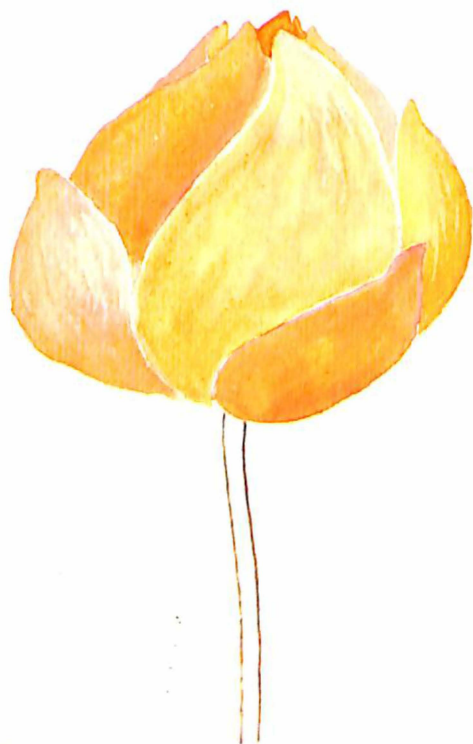


The Veda and Human Destiny



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in the world's history is not a
teaching, not even a revelation;
it is a decisive action direct from
the Supreme.*

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The Veda and Human Destiny

Satprem

Translated from the French
by Michel Danino

MIRA ADITI, Mysore, India



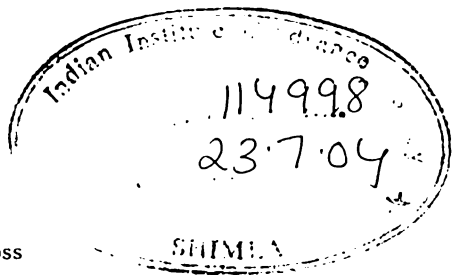
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This text dating from 1961, more than thirty years ago, but never published, was part of Satprem's first essay, *Sri Aurobindo or the Transformation of the World*, written before the *Adventure of Consciousness*.

The first pages of the book opened on the Veda and denote what was already Satprem's central interest: the Veda as the key to human destiny.

*My Yoga is not done for myself
who need nothing and do not
need salvation or anything
else, but precisely for the earth-
consciousness, to open a way
to the earth-consciousness to
change.¹*

Sri Aurobindo

THAT which Sri Aurobindo came to accomplish, other poets, the Vedic Rishis, had announced thousands of years earlier, in prehistoric times:

*Weave an inviolate work,
become the human being, create the divine race. . . .
Seers of truth you are,
sharpen the shining spears with which
you cut the way to that which is Immortal;
knowers of the secret planes,
form them, the steps by which
the gods attained to immortality.*

(Rig-Veda X.53)

Since Adam, we seem to have chosen to eat the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, but on this path there are no half-measures or regrets, for if we remain prostrate in a false humility, our noses in the dust, the titans and djinns among us will be all too ready to snatch the Power we did not want—that is in fact what they are doing—and they will crush the god within us. The question is to know whether we want to leave this earth in the hands of Darkness and escape once more into our various heavens, or whether we want to seize hold of the Power—and find it to begin with—in order to refashion this earth in a diviner image and make, in the words of the Rishis, “Heaven and Earth equal and one.”

There is a Secret, that is clear. All traditions bear witness to it, whether the Rishis or the Magi of Persia, the priests of Chaldea or Memphis or Yucatan, the hierophants of Eleusis or even our Celts. We have forgotten. We have lost the Word.

*I perceived the Law,
The Truth, the Vast,
From which we came and which we are; I heard
The ages past
Whisper their history, and I knew the Word²*

An age of Truth, India's *satya yuga*, or rather an *age of intuition*, preceded the history of our mental humanity. Judging by the shreds of our traditions, our infancy in the world was struck with an illumination, as is sometimes our brief human infancy before reason tramples on our dreams, or as with the seeker of truth when at the start of his quest, for an instant the veil is rent in a dazzling light, as if to tell him, "Here is where you are going." Then everything closes again, and we are left to the slow plodding of years or centuries, at the end of which we rediscover a child's truth. We have walked the long road of human reason; the time has come to recapture the Word: *At present mankind is undergoing an evolutionary crisis in which is concealed a choice of its destiny; for a stage has been reached in which the human mind has achieved in certain directions an enormous development while in others it stands arrested and bewildered and can no longer find its way. . . . Man has created a system of civilisation which has become too big for his limited mental capacity and understanding and his still more limited spiritual and moral capacity to utilise and manage. . . . Because the burden which is being laid on mankind is too*

