



THE VISION OF RICH DEATH IN JOHN KEATS'S "ODE TO A NIGHTINGALE": AN AUROBINDONEAN PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract:

John Keats's vision of rich death while listening to the melodious voice of Nightingale, the manifestation of the Immortal on the earth, takes one beyond the plane of corporeality of the terrestrial existence. One comes to the plane of death-birth continuum, and, consequently, discovers a supra-earthly, nay, spiritual truth, the plane which earlier comes into the vision of the ancient Rishis of India. The richness of death which comes into the vision of Keats is revealed when we explore death in the light of the yogic discovery of Sri Aurobindo, a literary luminary of the 19th-20th century of India of, what he calls, 'Psychic Being', a flame of the Divine Self in the being of man. Sri Aurobindo discovers that the psychic being is instrumental in the evolution of consciousness to its spiritual and supramental planes in the death-birth phenomenon as it gathers the spiritual experiences of man's life and, accordingly, lays foundation of his higher spiritual life to come in his next birth. Being immortal, it carries the foundation in the next birth of man. He also discovers that the foundation is laid at the time of the physical death of man. Such death, therefore, comes to be rich.

Keywords: Nightingale, Rich Death, Plane of Immortality, Psychic Being, Jivatman, Spiritual Consciousness, Supramental Consciousness, Mantra

1. Introduction

"Now more than ever seems it rich to die
To cease upon the midnight with no pain
While thou art pouring forth thy soul abroad
In such an ecstasy!" (Ode to A Nightingale)

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Here manifests the yogic and spiritual consciousness in the being of John Keats, the spiritual consciousness wherein one has the knowledge and realisation of the One Divine, the One Cosmic Self. Such spiritual consciousness reveals a death that is rich. The plane of death-birth continuum comes into our vision consequently in such a vision of rich death. The truth of rebirth emerges here. A higher life in the birth to come is, simultaneously, seen as destined for such a rich death. The spiritual consciousness takes over the rein of this higher life. It leads ultimately to attaining the transcendent plane of the One Divine as a result of innumerable successive rich deaths followed by higher lives in successive rebirths. One's individual self gets transformed accordingly since the phenomenon manifests the evolutionary path.

Such higher truth comes to be intelligible to us when we examine Keats's vision of rich death in the light of the yogic discoveries of the Rishis, especially, of Sri Aurobindo. It requires us to transcend the plane of physical mind consciousness and attain the yogic and the spiritual planes of consciousness wherein the rich death is discovered to be the fundamental reason for the higher life in the next birth. The yearning for such rich death we discover in the inmost being of the poet in his aforesaid lines.

The very vision of a rich death reveals the prior emergence of yogic consciousness in the being of Keats, the emergence which could further take him to the plane of spiritual consciousness to discover the truth of the existence of the sovereign plane of Immortality, the transcendent plane of Divine Consciousness. The emergence of yogic and spiritual consciousness in his being is all the more visible when he wishes to 'fly' to the Nightingale "on the viewless wings of Poesy", the Nightingale whom he discovers to be the manifestation of the plane of Immortality, the transcendent plane of the Divine Consciousness.

"Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!
No hungry generations tread thee down;
The voice I hear this passing night was heard
In ancient days by emperor and clown:
Perhaps the self-same song that found a path
Through the sad heart of Ruth, when, sick for home,
She stood in tears amid the alien corn;
The same that oft-times hath
Charm'd magic casements, opening on the foam
Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn." (Ode to A Nightingale)

Poetry is essentially the spiritual consciousness. In his *The Prelude*, William Wordsworth says that poetry is "cloth'd in priestly robe" (line 51), the robe which is the manifestation of the spiritual consciousness. Going deeper, the Vedic Rishis discover the poets as the 'Seer'. Sri Aurobindo says that the consciousness of a Seer is a very high plane of spiritual consciousness, the "Illumined Mind Consciousness" (1990: 945), he terms. The consciousness of 'Seer' begins to emerge from this plane of consciousness. It is the inner

sight that takes the reign of the being of the Seer. He further goes on to say that "the essential power of the poetic word is to make us see, not to make us think or feel" (Sri Aurobindo 1991: 23). He adds that "the more directly the word reaches and sinks deep into the soul, the greater the poetry" (11).

