

**APPRECIATING SRI AUROBINDO'S POEMS:
A SMALL COLLECTION OF INSIGHTFUL OBSERVATIONS
FROM SACAR LEARNERS**

Editor's Note: We present below a few selections from an online course "Poetry of the Future" that has been recently concluded. We hope our readers will enjoy reading these thoughtful and thought-provoking comments and analyses by some of the learners enrolled in the class. For a better reading flow, we have organized the selections according to the poems that are being commented upon by the learners.

Assignment posted by the course facilitator, Larry Seidlitz

Comment on one or two of the assigned poems by Sri Aurobindo. What do you like about it? How does it make you feel or what ideas does it generate? What do you find in the form of a poem that is particularly appealing or effective? In your analysis also discuss how each of the following points contribute (or don't contribute) to the meaning and/or significance conveyed in the poem:

1. Selection of words
2. Use of images
3. The speaker of the poem
4. Use of Rhyme and/or Rhythm

THE BLUE BIRD

I am the bird of God in His blue;
Divinely high and clear
I sing the notes of the sweet and the true
For the god's and the seraph's ear.

I rise like a fire from the mortal's earth
Into a griefless sky
And drop in the suffering soil of his birth
Fire-seeds of ecstasy.

My pinions soar beyond Time and Space
Into unfading Light;
I bring the bliss of the Eternal's face
And the boon of the Spirit's sight.

I measure the worlds with my ruby eyes;
I have perched on Wisdom's tree
Thronged with the blossoms of Paradise
By the streams of Eternity.

Nothing is hid from my burning heart;
My mind is shoreless and still;
My song is rapture's mystic art,
My flight immortal will.

Sri Aurobindo
Collected Poems, CWSA, vol. 2, p. 533

Poem: The Blue Bird
Response by learner, Deepali Prasad

Introduction

Sri Aurobindo's "The Blue Bird" has the rather enviable ability to transcend worlds. In the Indian cultural context birds enjoy a rather exalted place. They are considered as representatives and vehicles for the Gods. The eagle or Garuda for Lord Vishnu, the crow for Saturn and many more. This simple acceptance of the power and position, bestowed upon it by God, is apparent in the very first stanza of the poem:

*"I am the bird of God in His blue
Divinely high and clear
I sing the notes of the sweet and the true
For the gods and the seraph's ear."*

Speaker

Written as a first person, interior monologue the poem soliloquizes the poet's own meditation on the experiences of the Blue Bird. The poet himself remains completely invisible while adopting the persona of the Blue Bird. While the poem is purely descriptive it is richly embellished with the poet's own imagination as well. The sky is "griefless", the soil is "suffering" and the Blue Bird has a "burning heart".

Diction

The choice of words is as wide and expansive as the flight of the Blue Bird whose

*"Pinions soar beyond Time and Space
Into unfading Light."*
It has the ability to

"...Measure the worlds with... ruby eyes"; and

"perch on 'Wisdom's tree."

The Blue Bird is eternal because it brings

*"the bliss of the Eternal's face
and the boon of the Spirit's sight."*

Light, wisdom, bliss and insight would then be the qualities that the Blue Bird has acquired by association.

Rhythm

Sri Aurobindo adheres to a formal arrangement in the rhyme in order to create harmony. The pure rhyming pattern [ab, ab] is identical, with the second line in each quatrain ending on a rising note. This is further reinforced by the meter, which is a loose iambic tetrameter [I think]. But as a variation some of the lines [mostly the second and fourth lines] pack four accents in a very short space as in *'Divinely high and clear'* or *'Into unfading Light'*. To me this appears to give a sense of purposefulness to the bird's flight. The choice of a short meter also implies an uncomplicated yet meaningful symbol, for which the poet would like the reader to impart, his/her own interpretation.

Imagery

"The Blue Bird" is a descriptive poem replete with images both literal and abstract. Sometimes both may appear in the same line as in this case:

*"My pinions soar beyond Time and Space
Into unfading Light."*

It is easy to visualize a bird spread its wings and fly but it is difficult to visualize anything beyond time and space. This then, is an abstraction which produces a feeling of awe in the reader for the special powers of this creature.

Sri Aurobindo's Blue Bird is a mystic who has witnessed all. His freedom is born of true knowledge, "Nothing is hid from my burning heart" and consequently he has a mind that is "shoreless and still". And most of all his, "song is rapture's mystic art" because it is the, "immortal will", that determines his life course and not personal whim.



