

# The Problem of Pain

Excerpts from Sri Aurobindo's *Savitri: a Legend and a Symbol*<sup>1</sup>

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In his article "Is God Really Good?" (this issue), Granville Sewell has raised what perhaps is the most difficult and most passionately debated philosophical problem of all time: the problem of pain. Sri Aurobindo has addressed this problem in several of his writings. The solution presented here is culled from his epic poem *Savitri: a Legend and a Symbol*.

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Against human reason this is his offence,  
Being known to be for ever unknowable,  
To be all and yet transcend the mystic whole,  
Absolute, to lodge in a relative world of Time,  
Eternal and all-knowing, to suffer birth,  
Omnipotent, to sport with Chance and Fate,  
Spirit, yet to be Matter and the Void,  
Illimitable, beyond form or name,  
To dwell within a body, one and supreme  
To be animal and human and divine:  
A still deep sea, he laughs in rolling waves;  
Universal, he is all,—transcendent, none.  
To man's righteousness this is his cosmic crime,  
Almighty beyond good and evil to dwell  
Leaving the good to their fate in a wicked world  
And evil to reign in this enormous scene.  
All opposition seems and strife and chance,  
An aimless labour with but scanty sense,  
To eyes that see a part and miss the whole.<sup>2</sup>

Sri Aurobindo's prefatory Note: "The tale of Satyavan and Savitri is recited in the Mahabharata as a story of conjugal love conquering death. But this legend is, as shown by many features of the human tale, one of the many symbolic myths of the Vedic cycle. Satyavan is the soul carrying the divine truth of being within itself but descended into the grip of death and ignorance; Savitri is the Divine Word, daughter of the Sun, goddess of the supreme Truth who comes down and is born to save; Aswapati, the Lord of the Horse, her human father, is the Lord of Tapasya, the concentrated energy of spiritual endeavour that helps us to rise from the mortal to the immortal planes; Dyumatse-

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1 Book Six, Canto II, pp. 437–456. © Sri Aurobindo Ashram Publication Department, 1997. Reprinted with the kind permission of Sri Aurobindo Ashram Trust.

2 Sri Aurobindo, *Savitri*, Book Ten, Canto IV, p. 657.

na, Lord of the Shining Hosts, father of Satyavan, is the Divine Mind here fallen blind, losing its celestial kingdom of vision, and through that loss its kingdom of glory. Still this is not a mere allegory, the characters are not personified qualities, but incarnations or emanations of living and conscious Forces with whom we can enter into concrete touch and they take human bodies in order to help man and show him the way from his mortal state to a divine consciousness and immortal life.”

In the following passage Narad, “the heavenly sage from Paradise,” reveals to Aswapati, his wife (Queen of Madra), and Savitri (their daughter) that Savitri’s future husband Satyavan has but one year to live:

“O loss, if death into its elements  
Of which his gracious envelope was built,  
Shatter this vase before it breathes its sweets,  
As if earth could not keep too long from heaven  
A treasure thus unique loaned by the gods,  
A being so rare, of so divine a make!  
In one brief year when this bright hour flies back  
And perches careless on a branch of Time,  
This sovereign glory ends heaven lent to earth,  
This splendour vanishes from the mortal’s sky:  
Heaven’s greatness came, but was too great to stay.  
Twelve swift-winged months are given to him and her;  
This day returning Satyavan must die.” (p. 431)

“Voicing earth’s question to the inscrutable power,” the aggrieved Queen then questions Narad about the origin of pain:

Passionate like sorrow questioning heaven she spoke.  
Lending her speech to the surface soul on earth  
She uttered the suffering in the world’s dumb heart  
And man’s revolt against his ignorant fate.  
“O seer, in the earth’s strange twi-natured life  
By what pitiless adverse Necessity  
Or what cold freak of a Creator’s will,  
By what random accident or governed Chance  
That shaped a rule out of fortuitous steps,  
Made destiny from an hour’s emotion, came  
Into the unreadable mystery of Time  
The direr mystery of grief and pain?  
Is it thy God who made this cruel law?  
Or some disastrous Power has marred his work  
And he stands helpless to defend or save?  
...  
A thousand ills assail the mortal’s hours  
And wear away the natural joy of life;