What Keats visualises as "the viewless wings of Poesy" are the planes of spiritual consciousness, the planes which take one to the transcendent plane of the Divine, the plane of Immortality. Sri Aurobindo terms the plane 'Supramental'. Keats' "viewless wings of Poesy" come to be the four planes of spiritual consciousness that Sri Aurobindo reveals, the High Mind, the Illumined Mind, the Intuitive Mind, and the Overmind Consciousness as he terms them. The emergence of all four planes of the spiritual consciousness in one's being enables one yogically to ascend and enter into the transcendent plane of the Supramental, the Immortality, the manifestation of which, as noted earlier, is Nightingale.

Spiritual Consciousness, the essential manifestation of which is poetry, as we see in Sri Aurobindo's deeper revelations, is not tangible to the matter-oriented mind of man. The yearning of Keats to 'fly' to the Nightingale "on the viewless wings of Poesy" is the manifestation of his spiritual yearning, the divine aspiration to rise to the plane of Supramental, the Immortality. Here, poetry is found to be "the spiritual excitement of a rhythmic voyage of self-discovery" (Sri Aurobindo 1991:16) as revealed by Sri Aurobindo, —the discovery of the Divine Self wherefrom the yearning to attain the transcendent Divine, the plane of Immortality rises. Such Divine Self exists at the centre of man's being. In one of his letters on yoga, Sri Aurobindo says:

"When one speaks of the divine spark, one is thinking of the soul as a portion of the Divine which has descended from above into the manifestation rather than of some thing which has separated itself from the cosmos. It is the nature that has formed itself out of the cosmic forces—mind out of cosmic mind, life out of cosmic life, body out of cosmic Matter." (Sri Aurobindo 1979: 1091-92)

The yogic consciousness in man rises from his Soul-Self. It enables him to discover his deeper selves, the life-self, the mind-self, and, finally, the Divine Self. The gradual emergence of the yogic consciousness in him keeps on giving impetus to the 'rhythmic voyage', of which Sri Aurobindo speaks to discover the deeper supraphysical and spiritual selves, or what Sri Aurobindo terms, 'Subliminal Self', and finally, the transcendent Divine Self, existing within his being. The gradual emergence of the yogic consciousness with the resultant discovery of the aforesaid supraphysical and 'Subliminal Self', wherein all the planes of spiritual consciousness exist, comes to be the "viewless wings of Poesy".

In his yogic and spiritual consciousness, Keats discovers that Immortality, or to say, Divine Consciousness exists in Its sovereign state in the terrestrial existence too, and manifests Itself in it. Its manifestation he discovers in the Nightingale as noted earlier. Her melodious voice, to him, comes to be the envelopment of the transcendent Divine

Consciousness, the voice to which a matter-oriented mind is not receptive. On an in-depth investigation, it is also found that the Divine Consciousness through the Nightingale descends into his being and brings about inner yogic changes therein. The descent is visible when Sri Aurobindo says in his epic *Savitri*:

"As when the mantra sinks in Yoga's ear,
Its message enters stirring the blind brain
And keeps in the dim ignorant cells its sound;
The hearer understands a form of words
And, musing on the index thought it holds,
He strives to read it with the labouring mind,
But finds bright hints, not the embodied truth:
Then, falling silent in himself to know
He meets the deeper listening of his soul;
The Word repeats itself in rhythmic strains:
Thought, vision, feeling, sense, the body's self
Are seized unalterably and he endures
An ecstasy and an immortal change;..." (Sri Aurobindo 2012: 381)