Photo credit: thundafunda.com/393/images/wallpapers/animals/bright-pink-flowers-tree-with-blue-bird.JPG

Conclusion

I enjoyed the simple delight of the bird's flight in this poem. I have always felt birds are privy to the secrets of both heaven and earth [lucky fellows!]

*"Nothing is hid from my burning heart;
My mind is shoreless and still;"*

...brings out beautifully the power this creature enjoys along the tempering wisdom its observations evoke.

The rhythm comes across as unhurried and even and at the same time captivating.

I found the last two lines particularly meaningful because "*rapture's mystic art*" to me means the original joy all creatures are meant to experience in complete acceptance of the 'immortal will'.

A symbol in poetry is the embodiment of the poet's own thoughts and feelings. Sri Aurobindo, the yogi cannot be separated from the poet. His use of the Blue Bird as a symbol goes far beyond its literary connotation and reflects his own consciousness. The Blue Bird is the epitome of freedom, wisdom and happiness born out of a joining of will, with that of the Eternal's. It has achieved the harmony that is only possible by combining vibrancy with stillness.

Response by course facilitator, Larry

Dear Deepali,

Thank you for your insightful analysis of this wonderful poem - an excellent choice and among his most popular ones. I should have mentioned that when analyzing a poem it is perhaps best to focus first on the meaning and significances in the poem, since at least in most poems this is the central thing, and then complement this focus on meaning by showing how the various forms (rhyme, rhythm, repetitions, sounds, word choices, images, etc.) relate to and highlight these meanings. You have brought out some of the central and important meanings but more peripherally, but I will take credit for not listing the meaning and significances at the top of the list.

Regarding Blue Bird, I think the meter there is iambic tetrameter in the first and third lines but iambic trimeter in the second and fourth. However, there are quite a few substitutions of anapests (short, short, long) for iambs (short, long). I suppose this alteration of the meter accents in a way the flight of the bluebird, a kind of rising and dipping pattern-- faster, then slower, then faster. This significance is perhaps accented in the second stanza where he says in line one "I rise" and in line three "And drop."

Deepali, I agree with you that there is an interesting combination of abstract and concrete terms here. I suppose this is a vehicle Sri Aurobindo uses to invest the images with more abstract meaning, without becoming overly abstract. Even, this alteration might in some way get reflected in the rhythm of the alternating line length. For example, sometimes it seems that the longer lines are more image-laden, and the shorter lines more abstract, though there are variations to this. And sometimes it also seems that longer lines are more movement oriented whereas the shorter lines are more static, an image signifying a state of consciousness.

I thought it might also be useful to highlight a relatively obvious but important characteristic of this poem which is also evident in much of Sri Aurobindo's poetry: the integrality of the spiritual experience and aspiration. For example, in Blue Bird, second stanza, he says,

*"I rise like a fire from the mortal's earth
Into a griefless sky*

*And drop in the suffering soil of his birth
Fire-seeds of ecstasy."*

This refers to the ascent of consciousness towards the Divine and a returning descent of the higher consciousness into the lower physical consciousness--which is perhaps the most characteristic aspect of his Integral Yoga. There is another aspect of integrality, and that is the integral participation of all the different parts of the nature in the realization. Here in this poem he refers specifically to the mind ("*shoreless and still*"), the "*burning heart,*" the "*immortal will,*" and the senses ("*bring the bliss of the Eternal's face / And the boon of the Spirit's sight.*")



Photo credit: www.freedigitalphotos.net/images/Landscapes_g114-Atmosphere_Of_Mist_p15606.html

INVITATION

With wind and the weather beating round me
Up to the hill and the moorland I go.
Who will come with me? Who will climb with me?
Wade through the brook and tramp through the snow?

Not in the petty circle of cities
Cramped by your doors and your walls I dwell;
Over me God is blue in the welkin,
Against me the wind and the storm rebel.

I sport with solitude here in my regions,
Of misadventure have made me a friend.
Who would live largely? Who would live freely?
Here to the wind-swept uplands ascend.

I am the lord of tempest and mountain,
I am the Spirit of freedom and pride.
Stark must he be and a kinsman to danger
Who shares my kingdom and walks at my side.

