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SRI AUROBINDO

August 15, 1872 — December 5, 1950

You have the Word and we are waiting to accept
it from you. India will speak through your voice to
the world.

—Rabindranath Tagore

The Passing of An Avatar

SRI AUROBINDO

August 15, 1872—December 5, 1950

By FRANKLIN MERREL-WOLFF

"Whensoever there is the fading of the Dharma and the uprising of unrighteousness, then I loose myself forth into birth.

"For the deliverance of the good, for the destruction of the evildoers, for the enthroning of the Right, I am born from age to age."

From *The Message of the Gita*, ch. IV, verses 7 and 8, as translated by Sri Aurobindo.

That the times in which we live bear the mark of the "fading of the Dharma" and the "uprising of unrighteousness" in exceptional degree has long been evident to many of us, who have, therefore, been alerted for Avataral Descent in one or more embodiments. For those who are spiritually awake the signs of such Descent, in more than one embodiment, currently or within the recent past, have not been lacking, so that, indeed, a time of exceptional darkness has also been the occasion for the manifestation of rare inner Light. Among these embodiments the late Sri Aurobindo stands out as one of the most luminous figures of all historic time. It is but fitting, therefore, that we should direct at least some portion of our thoughts and regard towards this man who in rare degree manifested the Divine Nature and Wisdom.

Sri Aurobindo was born in 1872 and passed from physical embodiment on the fifth of last December. Rarely have we known lives so packed with accomplishment as were the seventy-nine years of this man. His formal education began in England at the age of seven and was completed at Cambridge. His life-work began in the secretariat of the Gaekwar of Baroda and soon extended to the teaching of English and administrative work in Baroda College. It was not long before his interests were drawn into the field of Indian politics and in the years just preceding 1910 he became the leader of the independence movement. In fact he originated the technique of non-cooperation which was later continued so effectively by the late Mahatma Gandhi. Like other such leaders he experienced arrest and waited a year in jail for the trial which ultimately cleared him from the accusations brought against him.

This year was the turning point in his life, for, while on one side he faced the harshnesses of incarceration, yet it was during this night of physical life that there began for him the Illuminations and Realizations which opened the way for his primary life-work. So, when at last acquitted, he left forever the political and professional fields, retired to Pon-

dichery, the French territory in India, and there spent the remaining forty years of his life in a rarely productive retirement.

For the biographer, able to trace only the tangible events in a human life, the final forty years might well seem poor in the material offered; but for him who has metaphysical Vision, these were the great years which reveal One with a stature comparable with that of a Krishna, a Buddha or a Christ. These years saw the manifestation of greatness in two senses. First, there was a vast literary production, in both the mediums of prose and poetry, which is available to the scholar and which may be in some measure evaluated by the latter. The second and greater part of his labor lay in those unseen dimensions which only the few can ever truly evaluate. Along with this double labor, and really incidental thereto, an Ashrama was established, open to both sexes, and dedicated to the dual objective of individual Realization and the Spiritualization of the world in a sense that is not restricted to the human portion of that world.

Leaving this all too brief sketch of an extraordinarily full life-work, we must turn to an evaluation of the more tangible production of his last forty years. Aurobindo became a Yogi and a Rishi or, as the Buddhists would say, an Enlightened One. He was not merely a mystic but a master of mystical and Gnostic Consciousness with a comprehensiveness that does not seem to have been surpassed within historic times. His literary work was dedicated, almost exclusively, to the revelation of Gnostic Consciousness, in so far as that may be, and to the encouragement and guidance of effort upon the part of all who may respond, to the end that they too may know the Gnostic Realization. But he implemented this work with a most unusual scholarly equipment, in both Oriental and Occidental material. While this equipment is strongest in the Vedic and Yogic philosophical, and general literary, linguistic and historic sense, yet there is not lacking a considerable understanding of Western science, save only that phase of science of which mathematics is an essential part. Along with all this, Aurobindo was thoroughly trained in, and a master of, the English language in both the forms of prose and poetic literary production, and thus for the first time in the history of Indian Gnostic contributions we have original production in the language of the reader of English, and in terms adapted to the needs of the modern mind; all of which results in a product of far more value than the translations of ancient Sutras composed for a mentality which is strange and often incomprehensible to us.

While it is true that Sri Aurobindo often speaks in pejorative terms of the mind and the reason, particularly in later writings, yet, his formulations, even in his poetry, are always highly rational and, therefore, intelligible. The reader does not have to labor with the unintelligibilities which

are so often the curse of mystical production, as in the case of Jacob Boehme. Perhaps, despite himself, Aurobindo found it to be impossible to cease being reasonable, and the reader may well be thankful for this. The writer would class him with Shankara as being one of the two clearest and most rational of mystical philosophers. And further, Aurobindo rarely, if ever, imposes intellectual violence upon the reader, since he avoids categorical assertion and denial in the highest degree possible, though the authority of Direct Realization is such that the categorical form can not be completely avoided. He suggests possibilities or difficulties for the reasonable consideration of the reader and in his philosophic writings and letters ever seeks to lead the understanding by argument, rather than to compel it by authoritarian pronouncement. The result is that the thoughtful reader is often convinced away from his previous predilections and, when not convinced, yet feels that Aurobindo permits and respects his differing view. Of all the merits of this great man, this is not the least.

Lack of space prevents saying more than a word concerning the substance of Aurobindo's Yogic philosophy, but we would fail in the sketch of this man's life and thought if we did not say something. In the main, he continues in the current established by the Vedas, the Upanishads and the Gita and, in so far, is in accord with the established Indian tradition. But he derives from, or superimposes upon, that current an interpretation which, in certain important respects, diverges radically from views that have been predominant in India, particularly the views of Srishankaracharya and the Mayavadins. He teaches a philosophy of universal Realism as opposed to the Mayavadin universal Illusionism. Hence, for Aurobindo, the attainment of Nirvana, while a preeminently valuable achievement, is but the beginning of a process which returns to the world in order that transformation may be effected in the evolution, whereas, for Shankara and the Mayavadins, the evolution is simply irrelevant and Nirvana a culmination. For Aurobindo, world process and development remain significant even for the Divine Life.

The Crown of Sri Aurobindo lies in this that through him the Divine has been drawn down into the mundane field for its spiritualization in a degree and sense that has rarely, if ever, been realized heretofore, and thus He is truly an Avatar.

Hail to Thee, Thou Man-God!

Small is his work, even if he succeeds, who labours for his own salvation or the salvation of a few; infinitely great is his, even if he fail or succeed only partially or for a season, who lives only to bring about peace of soul, joy, purity and perfection among all mankind.

—Sri Aurobindo.