'Mantra' is, as Sri Aurobindo reveals, the highest spiritual consciousness. It is, as he says, the "poetic expression of the deepest spiritual reality" (1991: 17). He reveals, as stated earlier, the four planes of the spiritual consciousness, High Mind, Illumined Mind, Intuitive Mind, and the Overmind Consciousness. He very categorically states that poetry written from some higher plane of the Intuitive Mind Consciousness and the Overmind Consciousness is Mantra, beyond which, what he calls, 'Supramental Consciousness', exists. The Supramental Consciousness, the plane of Immortality that Keats yearns to attain, exists beyond the plane of Creation. The Intuitive Mind Consciousness is the 'ray' of the transcendent Supramental Consciousness, Sri Aurobindo says. He further explains that it is "an immediate translation of truth into mental terms half transformed by a radiant supramental substance, a translation of some infinite self-knowledge that acts above mind in the superconscient spirit" (1984: 781). On penetration, the aforesaid higher plane of the Intuitive Mind Consciousness wherefrom Mantra is written, as noted earlier, is found to be transformed by the "radiant supramental substance" (781). It is on account of the supramental transformation that it comes to be the plane of Mantra. Even though it is within the finite world of mind, it is free from finiteness on account of its supramental transformation. Further, the Overmind Consciousness which is the highest plane of the spiritual consciousness is the cosmic consciousness, he says. It "carries in it a delegated light from the supramental Gnosis" (1990: 950), he further says. He goes on to add that "the cosmic empire of the Overmind" (2012: 666) is "Time's buffer state bordering between Eternity" (666). The Supramental Consciousness is the transcendent Mantra since it exists beyond the plane of Creation as noted earlier. It is this consciousness which descends into the being of Keats in the voice

of the Nightingale. It brings about inner evolutionary changes, down to the level of the cells of his body, and goes to make him visualise his death coming to be rich. He discovers that death comes to be spiritually vibrant in the descent of the Divine Consciousness into his being. The spiritual vibration which is transcendent to the materiality of existence discloses the existence of the plane of the death-birth continuum to him. This goes to make him realise the richness of death while listening to the melodious voice of Nightingale, the richness wherein exists the continuity of his real Self, the Soul-Self.

Keats's vision of the existence of the One Transcendent Divine in the creation, to be specific, the terrestrial existence takes us into the vision of the ancient Vedic Rishis, the vision which is contained in the poetic line of the Rig Veda which speaks of the Primordial Resolve "Eko-Ham Bahu-Syam, Praja-Eyam", "I am One, become Many, yet remain the Same". The One Transcendent Divine comes to be many in bringing creation into existence. It does not lose Its Transcendent plane of Existence beyond such creation in spite of being 'many'. Further, it exists in its sovereign transcendent state within the creation too, the manifestation of which Keats discovers in the Nightingale as noted earlier.

2. Death as A Process of Life

The spiritually vibrant death, the vision of which comes into the being of Keats, goes to reveal Death as "a process of Life" (Sri Aurobindo 1990: 193), not as a "denial of Life" (193). The plane of the death-birth continuum lies in such "process of life". Here man emerges as Immortal Self, not as an amalgamation of body, life, and mind. For, it is the Immortal Self alone that continues to exist on the plane of death-birth continuum after his death. The rest, at the centre of which the Immortal Self exists, lose their existence. It comes to exist in the next birth with a new body, life, and mind, the truth of which Sri Aurobindo states in one of his letters on yoga. "It takes on a new mind, vital and body", he says (1979: 453).

Keats has unmistakably experienced the existence of the Divine Self in his being while receiving the melodious voice of the plane of the Transcendent Divine in the being of the Nightingale. The Divine Consciousness in the form of the melodious voice of the Nightingale descends from Its Sovereign Transcendent plane of existence into his being to meet his Immortal Self to form a spiritually bright future for him. The tangible experience of the descent he expresses in 'ecstasy' as noted at the outset of the paper. In Its descent, the descent which we witness in the light of Sri Aurobindo when he speaks of the Mantra, as noted earlier, sinking "in Yoga's ear" (2012: 23), the Divine Consciousness makes the divisiveness of the consciousnesses of the constituent parts, to be more specific, body, life and mind which are, on the present stage of evolution, matter-oriented in the being of man, evolve to be receptive to the integrality of Its Consciousness, shedding their divisive tendency. Such receptivity which evolves in the beings of the constituent parts goes to occupy a central place in the new body, life, and mind of the next birth as this receptivity is under the influence of his Soul-Self, the Self which

transmits it in its new body, life, and mind, an exploration of which will be made later on in the paper while drawing our attention to Sri Aurobindo's yogic revelation of the existence of, what he calls, 'Psychic Being' in the constitution of the being of man and its function therein. In other words, the new body, life, and mind in the next birth have such receptivity to ascend the higher planes of the spiritual mind-consciousness.