Poem: Invitation

Response by learner Geetanjali Prabhu

“Invitation” was composed in Alipore Jail in 1908. Here, Sri Aurobindo gives voice to his own inner feelings by inventing a narrator, a first person narrator to be precise. To put the poem in a nutshell, the poet-narrator invites readers to attain an inner freedom that does not depend on any other beyond the Self, an invitation to embrace solitude, and an invitation to experience free and peaceful existence. This poem is better understood in the light of history. As readers it becomes important that we contextualize the poem with a backdrop of the personal life of Sri Aurobindo and collective life of Indians in the bondage under the British rule. Sri Aurobindo had revelatory visions of Krishna while in Alipore Jail, and instead of feeling jailed he miraculously felt deep inner freedom and had the experience that the divine is manifest in one and all. It would not be wrong to say that this period was a turning point in Sri Aurobindo’s life and his life as a seer gradually unfurled to bloom after this testing time in prison.

“Invitation” is a short mystical poem in four lyrical stanzas with the rhyme scheme *abcb*. The poem is an invitation to experience the narrator’s experience of freedom and largesse in existence. The atmosphere that the words create is dreamy, almost fairytale like and unfelt, unknown in reality or not wholly comprehensible to our own, busy self-absorbed mechanical routine of life. The effect of this poem is that one can sense a calling or beckoning and one knows that bright promises are inherent in the call. The reader knows that there are rewards for accepting the invitation.

Getting into the detail of the mystical elements in poetry, Sri Aurobindo elucidates the same in one of his letters with an illustration from his poetry which needs to be essentially understood as one delves into the mysticism inherent in his poetry which nonetheless speaks for itself: “A mystic poem may explain itself or a general idea may emerge from it, but it is the vision that is important or what one can get from it by intuitive feeling, not the explanation or idea; *Thought the Paraclete* is a vision or revelation of an ascent through spiritual planes, but gives no names and no photographic description of the planes crossed.” (Life-Literature-Yoga: Some Letters of Sri Aurobindo, 1967, pp. 149-50)

In the first stanza of “Invitation” we can sense that the geo-physical words employed by the poet to describe the journey are very English, and we can attribute this to Sri Aurobindo’s European residence and education; the word “moorlands” which is indicative of the uncultivated countryside and the idea of “*Wade through the brook and tramp to the snow*” create an English influence upon the Indian emotion of the up-climb. The poet wants others to be a party to the ascension and extends an invitation in verse when he says “*Who will come with me? Who will climb with me?*” It is noteworthy that both of the action words or verbs in this line begin with the “c” sound.

The first two stanzas are particularly loaded with a Wordsworth-ian sort of romanticism – a love for nature and the countryside, which are in stark contrast to the hustle-bustle of city life. In this poem, Sri Aurobindo goes ahead to move us from the outer landscape to the inner nature and a state of desirable freedom. The poet-narrator makes his carefree state of existence very clear by contrasting it with city life and its limitedness when he says “*Not in the petty circles of cities /*

Cramped by your doors and your walls I dwell;” The phrase “*petty circle of cities*” has a repetition of the sounds of “t” and “c” and the phrase amounts to concluding that city life is binding and circular or rather limited. The next line opens with the “c” and the poet says that he is beyond the cramped doors and walls, the sounds of “d” repeats in this line in the words “doors” and “dwell”. A note of distinction between the poet and the drabness of city life is made more obvious and emphatic when the poet narrator says “your doors” and “your walls”. He sees himself as distinct and there is a sort of psychoanalytic “otherness” that the poet-narrator establishes by emphasizing on the word “your”. He describes his natural state of existence when he says “*Over me God is blue in the welkin/ Against me the wind and the storm rebel.*” The choice of the literary word “welkin” for sky, as being the abode of God, literally transforms the setting of the poem from the mundane to the celestial spheres.

There is an aura of mystery when the poet-narrator says that he plays with solitude in his own region and that he has befriended misadventure. Perhaps he implies that to those who are trapped in the humdrum of life his situation would translate to a misadventure, but for him there is a largesse and freedom in his situation. Once again, there is a repetition as in the first stanza, the poet further extends the invitation in the following lines

*“Who would live largely? Who would live freely?
Here to the wind-swept uplands ascend.”*

Perhaps the word “wind-swept” is indicative of certain calmness devoid of turmoil.

In the last stanza the poet-narrator reveals the prominent attributes of his entity and also enlists the essential pre-requisites for those who wish to accept his invitation. He calls himself the lord of the tempest and the mountain and says that he is “*the Spirit of freedom and pride*”. The persona that Sri Aurobindo creates is powerful and embodies the spirit of freedom and pride; here the spirit is personified with the capitalization of the “s”. The word pride in association with freedom should not be read in a derogatory manner but rather as a dimension of self respect. Pride is sinful in the English context but here the narrator is perhaps trying to convey an Indian expression like ‘*atma-samman*’ in the foreign language, and has few words as equal substitutes. In the end the poet says that the ones who accept the invitation must be “*stark*” and “*a kinsman to danger*” indicative of the strength required to accept the invitation and to ascend upwards to share the poet-narrator’s experience.

