

JUNGIAN LIGHTS ON SRI AUROBINDO'S SAVITRI:
A MYTH FOR OUR TIME

RUNNING HEAD: Lights on Savitri

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ABSTRACT

Sri Aurobindo was a master yogi and visionary and wrote brilliantly in various areas of culture. He considered himself to be primarily a poet by vocation. His poetry found its apotheosis in the epic poem Savitri, a work in excess of 23,000 lines. The principal theme involves the heroine, Savitri's, descent into the realm of the Lord of Death in order to release her mate, Satyavan, and to return together with him into life. The poem, in fact, is about the essential nature of many aspects of spiritual, psychological and even physical realities. It is a symbolic myth and mantra reflecting Sri Aurobindo's own felt-experience and understanding. It is his magnum opus and the most complete expression of his worldview and vision. According to him, as a mantra, it has the capacity of transforming the individual's inner consciousness. As a symbol, it represents the truth behind what is represented in the poem -- the release of the truth of being from the clutches of death into life. Savitri is a meaningful answer to the cry for a guiding myth or worldview that can be heard behind the chaotic noise of the contemporary world.

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Introduction

Sri Aurobindo was born in 1872 in Calcutta and educated in England between the ages of seven and twenty, at which time he returned to his native country, India. He was a principal participant in the revolution that liberated India from British rule and is considered to be a national hero. He had wide-ranging cultural interests and wrote with breathtaking insights in several different areas. Culturally, he was primarily a poet, with his poetry finding its apotheosis in Savitri, an epic poem, which he wrote and re-wrote over many years. Sri Aurobindo was also a master yogi and seer and presented the world with an unparalleled vision for individual and world transformation based on spiritual principles. On his own account, his vision finds its most complete expression in the above-mentioned poem. Sri Aurobindo's spiritual collaborator, the Mother, actively participated in his work and contributed to it, what might be called, an insistence for the material realization of his vision. She brought complementary feminine values, reflected in Sri Aurobindo's vision, to his masculine emphasis.

Sri Aurobindo's work is becoming more accessible to the Western mind, which is growing increasingly intuitive and open to ideas from the East. His Cambridge education and knowledge of English culture permeate his writings, including Savitri making his work attractive to Westerners. He was a consummate master of written English, imbuing it with great power and beauty. Savitri is a symbolic myth and *mantric* poem that can give people direct felt-experience and imagery of spiritualized energy that many are beginning to realize is necessary for the redemption of contemporary life.

The Need for a Vision and the Cry for Myth

My intention here is to briefly reflect upon Sri Aurobindo's *magnum opus*, *Savitri*, which he himself declared was both a legend and a symbol (Sri Aurobindo, 1970b). By legend is meant a story that, in this case, finds its origins in the *Vedas*, India's source scriptures, and which later was given form as a human tale in the *Mahabharata*. As symbol, Sri Aurobindo's rendition penetrates to the truth behind and represented by the story. *Savitri* is, in fact, a great mythic poem and an archetypal expression of what is involved in humankind's potential self-fulfillment. It consists of underlying behavior patterns for a spiritually individuated life. The Mother, Sri Aurobindo's spiritual collaborator, goes so far as to contend that "it is the prophetic history of the earth, embodying in itself the fulfillment of man's life on earth" (reported in Purani, 1967, p. 2).

The following lines from the poem are indicative of the scope and beauty of Sri Aurobindo's vision:

*O Sun-Word, Thou shalt raise the earth-soul to Light
And bring down God into the lives of men;
Earth shall be my work-chamber and my house
My garden of life to plant a seed divine.
The mind of earth shall be a home of light,
The life of earth a tree growing towards heaven,
The body of earth a tabernacle of God. (Book XI, Canto
one, p. 699)*

In a letter to a young man, the eminent psychologist C. G. Jung expressed similar sentiments. In it, he wrote: "One must be able to suffer God. That is the supreme task for the seeker of ideas. He must be the advocate of the earth. God will take care of himself. My principle is: *Deus et homine*. God needs man in order to become conscious just as he needs limitation in time and space. Let us therefore be for him limitation in time and space, an earthly tabernacle" (quoted in Adler & Jaffé, 1973, p. 65). It is as if Sri Aurobindo depicts a divine fiat and Jung, the necessary human response for its fulfillment.