3. Sri Aurobindo's Yogic Discovery of 'Jivatman' and the 'Psychic Being' in Man

In order to discover the validity of Keats's vision of rich death while listening to the melodious voice of Nightingale we are required to look into some more yogic revelations made by Sri Aurobindo. In his yogic consciousness, Sri Aurobindo has revealed, as noted earlier, that man is made up of body, life, and mind, at the centre of which exists the Divine Self. 'Jivatman' he calls it. It is the real Self of man since it is immortal. It is immortal for the reason that it is unborn. It exists beyond the plane of mortality, the plane created by the divisiveness of consciousness. Jivatman is, in fact, the individual poise of the Supreme Divine. Such individual poise the Supreme Divine assumes when It brings creation into existence. Of It, in the being of an individual, he says in one of his letters on yoga:

"Jivatma is the individual Self—the central being.

The central being is that which is not born, does not evolve, but presides over all the individual manifestation." (Sri Aurobindo 1979: 267)

He further says in his another letter on yoga:

"The central being is the being which presides over the different births one after the other, but is itself unborn, for it does not descend into the being but is above it—it holds together the mental, vital, and physical being and all the various parts of the personality and it controls the life either through the mental being and the mental thought and will or through the psychic, whichever may happen to be in front or most powerful in nature. If it does not exercise its control, then the consciousness is in great disorder and every part of the personality acts for itself so that there is no coherence in the thought, feeling or action."
(269)

He makes it clear in his other letter on yoga that the Jivatman has produced a projection of itself, and the 'psychic', of which he speaks in the aforesaid letter, is such projection. He says:

"The psychic is its projection here—for the psychic being is in evolution and from within supports our whole evolution; it receives the essence of all experience and by that develops the personality Godward." (267)

He adds:

"The psychic is a spark come from Divine which is there in all things and as the individual evolves it grows in him and manifests as the psychic being, the soul, seeking always for the Divine and the Truth and answering to the Divine and the Truth whenever and wherever it meets it." (278)

He calls it 'Passenger' (2012: 23) on the plane of death-birth continuum. In his epic *Savitri*, he says:

"Passenger from life to life, from scale to scale,
Changing his imaged self from form to form,
He regards the icon growing by his gaze
And in the worm foresees the coming god.
At last the traveller in the paths of Time
Arrives on the frontiers of eternity." (2012: 23)

He explains its role:

"Missioned to lead man in the Ignorance towards the light of the Divine Consciousness, it takes the essence of all experience in the Ignorance to form the nucleus of soul-growth in nature; the rest it turns into material for the future growth of the instruments which it has to use until they are ready to be a luminous instrumentation of the Divine. It is this secret psychic entity that is the true original Conscience in us deeper than the constructed and conventional conscience of the moralist, for it is this which points always towards Truth and Right and Beauty, towards Love and Harmony and all that is a divine possibility in us, and persists till these things become the major need of our nature." (Sri Aurobindo 1990: 226)

Also, he says:

"The psychic is not above but behind—its seat is behind the heart, its power is not knowledge but an essential or spiritual feeling—it has the clearest sense of the Truth and a sort of inherent perception of it which is of the nature of soul-perception and soul-feeling. It is our inmost being and supports all the others, mental, vital, physical, but it is also much veiled by them and has to act upon them as an influence rather than by its sovereign right of direct action; its direct action becomes normal and preponderant only at a high stage of development or by yoga." (1979: 269)

The psychic being as the 'spark' of Jivatman (278) can be viewed as the folded state of Jivatman. It unfolds itself when something from the transcendent plane of Divine

descends into the being of man. It comes to be a matter of spiritual experience for him which the psychic being gathers, laying the foundation of a spiritually rich life in the next birth. Consequent upon this, there takes place transformation in the body, the life, and the mind in the being of man. The psychic being, thus, comes to be instrumental in man's evolution.