great for the present littleness of the human personality, . . . because it is using this new apparatus and organisation to serve the old infrapsiritual and infrarational life-self of humanity, the destiny of the race seems to be heading dangerously. . . . Even if this turns out to be a passing phase or appearance and a tolerable structural accommodation is found which will enable mankind to proceed less catastrophically on its uncertain journey, this can only be a respite. For the problem is fundamental and in putting it evolutionary Nature in man is confronting herself with a critical choice which must one day be solved in the true sense if the race is to arrive or even to survive.

And Sri Aurobindo repeats: *The evolution of Mind working upon Life has developed an organisation of the activity of Mind and use of Matter which can no longer be supported by human capacity without an inner change.*³

Sri Aurobindo discovered the key that can help us to effect the necessary change—a change of consciousness—and at the same time, he rediscovered the key to a great many traditions, in particular, as we shall see, *the Secret of the Veda*, because ultimately there is only one secret.

The light he throws on our past will help us to better understand our present position in the human development and the possibilities of our future evolution, but we would be grossly mistaken if we thought that Sri Aurobindo came to resurrect old traditions—*We do not belong to the past dawns, but to the noons of the future*⁴—or even that his work is tied to the Veda, for had he never known Sanskrit, neither his life nor his work would have been changed in the least. His ancient discoveries are the corollary of a central discovery that plunges into the past as into the future and shows all our History as a blossoming of the future or, rather, as the immense foliation of a giant tree whose roots are neither below nor behind, but above, as the Vedic Rishis had seen, in an eternal Present.

*In Time's deep heart high purposes move and live*⁵

When he read the Vedas for the first time, in the translation of Western Sanskritists or that of Indian pandits, Sri Aurobindo only saw in them a document of some interest for India's history, *but [which] seemed of small value or importance for the history of thought or for a living spiritual*

*experience.*⁶ Fifteen years later, in 1910 at Pondicherry, Sri Aurobindo read the Vedas in the original and found in them *a constant vein of the richest gold of thought and spiritual experience.*⁷ In the meantime, Sri Aurobindo had had a series of *psychological experiences of my own for which I had found no sufficient explanation either in European psychology or in the teachings of Yoga or of Vedanta, but which the mantras of the Veda illuminated with a clear and exact light.*⁸ Thus it was because of those experiences “of his own” that Sri Aurobindo was able to discover, from within, the true sense of the Veda (and particularly of the most ancient of the four Vedas, the Rig-Veda, which he specially studied, or rather recognized). The Veda simply brought him a confirmation of what he had *received directly.*⁹ But did not the Rishis themselves say, “Secret words, seer-wisdoms that utter their inner meaning to the seer”? (Rig-Veda, IV.3.16)

It is therefore not surprising that exegetes saw in the Veda little more than a collection of propitiatory rites centred around fire and obscure incantations to Nature-gods—water, fire, dawn, the moon, the sun, etc.—aimed at securing rain and good harvests for the tribes, a

male progeny, blessings for their journeys, or protection against the “thieves of the sun”—as if those shepherds were barbarous enough to fear that one inauspicious day, their sun, stolen for good, might no longer rise. Only in some “more modern” hymns did a few luminous passages here and there shine through, as though inadvertently, providing some slight measure of justification for the respect in which the Upanishads, composed at the dawn of the historical age, held the Veda. To the Indian tradition, the Upanishads had become the real Veda, the “Book of Knowledge,” while the Veda, product of an infant humanity, was the “Book of Works,” from which everyone, to be sure, claimed to draw inspiration, as from the venerable Authority, but which none understood any longer. We may, along with Sri Aurobindo, wonder why the Upanishads, commended the world over for their depth, claimed to draw their inspiration from the Veda if there was in it no more than a web of primitive rites, or how humanity happened to take a leap from that supposed infancy to the intense richness of the Upanishadic age, or again, in the West, from Arcadian shepherds to the wisdom of Greek thinkers. We fail to see how there could

have been *nothing between the early savage and Plato or the Upanishads*.¹⁰

Yet the exegetes of the Veda are not wholly wrong, for the Rishis did live among pastoral tribes, and it was through familiar material symbols that those men had to be brought in communion with what was beyond immediate appearances; they had to be taken at their level, with their need for material security and solid little males. And it is likely that the Rishis' *mantras* did have the power to make sterile women fertile, to protect their hazardous seasonal migrations from wolves or dark enemies, but their primary power, to the initiate, was one of inner realization. The Veda was, in fact, *a process of divinisation*.¹¹ A Book of Works, certainly, but much more than that, a Book of *the Work*.