Sri Aurobindo’s short poems can awaken one to the true love of poetry and this little poem is proof enough to that effect.

Response by course facilitator, Larry

Dear Geetanjali,

I enjoyed the essay very much, I think you captured well the approach that I have advocated in focusing on meaning and then drawing this out further through the connections between meaning and forms in the poem. I must add that I recently heard a remarkable talk in the Ashram that referred to this poem as well as to other of Sri Aurobindo's literary writings made during this period. The main point of the talk was the close connection between Sri Aurobindo's sadhana, that is, the *practice* of his yoga, and his literary work. In effect, his writing was a part of his practice of sadhana. Part of this practice had to do with receiving inspiration or higher

knowledge in word-form, and part of it was expressing his inner visions in his poetry, two things which are related. Anyway, in the context of this particular poem, the speaker argued that the images in this poem were not simply literary devices or symbols in the conventional sense, but things actually seen by him which no doubt were imaging a profounder knowledge and reality. I understand that this talk is going to be published soon in the journal Shraddha, and you may find it interesting.

Response by learner Makuteswara Kuppuswamy

I would like to add the following comment regarding the poem "Invitation":

Written in prison when he was alone in solitary confinement where he practiced Yoga and had the experience of God. This is reflected in the image of sweeping winds, both abstract and visual in nature.

By '*I am the lord of tempest*' he refers to God. Wind and storm convey the movement and energy; though the stormy wind is invisible the ravaging effects can be visualized. It is the God as Lord of tempest inviting him to join Him in the wonderful wind-swept uplands. Besides, the strong winds also denote unrestrained freedom and display of command that he felt not as a prisoner but as a free bird.

Response by course facilitator, Larry

Dear Kuppuswamy,

Yes, this is a good point. Sri Aurobindo, or let us say the narrator or speaker of the poem, seems to be identifying with this Spirit of freedom and pride. One of the interesting things about poetry is that the author can take different voices, different perspectives. She can be a character in the poem seeing everything from that character's perspective, or she can be an impersonal witness to the events, or even a spirit or God.

Another thought comes to me about Alipore, and that is that Sri Aurobindo has said that Swami Vivekananda had come to him in jail and showed to him the overhead planes of consciousness intervening between the human mind and the Supermind. So this upward ascent with the wind and weather beating round him might also represent something of this ascension of consciousness through these higher spiritual planes of consciousness that he was traversing, probably for the first time.

Response by learner Geetanjali Prabhu

It feels good to read an ongoing dialogue here. The "spiritual transmutation" that goes along with poetry is food for thought. It was interesting to know that Swami Vivekananda enlightened Sri Aurobindo by the spirit. The lives of the great are indeed so deep and often interestingly mysterious.



Worship

Photo credit: Eeshaan Mahesh (www.binduartaaura.com)

WHO

In the blue of the sky, in the green of the forest,
Whose is the hand that has painted the glow?
When the winds were asleep in the womb of the ether,
Who was it roused them and bade them to blow?

He is lost in the heart, in the cavern of Nature,
He is found in the brain where He builds up the thought:
In the pattern and bloom of the flowers He is woven,
In the luminous net of the stars He is caught.

In the strength of a man, in the beauty of woman,
In the laugh of a boy, in the blush of a girl;
The hand that sent Jupiter spinning through heaven,
Spends all its cunning to fashion a curl.

These are His works and His veils and His shadows;
But where is He then? by what name is He known?
Is He Brahma or Vishnu? a man or a woman?
Bodied or bodiless? twin or alone?

We have love for a boy who is dark and resplendent,
A woman is lord of us, naked and fierce.
We have seen Him a-muse on the snow of the mountains,
We have watched Him at work in the heart of the spheres.

We will tell the whole world of His ways and His cunning:
He has rapture of torture and passion and pain;
He delights in our sorrow and drives us to weeping,
Then lures with His joy and His beauty again.

All music is only the sound of His laughter,
All beauty the smile of His passionate bliss;
Our lives are His heart-beats, our rapture the bridal
Of Radha and Krishna, our love is their kiss.

He is strength that is loud in the blare of the trumpets,
And He rides in the car and He strikes in the spears;
He slays without stint and is full of compassion;
He wars for the world and its ultimate years.