According to Jung, the appropriate myth today for contemporary individuals is the myth of consciousness. This ultimately involves becoming conscious of all psychological opposites, including the masculine and feminine principles, good and evil and their reconciling synthesis. He described the process in his great work, the *Mysterium Coniunctionis* (Jung, 1974). It is noteworthy that the opposites referred to are not those of the personal complex-ridden psyche, nor only between the ego and non-ego or the Self, but the opposites in the godhead itself. Sri Aurobindo's poem *Savitri* is a poetic rendition of this very realization.

Savitri as Legend and Symbol

Briefly, the legend of *Savitri* involves a childless king, Aswapathy, propitiating the Mother of the universe for a son. She grants him his boon and the additional boon of a daughter, who is a portion of Herself. As the tale unfolds, his daughter, Savitri, after a long search, finds her mate in Satyavan, the son of a dispossessed king, Dyumatsena. After one year together, Satyavan dies, as prophesied. Savitri then accompanies the Lord of Death to His realm and persuades him to allow her to return to life with her beloved.

According to Sri Aurobindo (1972), as a symbol, the poem revolves around the following archetypal phenomena. King Aswapathy represents human aspiration for the realization of a divine life. Savitri is the embodiment of a portion of the universal Mother, whose purpose for incarnation is to enable humankind to fulfill its prayers. She represents the Divine Word, who is born to save. Satyavan represents the soul of which the essence is "the divine truth of being" (p. 265). Dyumatsena symbolizes the Divine Mind, which has here fallen blind, losing not only its vision but its natural right to its heavenly kingdom.

Sri Aurobindo bases his symbolic rendition of *Savitri* on his own felt-experience, vision and understanding. The nature of the symbol for him is essentially the same as it is for Jung. The latter notes that it is a “sensuously perceptible expression of an inner experience,” based on the transcendent function involving the reconciliation of opposites (Adler & Jaffé, 1973, p. 269). He describes it as a “libido analogue” that effectively canalizes instinctual energy into new form (Jung, 1967/1975, p. 48). Likewise, Campbell defines the symbol as “an energy evoking and directing agent” (1969/1990, p. 178). He approvingly quotes Thomas Merton, who observes that the “true symbol” “awakens ... consciousness to a new awareness of the inner meaning of life and of reality by way of affective relationship to one’s “deepest self” (quoted in Campbell, 1972/1973, p. 265). The true symbol, in other words, is a vehicle for the spiritual transformation of consciousness.

The Cry for Myth in the Contemporary World

The existentialist psychologist, Rollo May (1991), wrote a book entitled The Cry for Myth where he expressed his conviction in the [urgent] need for myth in our day. Living myth, according to both him and Campbell (1975), contribute to a sense of individual and communal identity, as well as provide the foundation for a moral order. In addition, they each contend, myth can awaken consciousness to the mystery of being or the *mysterium tremendum et fascinens* of the existential nature of the universe.

Sri Aurobindo’s poem *Savitri* fulfills all these requirements for the new age that is in the process of being born. The poem is, in fact, a dialogue between a highly individuated individual and the archetypal powers of the unconscious, fulfilling in a superlative fashion Jung’s appeal for the need, today, for an active dialogue between the conscious and the

unconscious. The result is a symbolic myth that speaks directly to what Sri Aurobindo referred to as the “Cosmic Self,” that is the individual’s innermost being and the “general mind of man” (1970b, p. 800).

Campbell (1973) likens mythologies and religions to great poems. The poet, according to Robert Graves (1978), was originally a priest and seer, at least in the Celtic tradition. This is also true of other traditions including the Hindu tradition, dating back to the time of the mantras of the Vedic cycle, some three to seven thousand years ago and perhaps beyond. Sri Aurobindo is a contemporary poet-seer and *Savitri* a high order mantric poem. The mantra consists of words of power that find their source deep within, while being “framed in the heart” (Sri Aurobindo, quoted in Pandit, 1967/1970/1972, p. 35). According to Sri Aurobindo, its purpose is to “create vibrations in the inner consciousness” that encourage the realization of what the mantra symbolizes (p. 35). *Savitri*, in other words, is not only a visionary poem, but its mantric quality renders it a supreme vehicle for the transformation of consciousness and for a life organized around the Self.