To conceal their secret, the Rishis had the advantage of a yet unfixed language. Sounds had an emotive value and determined the meaning; they were living things, living forces, creative of ideas, and had more importance—and above all more power—than the ideas they represented, whereas now it is the other way round: the idea has become foremost and the sound secondary,

each word has only one meaning at a time, firmly fixed and stamped, and our poets lament ("Another language!" exclaimed Rimbaud). But to the Rishi, the word was not yet the conventional symbol of an idea; when, for instance, he used the word *vrika*, his meaning could be the tearer, the divider, the dualizer, and incidentally, a wolf; the root *go* could mean a cow as well as a ray of light. Words could thus be used in their objective or their subjective meaning, and it is on that double—and often triple—meaning that the Veda was erected. Triple meaning, because what the Rishis were trying to convey was not ideas, but experiences, illuminations, and symbols alone could act as a vehicle for vision. They were *kavi*, that is, Seers of the Truth, and the word was synonymous with "poet": *To us, writes Sri Aurobindo, poetry is a revel of intellect and fancy, imagination a plaything and caterer for our amusement, our entertainer, the nautch-girl of the mind. But to the men of old the poet was a seer, a revealer of hidden truths, imagination no dancing courtesan but a priestess in God's house commissioned not to spin fictions but to image difficult and hidden truths.*¹²

We see that poetry burning throughout the

hymns of the Rig-Veda, which Sri Aurobindo so magnificently deciphered; it is not for nothing that *Agni*, the fire, was at the heart of the Vedic Mysteries—*Agni*, the inner flame, the soul in us (and who does not know that the soul is fire?), the innate aspiration that draws man towards the heights; *Agni*, the ardent will of that in us which forever sees and remembers; *Agni*, the “priest of the sacrifice,” the “divine worker,” “the Messenger between earth and heaven” (III.3.2). “He is there in the middle of his house” (I.70.2). “The Fathers who have divine vision set Him within as a child that is to be born” (IX.83.3). He is “the boy suppressed in the secret cavern” (V.2.1). “He is as if life and the breath of our existence, he is as if our eternal child” (I.66.1). “O Son of the body (III.4.2), O Fire, thou art the son of heaven by the body of the earth” (III.25.1). “Immortal in mortals (IV.2.1), old and outworn he grows young again and again” (II.4.5). “When he is born he becomes one who voices the godhead: when as life who grows in the mother he has been fashioned in the mother, he becomes a gallop of wind in his movement” (III.29.11). “O Fire, when thou art well borne by us thou becomest the supreme growth and expansion of

our being, all glory and beauty are in thy desirable hue and thy perfect vision. O Vastness, thou art the plenitude that carries us to the end of our way; thou art a multitude of riches spread out on every side" (II.1.12). "O Fire . . . brilliant ocean of light in which is divine vision (III.22.2); Flame with his hundred treasures . . . O knower of all things born" (I.59).

But the divine fire is not our exclusive privilege; *Agni* does not dwell in man alone: "He is the child of the waters, the child of the forests, the child of things stable and the child of things that move. Even in the stone he is there" (I.70.2).

The Vedic sacrifice was not merely an outer ritual, but the great inner Rite through which man changes himself into God; it was the offering in the Flame of all that keeps us in ball and chain and bars our divinity; it was a "journey," an "ascent of the hill of being," a long migration through many a peril. The Rishi was not a dreamy monk but an *Aryan* (which denoted a quality of soul, not a quality of race, the Sanskrit *ārya* meaning the one who ploughs, toils, fights and climbs towards the heights), he was *the warrior of the light and the traveller to the Truth*.¹³ The gods to whom he offered the sacrifice