In the sweep of the worlds, in the surge of the ages,
Ineffable, mighty, majestic and pure,
Beyond the last pinnacle seized by the thinker
He is throned in His seats that for ever endure.

The Master of man and his infinite Lover,
He is close to our hearts, had we vision to see;
We are blind with our pride and the pomp of our passions,
We are bound in our thoughts where we hold ourselves free.

It is He in the sun who is ageless and deathless,
And into the midnight His shadow is thrown;
When darkness was blind and engulfed within darkness,
He was seated within it immense and alone.

Sri Aurobindo

Collected Poems, CWSA, vol. 2, pp. 201-203

Poem: Who

Response by learner Geetanjali Prabhu

The next poem for our reading "Who" presents somewhat a continuum of thought that is built in "Invitation". Perhaps it was that phase in Sri Aurobindo's life where many revelations and mysteries stood resolved before the eye of the mind and therefore stand out in his poetry. The title has no question mark but has the quality of a riddle. Sri Aurobindo does not merely raise questions but intentionally asks questions that are in themselves suggestive of answers. The poem creates many series of images, those which appear manifest before the eyes ("*blue of the sky*", "*green of the forest*") and those which are invisible ("*He is lost in the heart*", "*He is found in the*

brain where He builds up the thought) . The many images only point to the One who is All in the Aurobindonian thought.

Some of Sri Aurobindo's phraseology is stark and unique to my understanding, for instance, just look at the phrase "*womb of the ether*", it is such a deep, beautiful and profound expression if one actually gives it a thought. It reminds me of the classical term in Sanskrit "*Hiranyagarbha*". Today's learners struggle with limited powers of language. Reading Sri Aurobindo I am awed by the easy and natural flow of Indian concepts into a foreign language, I guess for a linguist Sri Aurobindo, it is but a natural outburst rather than a studied effort.

While I think it is a particularly Indian thought to conceive of the world as the cosmic dance of Shiva or alternatively as the conjugal love of Radha-Krishna, and such a thought may not allow a poem to make its way into the English literary canon which claims to be secular, I personally admire such a thought because English is the only language that I am comfortable with and it is only in English that I understand India and Indian-ness. In the seventh stanza the poet says,

*"Our lives are His heart-beats, our rapture the bridal
Of Radha and Krishna, our love is their kiss".*

It is once again a rather eastern concept to imagine the divine as a slayer, and perhaps in the 'sensitive', 'secular' and 'sensational' times that we live, it becomes very important to understand that the divine is a metaphorical slayer of the demons within and not to misunderstand or associate the divine with the tormentor as a Lucifer or a Mephistophilis spreading hell-fire. This is evident in the eighth stanza:

*"And He rides in the car and He strikes in the spears;
He slays without stint and is full of compassion;
He wars for the world and its ultimate years."*

Car is perhaps the "rath" in Hindi or Sanskrit (and of course not the automobile) wherein the idol presides over during festivals in any town!

Examining the last stanza...

*"It is He in the sun who is ageless and deathless,
And into the midnight His shadow is thrown;
When darkness was blind and engulfed within darkness,
He was seated within it immense and alone."*

I begin to feel as if this is the description of a scene before the world was manifest, a pre-creation sort of idea or thought.

Response by course facilitator, Larry

Dear Geetanjali,

You have nicely brought out some of the interesting images of the poem "Who." Yes, that "womb of the ether" phrase is quite striking, and I think you are right that it suggests Hiranyagarbha, though to a westerner it might suggest simply outer space. The vast, cold, empty

vacuum of space is more vivid in our imagination. One of the striking things about the poem is its personification of the Divine. Here Sri Aurobindo emphasizes the Divine as a being, not simply as a truth or an ideal, and he specifically references various Hindu gods through whom He comes into relation with us.

Response by learner Biswajit Banerjee

The poem “Who” is indescribably sweet...every word, every phrase, every sentence, every stanza and the poem as a whole resonate with Godly energy. It is such a smooth read, the words just fall into the reader’s being without any effort on her part.

As a comprehensive analysis is beyond the scope of this discussion, I shall very briefly talk about only a few of the stanzas that truly appealed to me.

*“In the blue of the sky, in the green of the forest,
Whose is the hand that has painted the glow?
When the winds were asleep in the womb of the ether,
Who was it roused them and bade them to blow?”*

What control of language! Such control cannot be accomplished by the intellect. This is the first stanza and even before we are into the heart of this beautiful poem, the soul-force of the poet shows up. The very first words connect us to the Divine Force working within and without our beings. The Master employs just a few words to express the workings of the Infinite Being.