Our bodies are an engine cunningly made,  
But for all its parts as cunningly are planned,  
Contrived ingeniously with demon skill,  
Its apt inevitable heritage  
Of mortal danger and peculiar pain,  
Its payment of the tax of Time and Fate,  
Its way to suffer and its way to die.  
This is the ransom of our high estate,  
The sign and stamp of our humanity.  
A grisly company of maladies  
Come, licensed lodgers, into man's bodily house,  
Purveyors of death and torturers of life.  
In the malignant hollows of the world,  
In its subconscious cavern-passages  
Ambushed they lie waiting their hour to leap,  
Surrounding with danger the sieged city of life:  
Admitted into the citadel of man's days  
They mine his force and maim or suddenly kill.  
Ourselves within us lethal forces nurse;  
We make of our own enemies our guests:  
Out of their holes like beasts they creep and gnaw  
The chords of the divine musician's lyre  
Till frayed and thin the music dies away  
Or crashing snaps with a last tragic note.

...

On Nature's gifts to man a curse was laid:  
All walks inarmed by its own opposites,  
Error is the comrade of our mortal thought  
And falsehood lurks in the deep bosom of truth,  
Sin poisons with its vivid flowers of joy  
Or leaves a red scar burnt across the soul;  
Virtue is a grey bondage and a gaol.  
At every step is laid for us a snare.  
Alien to reason and the spirit's light,  
Our fount of action from a darkness wells;  
In ignorance and nescience are our roots.

...

All is an episode in a meaningless tale.  
Why is it all and wherefore are we here?  
If to some being of eternal bliss  
It is our spirit's destiny to return  
Or some still impersonal height of endless calm,  
Since That we are and out of That we came,

Whence rose the strange and sterile interlude  
 Lasting in vain through interminable Time?  
 Who willed to form or feign a universe  
 In the cold and endless emptiness of Space?  
 Or if these beings must be and their brief lives,  
 What need had the soul of ignorance and tears?  
 Whence rose the call for sorrow and for pain?  
 Or all came helplessly without a cause?  
 What power forced the immortal spirit to birth?

...

Or who persuaded it to fall from bliss  
 And forfeit its immortal privilege?  
 Who laid on it the ceaseless will to live  
 A wanderer in this beautiful, sorrowful world,  
 And bear its load of joy and grief and love?  
 Or if no being watches the works of Time,  
 What hard impersonal Necessity  
 Compels the vain toil of brief living things?

...

Perhaps the soul we feel is only a dream,  
 Eternal self a fiction sensed in trance.”

Narad replies:

“Was then the sun a dream because there is night?  
 Hidden in the mortal’s heart the Eternal lives:  
 He lives secret in the chamber of thy soul,  
 A Light shines there nor pain nor grief can cross.  
 A darkness stands between thyself and him,  
 Thou canst not hear or feel the marvellous Guest,  
 Thou canst not see the beatific sun.  
 O queen, thy thought is a light of the Ignorance,  
 Its brilliant curtain hides from thee God’s face.  
 It illumines a world born from the Inconscience  
 But hides the Immortal’s meaning in the world.  
 Thy mind’s light hides from thee the Eternal’s thought,  
 Thy heart’s hopes hide from thee the Eternal’s will,  
 Earth’s joys shut from thee the Immortal’s bliss.  
 Thence rose the need of a dark intruding god,  
 The world’s dread teacher, the creator, pain.

...

Pain ploughed the first hard ground of the world-drowse.  
 By pain a spirit started from the clod,  
 By pain Life stirred in the subliminal deep.

