

*Meditations on Savitri*¹

Part 1 of 3

Franklin Merrell-Wolff
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*All forms are tokens of some veiled idea
Whose covert purpose lurks from mind's pursuit,
Yet is a womb of sovereign consequence.
There every thought and feeling is an act,
And every act a symbol and a sign,
And every symbol hides a living power.*

Sri Aurobindo

SAVITRI

A Legend and a Symbol

Savitri is an experiment in mystic poetry, spiritual poetry cast into a symbolic figure

The whole of *Savitri* is, according to the title of the poem, a legend that is a symbol and this opening canto is, it may be said, a key beginning and announcement.

. . . the physical night and physical dawn are, as the title of the Canto clearly suggests, a symbol, although what may be called a real symbol of an inner reality and the main purpose is to describe by suggestion the thing symbolized.

Sri Aurobindo

Then from a timeless plane that watches Time,
A Spirit gazed out upon destiny,
In its endless moment saw the ages pass,
All still was in a silence of the gods,
The prophet moment covered limitless space . . .
Over wide earth brooded the infinite bliss.

Sri Aurobindo

¹ Aurobindo Ghose, *Meditations on Savitri*, vols. 1 and 2 (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Press, 1965). Wolff reads excerpts from Book One: Cantos I, II, and III of Sri Aurobindo's epic poem *Savitri* selected by the Mother and printed in four volumes titled *Meditations on Savitri* along with the paintings by Huta that they inspired.

Savitri, this prophetic vision
of the world's history, including
the announcement of the earth's
future. —Who can ever dare
to put it in pictures?

Yet, the Mother and Huta have
tried it this way.

We simply meditate together
on the lines chosen, and when
the image becomes clear, I
describe it with the help of a
few strokes, then Huta goes to
her studio and brushes the painting.

It is a mediative mood
that these 'meditations' must
be looked at to find the feeling
they contain behind their
appearance.

The Mother

Descend, O Happiness, with thy moon-gold feet,
Enrich earth's floors upon whose sleep we lie.

Sri Aurobindo

BOOK ONE
THE BOOK OF BEGINNINGS
CANTO I
THE SYMBOL DAWN

It was the hour before the Gods awake.
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.
Almost one felt, opaque, impenetrable,
In the sombre symbol of her eyeless muse
The abysm of the unbodied Infinite;
A fathomless zero occupied the world.

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.
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.

Then something in the inscrutable darkness stirred;
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.

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.

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.

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

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

A glamour from the unreached 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.

On life's thin border awhile the Vision stood
And bent over earth's pondering forehead curve.

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.
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.
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.

All grew a consecration and a rite.
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.

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.

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.

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.
There was the common light of earthly day.

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

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.
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.
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.
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.
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.
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.

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.

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.

Too unlike the world she came to help and save,
Her greatness weighed upon its ignorant breast
And from its deep chasms welled a dire return,
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.
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.

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.

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

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.
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.
All came back to her: Earth and Love and Doom,

Immobile in herself, she gathered force.
This was the day when Satyavan must die.

END OF CANTO I

CANTO II

THE ISSUE

An absolute supernatural darkness falls
On man sometimes when he draws near to God:
An hour comes 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.

Around her were the austere sky-pointing hills,
And the green murmurous broad deep-thoughted woods
Muttered incessantly their muffled spell.
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.
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.
Its solitude greatened her human hours
With a background of the eternal and unique.

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 wideness 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.
There was her drama's radiant prologue lived.

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.
Well might he find in her his perfect shrine.
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.

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

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.

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.
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.
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.
For even her gulfs 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.
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.

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.

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.
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.
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.
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.

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

Across each road stands armed a stone-eyed Law,
At every gate the huge dim sentinels pace.

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 bond is put on the high-climbing mind,
A seal on the too large wide-open heart;

Death stays the journeying discoverer, Life.

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.
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.

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.
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.

END OF CANTO II

CANTO III

THE YOGA OF THE KING: THE YOGA OF THE SOUL'S RELEASE

A world's desire compelled her mortal birth.
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.
His was a spirit that stooped from larger spheres
Into our province of ephemeral sight,
A colonist from immortality.
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.
Affiliated to cosmic Space and Time
And paying here God's debt to earth and man
A greater sonship was his divine right.
Although consenting to mortal ignorance,
His knowledge shared the Light ineffable.
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.

A Seer was born, a shining Guest of Time.
For him mind's limiting firmament ceased above.
In the griffin forefront of the Night and Day
A gap was rent in the all-concealing vault;
The conscious ends of being went rolling back:
The landmarks of the little person fell,
The island ego joined its continent.
Overpassed was this world of rigid limiting forms:
Life's barriers opened into the Unknown.

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.
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.
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.
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.
A crown of the architecture of the worlds,
A mystery of married Earth and Heaven
Annexed divinity to the mortal scheme.

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.
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.
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.

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

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.

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

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 poise 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.
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.
This too the supreme Diplomat can use,
He makes our fall a means for greater rise.
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;
The twin duality for ever one
Chooses its home mid the tumults of the sense.
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.
All here must learn to obey a higher law,
Our body's cells must hold the Immortal's flame.

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

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.

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.
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.

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.
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.
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.

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.
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.
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.

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.
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.

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.

She broke in with inspired speech for scythe
And plundered the Unknowable's vast estate.
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;
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.

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.
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.
A recorder of the inquiry of the gods,
Spokesman of the silent seeings of the Supreme,
She brought immortal words to mortal men.

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.

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.
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.

Thus came his soul's release from Ignorance,
His mind and body's first spiritual change.

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.
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.
The universal strengths were linked with his;
Feeling earth's smallness with their boundless breadths,
He drew the energies that transmute an age.

END OF CANTO III