

SRI AUROBINDO'S THEORY OF POETRY: SEARCHING FOR A COMPLETE MANIFESTO

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The Future Poetry was a silent revolution between 1917 and 1920 amidst the noise of loudly publicized modern poetic theories in favour of intellectual poetry. It was just the time when people in Europe and America were listening to T.S. Eliot's impersonal theory of poetry with great attention. In a little known corner of the globe and in a less known journal, Sri Aurobindo was then busy preparing the passage for man to move up to a new species. In the years between 1914 and 1921, he was absorbed in mighty experiential prose works, some of which were either moving together or stopping in parallel with *The Future Poetry* as installments in *The Arya*. *The Life Divine* stopped coming out as a serial in January 1919, *Essays on the Gita* in July 1920, *The Synthesis of Yoga* just a few months later in January 1921, *The Psychology of Social Development* in July 1918.

The aesthetics proper and a half-developed theory of poetry came in the closing session of a great series, as if to give the final shape to the Aurobindonian world view. Contrary to the common belief in our English departments, where the other major prose works are thought of as irrelevant to Sri Aurobindo's aesthetics and theory of poetry, I must say that his poetics can only be grasped thoroughly with reference to his total view of life. How is *The Life Divine* related to his art and poetry? Just a brief explanation from *The Future Poetry* will tell all:

Poetry and art most of all our powers can help to bring this truth home to the mind of man with an illumining and catholic force, for

while philosophy may lose itself in abstractions and religion turn to an intolerant otherworldliness and asceticism, poetry and art are born mediators between the material and the concrete, the spirit and life. This mediation between the truth of spirit and the truth of life will be one of the chief functions of the poetry of the future. (*The Future Poetry*, p. 199)

The Future Poetry is not just a search for mantric poetry; it touches on various planes of life, society and culture in general. It starts with a focus on a lost poetry, then becomes a revised history of English poetry, and in the final chapters struggles keenly to define and characterise *mantra* and stops short of a total clarification despite his wonderful language encircling all the time the secret sources of overhead poetry. Never was the language of poetry criticism such a unique blend of revelation and argument, poetry and logic, with the long drawn out Ciceronian, the suspended syntax, balanced by a cool clarified statement.

The Future Poetry will restore the element of sight and listening, the rhythmic speech, as it rose in the past from the heart of the seer and from the native home of the truth. The *mantra* will return with a more deliberate subjectivising, a more deliberate exploration of the self. Talking of the evolution of society, Sri Aurobindo remembers the lost art and its distortion in the very first chapter of *The Human Cycle*, refusing to look on it as a 'nautch-girl of the mind', and 'a revel of intellect and fancy.' (*SABCL*, Vol. 15, p. 5) The poets of the old days just saw and sang. Teaching, preaching, philosophising and sermonising had nothing to do with them. In classical Sanskrit, the word Kavi "applied to any maker of verse, but in the Vedic Sanskrit it meant the poet-seer who saw the Truth and found in a subtle truth-hearing the inspired word of his vision." (*The Future Poetry*, p. 27)

Here are some significant highlights from *The Future Poetry*, where he seeks to express his ultimate choice as a theoretician and a practitioner.

But poetry is the *Mantra* only when it is the voice of the inmost truth and is couched in the highest power of the very rhythm and speech of that truth. (*The Future Poetry*, p. 194)

But still all life is one and a new human mind moves towards the realisation of its totality and oneness. The poetry which voices the oneness and totality of our being and nature and the worlds and God, will not make the actuality of our earthly life less but more real and rich and full and wide and living to men. (*Ibid.*, p. 224)

It will be a mistake to consider this poetry as just revivalistic. *The Future Poetry* speaks more about the present and the future than about the past. Here is a relevant passage:

But now the mind of man is opening more largely to the deepest truth of the Divine, the Self, the Spirit, the eternal presence not separate and distant, but near us, around us and in us, the Spirit in the world, the greater Self in man and his kind, the Spirit in all that is and lives, the godhead, the existence, the power, the beauty, the eternal delight that broods over all, supports all and manifests itself in every turn of creation. (*Ibid.*, p. 223)

The frequent use of the comparative degree in *The Future Poetry* simply indicates the progressive awareness of the subjective self. The vision of the 'more' is not just a mere comparative degree. Sri Aurobindo has a distinct perception beyond Tagore, Whitman, Carpenter, A.E., Yeats, Stephen Phillips and the other poets near to him. There is no mention about himself, simply because he was not practicing fully what he was preaching then. But then, he might be having a prescience of his own poetic output between 1926 and 1950, the poetry of K. D. Sethna, Harindanath, J.A. Chadwick, Nirodbaran and Nolini Kanta, and also of Themis and the Aurovilian Poets of today, R.Y. Deshpande, and others working around us.