Interned, submerged, hidden in Matter's trance  
Awoke to itself the dreamer, sleeping Mind;  
It made a visible realm out of its dreams,  
It drew its shapes from the subconscious depths,  
Then turned to look upon the world it had made.  
By pain and joy, the bright and tenebrous twins,  
The inanimate world perceived its sentient soul,  
Else had the Inconscient never suffered change.  
Pain is the hammer of the Gods to break  
A dead resistance in the mortal's heart,  
His slow inertia as of living stone.  
If the heart were not forced to want and weep,  
His soul would have lain down content, at ease,  
And never thought to exceed the human start  
And never learned to climb towards the Sun.

...

Pain is the hand of Nature sculpturing men  
To greatness: an inspired labour chisels  
With heavenly cruelty an unwilling mould.  
Implacable in the passion of their will,  
Lifting the hammers of titanic toil  
The demiurges of the universe work;  
They shape with giant strokes their own; their sons  
Are marked with their enormous stamp of fire.  
Although the shaping god's tremendous touch  
Is torture unbearable to mortal nerves,  
The fiery spirit grows in strength within  
And feels a joy in every titan pang.

...

O mortal who complainst of death and fate,  
Accuse none of the harms thyself hast called;  
This troubled world thou hast chosen for thy home,  
Thou art thyself the author of thy pain.  
Once in the immortal boundlessness of Self,  
In a vast of Truth and Consciousness and Light  
The soul looked out from its felicity.  
It felt the Spirit's interminable bliss,  
It knew itself deathless, timeless, spaceless, one,  
It saw the Eternal, lived in the Infinite.  
Then, curious of a shadow thrown by Truth,  
It strained towards some otherness of self,  
It was drawn to an unknown Face peering through night.  
It sensed a negative infinity,

A void supernal whose immense excess  
Imitating God and everlasting Time  
Offered a ground for Nature's adverse birth  
And Matter's rigid hard unconsciousness  
Harbouring the brilliance of a transient soul  
That lights up birth and death and ignorant life.  
A Mind arose that stared at Nothingness  
Till figures formed of what could never be;  
It housed the contrary of all that is.  
A Nought appeared as Being's huge sealed cause,  
Its dumb support in a blank infinite,  
In whose abyss spirit must disappear:  
A darkened Nature lived and held the seed  
Of Spirit hidden and feigning not to be.  
Eternal Consciousness became a freak  
Of an unsouled almighty Inconscient  
And, breathed no more as spirit's native air,  
Bliss was an incident of a mortal hour,  
A stranger in the insentient universe.  
As one drawn by the grandeur of the Void  
The soul attracted leaned to the Abyss:  
It longed for the adventure of Ignorance  
And the marvel and surprise of the Unknown  
And the endless possibility that lurked  
In the womb of Chaos and in Nothing's gulf  
Or looked from the unfathomed eyes of Chance.  
It tired of its unchanging happiness,  
It turned away from immortality:  
It was drawn to hazard's call and danger's charm,  
It yearned to the pathos of grief, the drama of pain,  
Perdition's peril, the wounded bare escape,  
The music of ruin and its glamour and crash,  
The savour of pity and the gamble of love  
And passion and the ambiguous face of Fate.  
A world of hard endeavour and difficult toil,  
And battle on extinction's perilous verge,  
A clash of forces, a vast incertitude,  
The joy of creation out of Nothingness,  
Strange meetings on the roads of Ignorance  
And the companionship of half-known souls  
Or the solitary greatness and lonely force  
Of a separate being conquering its world,  
Called it from its too safe eternity.

A huge descent began, a giant fall:  
For what the spirit sees, creates a truth  
And what the soul imagines is made a world.  
A Thought that leaped from the Timeless can become,  
Indicator of cosmic consequence  
And the itinerary of the gods,  
A cyclic movement in eternal Time.  
Thus came, born from a blind tremendous choice,  
This great perplexed and discontented world,  
This haunt of Ignorance, this home of Pain.”