhile abide.

First Aswapati just glimpses those wonderful lands, then he sees them more clearly, and now he can actually enter and stay there, abide there for some time.

A voyager upon uncharted routes
Fronting the viewless danger of the Unknown,
Adventuring across enormous realms,
He broke into another Space and Time.

'A *voyager*' is a traveller, a person who is making a journey. Aswapati is a voyager, and he is travelling '*upon uncharted routes*' that have never been mapped; nobody has ever explored those lands and made maps of them, they are '*uncharted*'. He faces the '*danger of the Unknown*'. When you set off into '*uncharted*' territory you do not know what you will meet there, what you will have to face; those dangers are '*viewless*', they cannot be seen in advance. He is setting off, '*adventuring across enormous realms*'; '*realms*' are kingdoms, countries. In order to explore those realms, he has to move into completely new dimensions, different from the space and time which we experience: '*He broke into another Space and Time*'.

What he sees and experiences there is described in Book Two, The Book of the Traveller and the Worlds.

End of Canto Five
End of Book One

Afterword

We have reached the end of Book One of *Savitri*, the Book of Beginnings. Before us lie ten more great steps, leading up the climax of the poem in Book Eleven, the Book of Everlasting Day, which is followed by the Epilogue, Book Twelve, the Return to Earth, which closes Sri Aurobindo's mantric epic with the promise of '*a greater dawn*'.

In Canto Three of Book Seven, the Book of Yoga, Sri Aurobindo speaks of how the self-confident and ignorant mind keeps '*the sacred book*' tied up in '*interpretation's silken strings*'. I hope that this will never happen to *Savitri*. Speaking of the English Bible in the early 17th century, the protestant preacher John Robinson urged his listeners to remember that 'The Lord has yet more Light and Truth to break forth from his Word'. As we grow and develop in soul and spirit the great divine revelations reveal ever deeper and wider significances to light us on our journey.

Whatever I have been able to share of my current understanding of this 'supreme revelation of Sri Aurobindo's vision' is offered in the hope that it may assist others to penetrate deeper into this fathomless Ocean of Gems. In reaching this level of understanding I have been helped above all by Sri Aurobindo's own comments on his poetic masterwork, and those of the Mother; also by the work of the pioneering commentators, Amal Kiran (K.D. Sethna), A.B. Purani, Dr. Prema Nandakumar and M.P. Pandit, whose '*Readings in Savitri*' have helped so many people to take their first steps into the mystery and adventure of *Savitri*. I am also indebted to the illuminating speakers who have shared their insights into and love of the poem with us at Savitri Bhavan over the last 20 years, as well as to the fellow-students with whom I have been privileged to

explore this glorious text, step by hesitant step, in the weekly Savitri Study Circle which has gathered in Auroville every Sunday morning since November 24, 1994, and to the students of the classes on which this book is based.

In 1946 Sri Aurobindo wrote 'A new kind of poetry demands a new mentality in the recipient as well as in the writer' and in the following year he said of 'the fit reader' who would be able to appreciate the special qualities of *Savitri*, that 'he must be open to this kind of poetry, able to see the spiritual vision it conveys, capable too of feeling the overhead touch when it comes.'²² He made it clear that for his poem to become widely appreciated and understood 'there must be a new extension of consciousness and aesthesis to appreciate a new kind of mystic poetry.'²³) He pointed out that it took about 100 years for the work of the English mystic poet William Blake to gain public recognition and added, 'It would not be improbable that there might be a greater time-lag [in the case of *Savitri*], though naturally we hope for better things. For in India at least some understanding or feeling and an audience few and fit may be possible. Perhaps by some miracle there may be before long a larger appreciative audience.'²⁴

This book is offered as a humble contribution to the on-going process of evolving the extension of consciousness which can lead to a greater appreciation and understanding of the new and unique mystic poetry that Sri Aurobindo has given to the world in *Savitri*.

Shraddhavan
December 5, 2014

²²*Letters on Poetry and Art*, CWSA volume 27, p. 288

²³*Ibid.* p.343

²⁴*Ibid.* p.355-56

About the Author

"Shraddhavan" is the Sanskrit name given by the Mother in June 1972 to a young Englishwoman who had left her country, after completing studies in English Language and Literature as well as Library Science, to join the upcoming project of Auroville. Since August 1999 she has been the Project Coordinator of Savitri Bhavan, a centre of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother Studies which is a unit of SAIIER (Sri Aurobindo International Institute of Educational Research). She edits the Bhavan's journal, Invocation: study notes on Savitri and leads study courses on Savitri and The Life Divine. This is her first full-length book.