*“These are his works and His veils and His shadows;
But where is He then? By what name is He known?
Is He Brahma or Vishnu? a man or a woman?
Bodied or bodiless? twin or alone?”*

Note the words “These are his works and His veils and His shadows” – these words clearly explain that the things surrounding us – whether beautiful or ugly, whether bright or dark, whether explicable or inexplicable – are not only the Divine’s expressions but also his veils. In other words, the Brahman’s creations are also serving as cover-ups for the Brahman. And this is really true. Most of us get caught up in the material web of life and hardly think about the Brahman, let alone seeking Him.

The last line of this stanza is equally interesting. It mentions, although doesn’t make a clear statement, on the ‘Sakara’ and ‘Nirakara’ forms of the Divine. The words ‘twin and alone’ point at the dual possibilities of the Brahman being a Single Soul or an agglomeration of multiple atomic souls.

*“We will tell the whole world of His ways and His cunning:
He has rapture of torture and passion and pain;
He delights in our sorrow and drives us to weeping;
Then lures with His joy and His beauty again.”*

A very interesting stanza – Sri Aurobindo describes the sadistic side of God. And that makes it a very bold expression as well. Going by a simple logic, if God created all that we know or do not know just for reasons of pure pleasure, then sorrow which happens to be a very important

ingredient of his creation was also made a part of our world so that He could have pleasure. It is not a criticism of God because He made sorrow a part of our lives, it just raises a question a common man might ask when faced with an unpleasant situation – “Why should I have to suffer, couldn’t God have arranged things in a manner so that I, and for that purpose others, wouldn’t have to suffer?” It cannot be expected of a common man to know the purpose of keeping sorrow in the scheme of things...only a realized soul would know that. Till one accomplishes such spiritual quality so as not be moved no matter what is the intensity of happiness or sorrow, one will certainly not be willing to tread through sorrow. So for an unrealized soul the pleasure of God in making others weep is nothing short of pure sadism.

*“All music is only the sound of His laughter,
All beauty the smile of His passionate bliss;
Our lives are His heart-beats, our rapture the bridal
Of Radha and Krishna, our love is their kiss.”*

I just mention this stanza for its sheer beauty. Its beatific intonations can drive one to near ecstasy.

*“He is strength that is loud in the blare of the trumpets,
And He rides in the car and He strikes in the spears;
He stays without stint and is full of compassion;
He wars for the world and its ultimate years.”*

It shows the dual nature of God, He can live through diametrically opposite attributes – hardness and softness, bitterness and sweetness, cruelty and compassion, hate and love – God is capable of harmonizing such opposites. I would like to particularly stress on the last sentence of this stanza viz. “He wars for the world and its ultimate years” – this perhaps suggests the scheme of the Divinity wherein consciousness progressively moves towards super-consciousness, an end that will be reached in the ultimate years of evolution.

*“It is He in the sun who is ageless and deathless,
And into the midnight His shadow is thrown;
When darkness was blind and engulfed within darkness,
He was seated within it immense and alone.”*

The last stanza of the poem...it describes the infinity of the Supreme Brahman. He is beyond time and space, beyond the measurements in the physical or ethereal scales, beyond the deepest of the depths, and beyond the laws of lights and shadows. He is immense and complete.

I repeat – “Who” shows what soul-force can do. Sri Aurobindo has mentioned in ‘The Essence of Poetry’ that the power of soul force can bring poetry close to the realms of mantra. ‘Who’ is very close to being a mantra...a true masterpiece of the Master.

Response by course facilitator, Larry

Dear Biswajit,

Thanks for your interesting comments on the poem. This is surely one of Sri Aurobindo's best-loved short poems. It certainly does lead us directly into the mysteries of existence in such a delightful and apparently simple way--the way of the soul, I suppose. As you say, he does not really solve the riddle of pain and suffering, but merely raises the question that many people do. But also, as you say, it is bold that he puts God behind that side too, which many religionists would not dare. Perhaps he also gives some hints about the solution to this riddle, in lines which you also quoted. The following lines seem to bear on it:

*"It is He in the sun who is ageless and deathless,
And into the midnight His shadow is thrown;"*

...as it suggests that darkness is his shadow, the absence or inverse reflection of his ageless and deathless light.