were not fictions but real cosmic powers that aided us in our ascent towards Immortality, *amritam*: "Let there be that ancient friendship between you gods and us!" exclaimed the Rishi (VI.18.5), and the gods were not far away: they helped men and only wished to see them grow in strength and light. Indeed, to the Rishis the world did not stop at mind's narrow vision, it was a "rising tier," an unbroken gradation of "secret planes" which existed both in us and outside us, objectively and subjectively. Objectively, the world was—and still is!—composed of a series of cosmic planes of consciousness (the mind being one of them, rather low on this ascending scale); each plane had its own gods and beings, and those cosmic planes were connected to our individual, subjective being through a certain number of inner meeting points or inner "centres" (called *chakras* in Indian psychology), which in ordinary man are generally dormant, but can awaken under the action of the fire of aspiration—*Agni* again—and, breaking our narrow limits, bring us into contact with the vastness of the worlds, with *our* vastness: "Without effort one world moves in the other" (II.24.5). Thus the goal of the Rishi was neither

to remain shut in his shell, nor also to escape into an ineffable Absolute: it was to grow in consciousness and know all the "dwelling places" of our kingdom; it was to fulfil "our various lives," to "be born" to the totality of our being, for the worlds too were called "births" and we had to be born seven times in order to possess the full spiritual experience: "In the ignorance of my mind, I ask of these steps of the Gods that are set within. The all-knowing Gods have taken the Infant of a year and they have woven about him seven threads to make this weft" (I.164.5).

The gods are thus not merely outer, objective powers, but also inner powers, for every time we are "born" to another world, it means, first of all, that we have given birth in us to the god corresponding to that world, or, as we would now say, that we have risen in our consciousness, otherwise there would be no meeting point. And so we give birth to greater and greater gods, that is to say, we rise higher and higher in our consciousness and grow in divinity and vastness. Indeed the gods are said to "be born" in us and the Human Forefathers to be *fashioning the gods as a smith forges the crude material in his smithy*¹⁴—and that by growing in

us, *they increase the earth and heaven*¹⁵ (that is, the capacities of our physical and mental existence). "Let the gods be in all our homes!" exclaims the Vedic bard (IV.1.18). Thus it is our turn to create the gods, after they created us, for the original cause is also the eventual outcome: "Rescue thy father, in thy knowledge keep him safe, thy father who becomes thy son and bears thee" (V.3.9). (And perhaps we now better understand the Vedic *mantra*, that inspired formula which vibrates like a gong and demolishes walls within.) Nowhere in the Veda is there any mention of the supernatural or the "miraculous" (*The supernatural, said Sri Aurobindo, is that the nature of which we have not attained or do not yet know, or the means of which we have not yet conquered*¹⁶), everything is the fruit of a progressive self-cultivation, a long journey strewn with pitfalls, a patient conquest of the forces of darkness, until the day when the Flame has grown strong enough in us to break its sheath. Then the complete redemption is accomplished, *the birth of the Son by the sacrifice*¹⁷: "The red-glowing mass of him is seen: a great god has been delivered out of the darkness" (V.1.2).

But we still have not reached the heart of the

Vedic secret. The birth of *Agni*, the soul—so many men are yet unborn—is only the onset of the journey. That inner flame seeks, it is the seeker in us, because it is a spark of the great primeval Fire and will not be satisfied till it has recovered its solar totality, the “lost sun” the Veda constantly refers to. But when we have risen from plane to plane and the Flame has taken successive births in the triple world of our lower existence—physical, vital, mental—it will still be unsatisfied, it will still want to ascend and ascend higher. And we soon reach a mental border where it seems as if there is nothing left to grasp, or even to see, and one must abolish everything and leap into the ecstasy of a great Light. Then one feels all around, almost painfully, that carapace of matter which keeps us imprisoned and prevents the final blaze of the Flame; one understands the cry of him who said, “My kingdom is not of this world,” one understands the Vedantic sages of India and perhaps the sages of all worlds and all religions, who said again and again, “He who would embrace the Eternal must leave this body.” Will our flame thus forever be truncated here below, our quest forever frustrated? Shall we always have to

choose the one or the other, to renounce the earth for heaven?

But beyond the lower triple world, the Rishis discovered "a certain fourth," *turiyam svid*, they found the "vast dwelling place," the "sun-world," *Swar*: "I have arisen from earth to the mid-world [life], I have arisen from the mid-world to heaven [mind], from the level of the firmament of heaven I have gone to the Sun-world, the Light" (Yajur-Veda, 17.67). And it is said, "Mortals, they achieved immortality" (Rig-Veda, I.110.4). What then is their secret? How did they rise from the "heaven of mind" to the "great heaven" without leaving this body, without, as it were, going into ecstasies?