Yet there was some thing more to be said in *The Future Poetry*, which would have completed a very interesting poetics. The master yearned for revisions. He played the instrument masterfully, but wished to tell something more, something that was still beyond his reach, beyond the capacity of his expressive skill or may be the thing he was trying to formulate took time to shape itself out with reference to his poetics. The knowledge about the planes was certainly there, as he had already spoken of them in *The Life Divine*. But somehow there was still a lack of integration.

The excessive stress on *The Future Poetry* (1917-20) as a pointer to Sri Aurobindo's final theory of poetry has made the book quite popular at the expense of the full view of his aesthetics, which only becomes clear in his post-1926 letters, especially the letters to K.D. Sethna. The last nine chapters of *The Future Poetry* speak of significant overlooked areas, which confirm that Sri Aurobindo is not speaking of a revival but of a dynamic subjectivity following the expanding zones of human consciousness.

Sri Aurobindo wished thorough revisions of the book, which could not be done and for which, maybe, the book remained unpublished during his life time. He must have felt the problem of objective correlative in the book and that could have been the reason why 24 of the book's 32 chapters received some revision at one time or another. Only once in *The Future Poetry*, that too very briefly towards the close of the book, we get a lone reference to the 'overmind' with a nearly accurate focus:

It will be first and most a poetry of the intuitive reason, the intuitive senses, the intuitive delight soul in us, getting from this enhanced source of inspiration a more sovereign poetic enthusiasm and ecstasy, and then, it may even be, rise towards a still greater power of revelation nearer to the direct vision and word of the overmind from which all creative inspiration comes. (*SABCL, Vol. 9, p. 207*)

Regarding the influence of the overmind on poetry, Sri Aurobindo does not say anything more beyond that. It is only in his letters to Mr. Sethna that we see repeated references to, and adequate explanations of, the term overmind. It is curious that Sri Aurobindo had been talking of the overmind in *The Life Divine* in detail with reference to the spiritual planes, as mapped by him. We see just a brief reference to that in *The Future Poetry*, which started coming out in 1917. There are frequent references to *mantra* in *The Future Poetry*, but we do not know as yet that the operating plane is the last summit of the mind, which either influences the style or the substance or both. Hence much of Sri Aurobindo's theory of poetry remains unexplained in *The Future Poetry*. Unless we read the letters to Mr. Sethna, no clear view of mantric poetry, or inspired poetry from comparatively low planes, can emerge. Judged from this point of view, it will not be proper to call *The Future Poetry* the complete poetic manifesto of Sri Aurobindo. Yet *The Future Poetry* should be there, the whole of it, along with the letters, in our search for the whole poetics of Sri Aurobindo. In an incomplete chapter entitled "Mantra", which is now put in Appendix III, he made perhaps his last attempt to clarify the nature of *mantra* in the book. This time he was very close as he had been in the chapter "The Word and the Spirit."

Speech, the expressive word, has such a summit or absolute, a perfection which is the touch of the infinite upon its finite possibilities and the seal upon it of its Creator. This absolute of the expressive word can be given the name which was found for it by the inspired singers of the Veda, the *Mantra*....the *Mantra* is the word that carries the godhead in it or the power of the godhead. (*The Future Poetry, p. 279*)

And yet this is far behind the post-1926 clarity, which we see in the letters. Sri Aurobindo became a relaxed guru after 1926. Apart from that, the Mother's influence might have been a significant force behind the clarity of his post-1926 letters. One suspects he learnt a lot about expressive skill from the Mother's writings. There is an obvious change in his prose style in the 30s and the progressive clarity reached a supreme height in *The Supramental Manifestation on Earth*. While writing the introduction to his *Overhead Poetry: Poems with Sri Aurobindo's Comments*, Sethna shuns his complicated and exhaustive language and opts for clarity to explain the overhead aesthetics:

The Future Poetry would be written from those rarer levels whose voices have occasionally joined the utterances from the usual sources to make the profoundest moments of past poetry. The rarest of those levels give birth to overhead poetry: they are “planes” whose afflatus comes as if from an infinitude of conscious being above our brain-clamped mentality. (Sethna, p. i)

These commentaries are extremely helpful in our effort to tie up the scattered materials and for our own practice of criticism of overhead poetry, the poetry that comes from the overhead planes: (1) the Higher mind, (2) the Illumined Mind, (3) the Intuition and (4) the Overmind. In these letters, Sri Aurobindo teaches us, through Sethna, how to identify the sources, starting from the voice of the self, the psychic poetry, and then going up from that gateway towards the spiritual planes. He clarifies the fluctuation of the influences, as there is no consistent influence of a particular source on the whole unit. He speaks of how the planes operate separately or mixed up in their touches on a line or lines. All overhead poetry cannot be called *mantra*, as the purest kinds come either by the overmind touch or by the touch of very high spiritual Intuition, which is a plane just below the overmind. Much of the supermind substance percolates down to the overmind, as all our colleagues from the philosophy and yoga-psychology branches present here know very well. And that could be the reason behind Sri Aurobindo’s statement in *The Future Poetry*, which takes us by surprise because of its direct reference to the Supermind.