The word shadow and its idea is also a repetition of the earlier line:

"These are his works and His veils and His shadows;"

...again suggesting this notion that darkness is an inverse of the light He is.

Also the other stanza you mentioned also bears on it:

*"He is strength that is loud in the blare of the trumpets,
And He rides in the car and He strikes in the spears;
He stays without stint and is full of compassion;
He wars for the world and its ultimate years."*

These lines put Him in the battle for the establishment of Truth, and in this battle death and pain are natural consequences. But why does the establishment of Truth have to be a battle? Again he gives a clue in these lines:

*"When darkness was blind and engulfed within darkness,
He was seated within it immense and alone."*

These lines suggest the beginning of the universe, and the long evolutionary growth of light and consciousness out of the inconscience. If we also recall that darkness is simply His shadow or a covering over Him, it also gives us a deeper insight into this whole evolutionary journey.

So much philosophy is here, yet in a deceptively simple and delightful expression. I appreciate you bringing out these gems for our consideration.



Godhead

Photo credit: <http://www.blossomlikeaflower.com/2008/04/godhead.html>

A GOD'S LABOUR

I have gathered my dreams in a silver air
Between the gold and the blue
And wrapped them softly and left them there,
My jewelled dreams of you.

I had hoped to build a rainbow bridge
Marrying the soil to the sky
And sow in this dancing planet midge
The moods of infinity.

But too bright were our heavens, too far away,
Too frail their ethereal stuff;
Too splendid and sudden our light could not stay;
The roots were not deep enough.

He who would bring the heavens here
Must descend himself into clay
And the burden of earthly nature bear
And tread the dolorous way.

Coercing my godhead I have come down
Here on the sordid earth,
Ignorant, labouring, human grown
Twixt the gates of death and birth.

I have been digging deep and long
Mid a horror of filth and mire
A bed for the golden river's song,
A home for the deathless fire.

I have laboured and suffered in Matter's night
To bring the fire to man;
But the hate of hell and human spite
Are my meed since the world began.

For man's mind is the dupe of his animal self;
Hoping its lusts to win,
He harbours within him a grisly Elf
Enamoured of sorrow and sin.

The grey Elf shudders from heaven's flame
And from all things glad and pure;
Only by pleasure and passion and pain
His drama can endure.

All around is darkness and strife;
For the lamps that men call suns
Are but halfway gleams on this stumbling life
Cast by the Undying Ones.

Man lights his little torches of hope
That lead to a failing edge;
A fragment of Truth is his widest scope,
An inn his pilgrimage.

The Truth of truths men fear and deny,
The Light of lights they refuse;
To ignorant gods they lift their cry
Or a demon altar choose.

All that was found must again be sought,
Each enemy slain revives,
Each battle for ever is fought and refought
Through vistas of fruitless lives.

My gaping wounds are a thousand and one
And the Titan kings assail,
But I cannot rest till my task is done
And wrought the eternal will.

How they mock and sneer, both devils and men!
"Thy hope is Chimera's head
Painting the sky with its fiery stain;
Thou shalt fall and thy work lie dead.

"Who art thou that babblest of heavenly ease
And joy and golden room
To us who are waifs on inconscient seas

And bound to life's iron doom?

"This earth is ours, a field of Night
For our petty flickering fires.
How shall it brook the sacred Light
Or suffer a god's desires?"

"Come, let us slay him and end his course!
Then shall our hearts have release
From the burden and call of his glory and force
And the curb of his wide white peace."

But the god is there in my mortal breast
Who wrestles with error and fate
And tramples a road through mire and waste
For the nameless Immaculate.

A voice cried, "Go where none have gone!
Dig deeper, deeper yet
Till thou reach the grim foundation stone
And knock at the keyless gate."

I saw that a falsehood was planted deep
At the very root of things
Where the grey Sphinx guards God's riddle sleep
On the Dragon's outspread wings.

I left the surface gods of mind
And life's unsatisfied seas
And plunged through the body's alleys blind
To the nether mysteries.

I have delved through the dumb Earth's dreadful heart
And heard her black mass' bell.
I have seen the source whence her agonies part
And the inner reason of hell.

Above me the dragon murmurs moan
And the goblin voices flit;
I have pierced the Void where Thought was born,
I have walked in the bottomless pit.

On a desperate stair my feet have trod
Armoured with boundless peace,
Bringing the fires of the splendour of God
Into the human abyss.

He who I am was with me still;

All veils are breaking now.
I have heard His voice and borne His will
On my vast untroubled brow.