The secret lies in Matter. Because it is in Matter that *Agni* is confined and we are confined. *Agni* is said to be "without head and feet, concealing his two extremities" (IV.1.11): above he disappears in the "great heaven" of the superconscient (which the Rishis also called "the great ocean"), while below he sinks into the "formless ocean" of the inconscient (which they also called the "rock"). We are truncated. But the Rishis were also men of a solid realism (the true realism, that which takes its stand on the Spirit),

and since the summits of the mind opened out onto a blank of light, doubtless ecstatic but with no hold over the world, they set out on the downward path. Thus begins the quest for the "lost sun," the long "pilgrimage" of the descent into the unconscious, and the merciless fight against the dark forces—the "thieves of the sun," *panis* and *vritras*, pythons and giants hidden in the "dark lair" with the whole cohort of the usurpers: the dualizers, obstructors, tearers, and COVERERS. But the "divine worker," *Agni*, is aided by the gods and led in his quest by the "intuitive ray," *Saramā*, the hound of heaven with a subtle sense of smell, who puts him on the track of the "stolen herds" (strange herds, these "shining herds"). At times a fleeting dawn breaks forth, then all grows dim again. It is a slow, plodding advance, "digging and digging," a fight against the "wolves," whose fury increases the nearer one draws to the lair—*Agni* is a warrior. *Agni* grows through difficulties, his flame burning more brilliantly with each blow from the Adversary. But did not the Rishis say, "Night and Day both suckle the divine Child" (I.95.1)? They even called Night and Day "two sisters, immortal, with a common lover [the sun] . . . common they,

though different their forms" (I.113.2,3). The alternations of darkness and light quicken, till the Day arrives at last and the "herds of Dawn"* surge forth, awakening "some one who was dead" (I.113.8). The "infinite rock" of the unconscious is shattered and the seeker un-covers "the sun dwelling in the darkness" (III.39.5), the divine consciousness in the heart of Matter.

Such is the secret of the Veda, the victory of the seven Rishis Angiras and the Navagwas, who discovered the "path of the gods": "Our fathers by their words broke the strong and stubborn places, the Angiras seers shattered the mountain rock with their cry; they made in us a path to the Great Heaven, they discovered the Day and the sun-world and the intuitive ray and the shining herds" (I.71.2). "They found the treasure of heaven hidden in the secret cavern like the young of the Bird, within the infinite rock" (I.130.3), "the contents of the pregnant hill came forth for the supreme birth . . . a god opened the human doors" (V.45). In the very depths of Matter, that is to say, in the body, on earth, the Rishis found themselves hurled into the Light—the

* Reminiscent of Homer and the "herds of Helios."

very Light others sought on high, without their body and without the earth, in ecstasy—and they called it “the Great Passage.” Without leaving the earth, they found the “vast dwelling place,” which is “the gods’ own home,” *Swar*, the primeval sun-world which Sri Aurobindo calls the *supramental world*: “Human beings [the Rishis stress that they are human] slaying the Coverer have crossed beyond both earth and heaven [matter and mind] and made the wide world for their dwelling place” (I.36.8). They entered “the Truth, the Right, the Vast,” *satyam, ritam, brihat*, “the unbroken light, the fearless light,” for there, suffering and falsehood and death are no more: there is only immortality, *amritam*. And the Veda gives us its high unifying vision, which has illuminated India to this day: “There is a Truth covered by a Truth, where they unyoke the horses of the Sun; the ten hundreds stood together, there was That One; I saw the greatest of the embodied gods” (V.62.1). That Truth covering another Truth is the summit of the mind, the mystical border where the seeker topples into ecstasy, thinking he has found the supreme Truth; it is the “golden lid” of the Upanishad of later times. But the Rishis found

the Truth which lies beyond that Truth, the place where the ten hundred rays of our illuminations and our lower truths are gathered into one great solar Body, they saw the radiant Body of which all the gods are living powers—*tad ekam*, That One; *tat satyam*, That Truth. "The Existent is One," says Rishi Dirghatamas, "but the sages express It variously; they say Indra, Varuna, Mitra, Agni; they call It Agni, Yama, Matariswan . . ." (I.164.46).