Perhaps it is not correct to say that there is no coalescing myth or worldview that provides a focus for life today. But, if there is, it is a narrow one organized around materialistic science, technology, consumerism and the profit motive, somewhat modified by humanistic concerns. Moreover, as the industrial age gives way to the information age and the modern mind gives way to post-modernism, a centerless, open-ended relativistic world without reference to any authority is growing, where even this focus is being increasingly subjected to narcissistic individualism and the will to power. This comes along with the quantification of life, social isolation, mass-mindedness and alienation from the instincts and the power of symbols. It

also encourages compartmentalization in both individual life and the life of the culture, where the left hand doesn't know or even care what the right hand is doing. Jung's observation that everywhere one hears the cry for a *Weltanschauung* (1967/1975, p. 337), that is a meaningful worldview or philosophy of life, is more relevant today than ever.

When a people's myth breaks down, life becomes fragmented and disoriented. This has always been the case, whether it be in the second and third century classical Greece, Egypt of three thousand BC or the Hebrew world of Isaiah. During the breakdown of classical Greece, Lucretius wrote that he could see "aching hearts in every home ...forced to vent themselves in recalcitrant repining" (quoted in May, 1991, p. 16). In Proverbs 29:18, we are warned that when there is no vision, people destroy themselves. It is not difficult for sensitive individuals to relate to both these observations today. Increasingly, people find life meaningless and without purpose, while defending themselves in all manner of ways, whether it be through mindless consumerism, obsessive involvement with new technology, or through excessive use of alcohol and drugs, whether legal or illicit. Add to this a popular culture of movies, music, television programs, video games, and possibilities on the internet that generally appeal to the lowest common denominator, while often celebrating destructive tendencies and shadow qualities, and the situation looks anything but hopeful.

People at all times have had a coalescing worldview that gives meaning to existence and focus to all activities of life and social patterns. At least, this is the case in normal times when society is functioning creatively and productively in tune with its ideals. The most recent period in Western consciousness of an integrated worldview dates back to the middle ages, when all life and art was organized around a Christian conception of life based on a

geocentric universe. There was, however, considerable repression, which exploded with the Renaissance, the period when there was a creative shift in consciousness towards more direct concern and involvement with life in this world, along with the exaltation of the human ego. This coincided with a heliocentric conception of the universe and the beginnings of the development of the scientific mind and positivism or objective reason.

But today, not only has our thinking turned more subjective but science has given us a new view of the reality of the physical universe. Now the sun itself is perceived as but a star amongst billions of stars, and our universe a part of a galaxy of stars and planets, amongst millions of galaxies. Meanwhile, leading physicists have come to regard physical reality to be of a unitary nature. In psychology, C.G. Jung (1967/1975) has given evidence for the unitary nature of all reality, both physical and spiritual, in his conception of a *unus mundus*.

The chaos of the present post-modern condition is giving birth to a deep-seated yearning for direction and purpose, integrated around a spiritual center and wholeness. There is a cry for a guiding myth and an integral *weltanschauung* that is in harmony with the most contemporary view of reality, and that does not repress life but fulfills it in all its multifacetedness. There is, in addition, growing awareness, especially among women, of a need for a re-evaluation of the feminine, which in some quarters is acknowledged as a need for a return of the Goddess. As a mythic poem of the Goddess as heroine, who assimilates death in order to release the soul and truth of being into life, Sri Aurobindo's *Savitri* is a remarkable response to all these aspirations. It is a myth for our time.

Sri Aurobindo's epic poem, Savitri, is a symbolic myth that responds to a deeply felt need in the contemporary mind. Not only does it represent a world-view that is in harmony with the most recent understanding of scientific reality but, as a symbol, it penetrates to the essential truth of that reality. It concomitantly describes what is involved in the fulfillment of a spiritually individuated life. This is the goal of Jung's myth of consciousness for our time. Not only is Savitri a vision for individual and collective self-fulfillment but, as a mantra, it has a directly transformative effect on the inner consciousness. Such a magnificent poem calls for intelligent reflection.

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