The gulf twixt the depths and the heights is bridged
And the golden waters pour
Down the sapphire mountain rainbow-ridged
And glimmer from shore to shore.

Heaven's fire is lit in the breast of the earth
And the undying suns here burn;
Through a wonder cleft in the bounds of birth
The incarnate spirits yearn

Like flames to the kingdoms of Truth and Bliss:
Down a gold-red stair-way wend
The radiant children of Paradise
Clarioning darkness's end.

A little more and the new life's doors
Shall be carved in silver light
With its aureate roof and mosaic floors
In a great world bare and bright.

I shall leave my dreams in their argent air,
For in a raiment of gold and blue
There shall move on the earth embodied and fair
The living truth of you.

Sri Aurobindo

Collected Poems, CWSA vol. 2, pp. 534-538

Poem: A God's Labour

Response by learner Geetanjali Prabhu

"A God's Labour" is a beautiful poem, generally Indian in its theme and particularly Aurobindonian. The poem runs in thirty one lyrical stanzas, and the rhyme scheme is strictly maintained. It brings out to an extent the secret path that yogis and tapasvis tread.

On reading the first stanza, the first question that arose in my mind is about the identity of "I" and "you". Reading the poem revealed them as the poet-narrator and God. This poem is about the efforts involved in manifesting divinity on earth itself, and this agenda is conveyed in the first two stanzas itself. I particularly found the expression "Marrying the soil to the sky" so very potent and lending the poem to a metaphysical analysis.

The third stanza which begins with a conjunction "But" itself introduces the detrimental impediments with regard to the agenda mentioned.

*"But too bright were our heavens, too far away,
Too frail their ethereal stuff;
Too splendid and sudden our light could not stay;
The roots were not deep enough."*

The fourth stanza brings the hope of resolution, when the poet-narrator says that God himself must descend as human ("into clay") to achieve this divine end. I think it is a very Indian idea to imagine that human body is a material one and it is the spirit that adds divinity to the same. The poet-narrator is clear that being on earth is no pleasurable experience when he says:

*"He who would bring the heavens here
Must descend himself into clay
And the burden of earthly nature bear
And tread the dolorous way."*

Further in the poem poet-narrator assumes a Prometheus like persona, and I see a many journeyed voice speaking of its myriad experience and hardships along the path of "Marrying the path to the sky". As I see it, there is a very powerful imagery that builds in the poem and the "grey Elf" is apparently indicative of the animalistic tendencies in human life. Even the bad and the ugly part of existence attain a beautiful description in the hands of a great literary master. While the concept of eulogizing something unworthy which is perhaps a part of human nature and growth, is brought out in...

*"The Truth of truths men fear and deny,
The Light of lights they refuse;
To ignorant gods they lift their cry
Or a demon altar choose."*

...the idea of death and rebirth is captured in...

*"Each battle for ever is fought and refought
Through vistas of fruitless lives."*

...and the mirage that this world is is brought out in the lines...

*"I saw that a falsehood was planted deep
At the very root of things."*

...but before that what keeps the poet-narrator going is the voice which said:

*"A voice cried, "Go where none have gone!
Dig deeper, deeper yet
Till thou reach the grim foundation stone
And Knock at the keyless gate." "*

While the narrator vividly describes his mysterious journey very vividly he also reveals that

*"Heaven's fire is lit in the breast of the earth
And the undying suns here burn."*

...which is perhaps a metaphysical discovery. Finally, the fruits of the "Labour" are captured in last two stanzas that almost crown the whole poem when the poet narrator concludes:

*"There shall move on the earth embodied and fair
The living truth of you."*

By the way, I am wondering why the "you" begin with the small letter "y" and not the capital one since it refers to God. Perhaps what the writer tells us about his work is the most important key, but then even what the text offers to us as meaning is not less valuable.

Response by course facilitator, Larry

Dear Geetanjali,

I was intrigued by your question about the lower case "you." Indeed, he uses the upper case in some places (I have heard His voice and borne His will). It made me think of an alternative interpretation. Perhaps it is not God, but mankind, or a representative individual of mankind. The idea here is that each of us has a true, divine self. He has dreamed of a perfected humanity, a divinised humanity. These are his jewelled dreams of you. He uses this "you" again only in the last stanza, the last lines:

*"There shall move on the earth embodied and fair
The living truth of you."*

That is, the divinised man/woman shall walk on earth.

Response by learner Geetanjali Prabhu

Thank you Larry, that is right, the "you" could perhaps imply the divinised man/woman on earth.