4. Psychic Being and Rich Death

The psychic being is the key to Keats's vision of rich death since it receives the thing of divinity and, consequently, grows the being of man Godward. What is to be noted emphatically here in Sri Aurobindo's yogic revelation is the role of the psychic being, or to say psychic entity in shaping the future of man in the life of his next birth, the role which has been brought into notice earlier above when Sri Aurobindo says that "it takes the essence of all experience" (1990: 226) in his *The Life Divine* and in the above noted poetic lines of *Savitri*, "Changing his imaged self from form to form", as a result of taking the essence of all experience, the imaged self which is the integrality of the body, the life and the mind in the being of man (23). As a result of gathering spiritual experience in the descent of the Divine Consciousness in the being of the Keats, the psychic being which is the folded state of Jivatman unfolds itself to receive what further descends from the transcendent plane of the Divine Consciousness. Consequently, he moves towards the "frontiers of eternity" (Sri Aurobindo 2012: 23).

We have another yogic revelation of Sri Aurobindo of which he speaks in some of his letters on rebirth. He says:

"It should be noted that the conditions of the future birth are determined fundamentally not during the stay in the psychic world but at the time of death—the psychic being then chooses what it should work out in the next terrestrial appearance and the conditions arrange themselves accordingly." (1979: 441)

He further says:

"The psychic being at the time of death chooses what it will work out in the next birth and determines the character and conditions of the new personality. Life is for the evolutionary growth by experience in the conditions of the Ignorance till one is ready for the higher Light." (443)

Having a coherent view of the aforesaid yogic realities it is quite obvious that the Divine Consciousness in the form of the melodious voice of the Nightingale which is the manifestation of the One Transcendent Divine in the terrestrial existence descends into the being of Keats for bringing about the evolutionary change of consciousness in him. His psychic being receives it as a result of which its gradual unfoldment takes place for the rise of the Divine Consciousness in him and shapes his future in his next birth

spiritually oriented, for which it further evolves his being 'Godward'. Therefore, such death comes to be rich.

5. The Summit View

It is now obvious that Keats's vision of rich death reveals that he, too, has a strong intuitive awareness of the yogic and spiritual truth of existence and the role of the psychic being. Sri Aurobindo's yogic vision imparts justice to Keats, the justice which T. S. Eliot, unfortunately, denies while commenting on his vision of beauty to be the truth as "a serious blemish" (Eliot T. S. 1999: 270).

Sri Aurobindo has categorically stated that in the premature death of Keats humanity has suffered the most (Sri Aurobindo 1991: 126) since the "real spiritual vision" (26) in him could not get an opportunity to enlighten and enrich the world with the higher yogic truth of the terrestrial existence which is yet to come into the vision of mankind.

In spite of his premature death, Keats' vision of such a higher truth is a great contribution to the evolution of English poetry to the planes of Mantric Consciousness, the Intuitive Mind Consciousness, the Overmind Consciousness, and finally, the transcendent Supramental Consciousness. It is to be noted here that Sri Aurobindo's epic *Savitri* manifests the Supramental Consciousness. The manifestation begins to take place in the very opening canto of the epic when he reveals the pre-creation state of existence till the end when he reveals the transcendent yoga of supramentalisation of Savitri's being and the eventual supramentalisation of terrestrial existence. It is this transcendent Supramental that Keats yearns to enter. He appears to be in the state of, what the yogis term, 'Samadhi' in which he receives such a higher vision. But, later on, he appears to have come out of it, on account of which he finds a different reality in the mundane world, the reality that is not spiritually vibrant, the reality that is in the grip of mortality. It makes him say, "I wake or sleep?"

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

About the Author

Dr. Nikhil Kumar is a Professor & Head, Department of English, Veer Kunwar Singh University, Arrah in the state of Bihar in India. He has been teaching for over thirty-six years as a university teacher in the state of Bihar in India. He has done extensive work on Sri Aurobindo, a great literary luminary of a very high plane of yogic consciousness. Dr. Kumar has published more than two dozen research papers on Sri Aurobindo's poetic works in different international journals and the journals published from Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry, now, Puducherry in India. He has made an in-depth study of Sri Aurobindo's poetic and dramatic works, especially, his monumental epic *Savitri* which is a poetry of the future since it has been written from the transcendent plane of Supramental Consciousness, the consciousness to which mankind is yet to evolve. The

supramental consciousness is an evolutionary breakthrough. The present paper is a piece of evidence of his rich academic inheritance from his father Professor (Late) Devendra Kumar who imbibed Sri Aurobindo's yogic vision in him.

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