This solar vision does not annul our earth, but fulfils it: "Then, indeed, they awoke and saw all behind and wide around them, then, indeed, they held the ecstasy that is enjoyed in heaven. In all gated houses were all the gods" (IV.1.18). The Sun has invaded all our dwellings, he has taken possession of all our acts and movements; divine Bliss has come down to our very cells, like a wine, *Soma*: "O Agni and Soma, that heroic might of yours was made conscient" (I.93.4). *Soma*, the wine of immortality flowing in our veins, the ambrosia which is perhaps not the immortality of a body but the possession of our divine consciousness on the summit of the eternal mountain. But woe to him who is not ready, he "breaks like an ill-baked jar," for he cannot hold the Intensity: "He tastes not that delight

who is unripe and whose body has not suffered in the heat of the fire; they alone are able to bear that and enjoy it who have been prepared by the flame" (IX.83.1). The Rishi has gone through all ordeals, he is now established "in his high foundation" (III.55.7) and possesses in his body, on this earth, "the two births" at once, human and divine, "eternal and in one nest," "as the enjoyer of his two wives" (I.62.7).

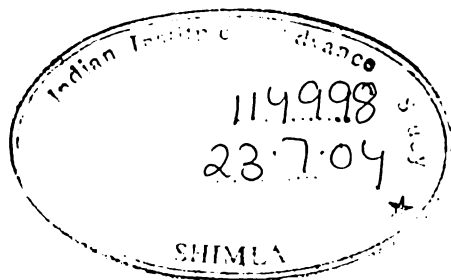
All is reconciled. The Rishi is "the son of the two mothers," son of *Aditi*, the luminous cow, Mother of the infinite light, creatrix of the worlds, but also son of *Diti*, the dark cow, Mother of the "black infinite" and divided existence, for at the end of her apparent Night, *Diti* eventually gives us the milk of heaven and the divine birth. All is fulfilled. The Rishi "sets flowing in one movement human strengths and things divine," (IX.70.3) he has realized the universal in the individual, he has become the Infinite in the finite: "Then shall thy humanity become as if the workings of these gods; it is as if the visible heaven of light were founded in thee" (V.66.2). And far from spurning the earth the Rishi prays, "O Godhead, guard for us the Infinite and lavish on us the finite." (IV.2.11)

The journey draws to its close. *Agni* has recovered his solar totality, his two concealed extremities. The "inviolable work" is accomplished. For *Agni* is where high and low meet—and in truth, there is no longer high or low; there is only a single Sun everywhere: "O Flame, thou goest to the ocean of Heaven, towards the gods; thou makest to meet together the godheads of the planes, the waters that are in the realm of light above the sun and the waters that abide below" (III.22.3). "O Fire, O universal Godhead, thou art the navel-knot of the earths and their inhabitants; all men born thou controllest and supportest like a pillar" (I.59.1), "O Flame, thou foundest the mortal in a supreme immortality. . . . Thou createst divine bliss and human joy" (I.31.7).

For Joy is the heart of the world and in the depths of all things, it is "the well of honey covered by the rock" (II.24.4).

By giving us the keys to the Veda, *the last testament of the Ages of Intuition*,¹⁸ Sri Aurobindo may have given us the key to all traditions, from Iran to Central America and the banks of the Rhine, the secret of all seekers of perfection, from Eleusis to the Cathars and alchemists, for we do seem to find everywhere that ancient


Memory of a great transmutative truth and its overshadowing, of the Quest, the battle of the heroes of Light against the evil forces, Indra and the snake *Vritra*, Apollo and the Python, Thor and the Giants, Sigurd and Fafner, but nowhere do we find so purely the totality of the Secret, and we are filled with wonder at these Vedic conquerors: *They may not have yoked the lightning to their chariots, nor weighed sun and star, nor materialised all the destructive forces in Nature to aid them in massacre and domination, but they had measured and fathomed all the heavens and earths within us, they had cast their plummet into the inconscient and the subconscious and the superconscient; they had read the riddle of death and found the secret of immortality. . . . But over it all there was the "Aryan light", a confidence and joy and a happy, equal friendliness with the Gods which the Aryan brought with him into the world.*¹⁹



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* All references except the first are to the Centenary Edition of Sri Aurobindo's works. Quotations from the Veda are in Sri Aurobindo's translation.

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