The voice of poetry comes from a region above as, a plane of our being above and beyond our personal intelligence, a supermind which sees things in their innermost and largest truth by a spiritual identity and with a lustrous effulgency and rapture and its native language is a revelatory, inspired, intuitive word limpid or subtly vibrant or densely packed with the glory of this ecstasy and lustre. (*The Future Poetry*, p. 264)

The most significant phrases, clauses and sentences in these letters to Sethna may be underlined and by repeated readings of these letters the perception has to be formed. Because this is not intellectual poetry, our intellectual judgments will fail to characterise such lines. A different kind of language habit will strengthen that perception. Sri Aurobindo frequently uses words and phrases like ‘inevitability’, ‘absolute inevitability’, ‘supreme inevitability’, ‘inevitable word,’ ‘revelation,’ ‘direct overmind transmission,’ etc.

Sri Aurobindo’s letters cited in Sethna’s *Overhead Poetry* complete the image of *Mantra* and shows Sri Aurobindo’s humility in statements like the following:

The *Mantra* as I have tried to describe it in *The Future Poetry* is a word of power and light that comes from the overmind inspiration or some very high plane of intuition. Its characteristics are a language that conveys infinitely more than the mere surface sense of the words seems to indicate, a rhythm that means even more than the language and is born out of the infinite and disappears into it.... (Sethna, p. 12)

The overmind expresses a cosmic consciousness, even by its touch, as the full overmind inspiration rarely comes down upon human poetry. It may be a touch on the substance or the style of a line which may or may not have any relation with mysticism or spirituality proper or it may affect both the style and the substance in its more powerful touch. Sri Aurobindo also speaks of a "mental overmind" (*Ibid.*, p. 18) as contrasted with the overmind proper which has some Gnostic light in it. There are at least four divisions of the overmind in his letters to Sethna: mental overmind, intuitive overmind, true overmind and supramentalised overmind. Sri Aurobindo frankly admitted to Sethna that he was not in a position at that point of time to describe the workings of the "overmind Gnosis."

Sri Aurobindo stresses the point of feeling and perception, because there is still a problem of *objective correlative* for the critic while dealing with lines that drop in from the overmind. There may be an inspired selection, an unusual bringing together of words and obviously they come as discovery refusing to be intercepted by the intellectual mind. One cannot improve such lines, like

The winds come to me from the fields of sleep.

or

Charmed magic casements, opening on the foam
of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn.

Despite the clarity in the letters to Sethna and a detailed exposition of overmind aesthetics, there are important omissions or the issues were forgotten by Sethna, like the stress on the words 'song' and the 'singer', which we see so frequently in *The Future Poetry*. Mantric poetry has a close kinship with song and that seems to be a reason behind Sri Aurobindo's memory of Tagore, a singer poet from a regional language, while his discussion was centering round the flashes of *mantra* in the English language. Why was the Bengali poet so frequently remembered in the last few chapters of *The Future Poetry*? The old lights up the new in Tagore's songs. I have chosen just one example for my esteemed non-Bengali audience—

“aaji joto tara tobo akashe.”

The ananda from all directions have attained a profound fragrance
my mind it sweeps across your temple.

now I know no one anywhere

I hear nothing else, but

the breath of the cosmos plays through my heart

To the tune of a flute.

The Future Poetry must be properly linked up with Sri Aurobindo’s letters on psychic and overhead poetry to form a complete view of his poetics. Many of the lines from today’s anti-Aurobindonian school unknowingly focus on Sri Aurobindo’s theory of the overhead inspiration kissing the mundane substance. I should not pretend to locate the exact plane, but it will be interesting to have a look at Nissim Ezekiel’s surprising line from *Marriage*, where a sudden unusual vibration is caught in the following line describing the walk of a couple:

Wordless they walked like a breeze.

The mundane catching the suggestion of the infinite is certainly not the end point in Sri Aurobindo’s poetics. His more significant prophecies relating to the return of incantation in English poetry does not seem unreal for the poets writing from Pondicherry and Auroville. Let us wish the vibration to spread beyond these two cities.

Works Cited

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