Chapter VI

Parallelism: Sri Aurobindo

It is not seldom that we see critics referring to the parallelism in eminent writers, and that quite elaborately, often under a separate section. Isocrates, Cicero and Burke are universally accepted as masters of this device, while there are also references, as we see quite often in modern prose criticism, to Johnson, Hazlitt, Addison, Macaulay, Saul Bellow and a lot others. The reason why critics give so much importance to this scheme is not hard to find. Parallelism plays a key role in expository development. It is based upon such principles as balance and antithesis which are nothing but externalization of internal logic. In Sri Aurobindo's case, it is mostly the externalization of spiritual logic.
Sri Aurobindo's parallel styles deserve special mention. They play a key role in his great expositions, and the most remarkable fact about them is that they are not artful. They strike us by their naturalness, and help us, by means of emphasis, to concentrate on the subject. In fact, the only reason why Sri Aurobindo does not appear artificial -- to the sympathetic reader of course -- is that his technical devices do not overtop his theme. There is no stylization in his mature works; the beauty is in the single impression born of a synthesis of various elements. Matter and manner have a combined identity. This harmonization we do not always see in writers who have employed the balance-antithesis-scheme quite frequently. William Minto blames Macaulay, in A Manual of English Prose Literature, for having overdone this device. Sri Aurobindo, however, does not impress us by any artifice of style. One has a total impression. We do not know which particular element is hypnotising us. Parallelism is one of the many elements -- metaphor, grandeur of theme, inner logic, personality etc. -- that sweep us in combination. It is an important element and lends charm to the rhythm of his prose. Not only structural rhythm or mere pitch rhythm,
but certain kinds of parallelism take us beyond the words to make us feel the inner rhythm. To be convinced of this function of parallelism, one has to read *Essays on the Gita*. We prefer the book to *The Life Divine*, because the song-sequence is easier to enjoy.

For a critic of Sri Aurobindo's prose, it is easy to be overwhelmed by the multiplicity of parallel schemes he employs in his writings. Bewildering is the frequency of parallels; bewildering is their variety. The critic has to be alert always, not only for the clausal and phrasal parallels or single-word-parallel schemes, but for a deeper device, that is, the parallelism of sequence. He has to keep at his finger-tips the characteristics of different schemes — *scesis onomaton*, *homophone*, *tricolon*, *isocolon*, *anaphora*, *epistrophe*, *symploce*, *asyndeton*, *polysyndeton*, *climax* and quite a few other devices related to parallelism. We shall not pretend to characterize all these devices. We shall try to examine some genres.

Most things actually come in inspiration, although they are controlled by the intellect. The most common is the pairing of words which also cannot be restricted to a particular kind. Sometimes Sanskrit words are paired to explain an English "pair".
'This essential faculty and the essential limitation that accompanies it are the truth of Mind and fix its real nature and action, svabhava and svadharma...'

The pairing can be paradoxical.

'What is his method and his system? He has no method and every method.'

In the very rhetorical question, there is pairing. The answer comes in the form of a paradox. The whole unit seems to be apophrēsis (replying to one's own arguments). Remarkable is the inspired use of "pairs" in procession in the following passage.

'This compassion observes with an eye of love and wisdom and calm strength the battle and the struggle, the strength and weakness of man, his virtues and sins, his joy and suffering, his knowledge and his ignorance, his wisdom and his folly, his aspiration and his failure and it enters into it all to help and to heal.'
Except for battle and struggle, each parallel is emphasizing distinction, is consisting of words opposite in meaning. Even the conclusion of the unit is drawn with a pair. The single-word-procession is a fascinating device. This often comes within a period.

'To develop the sattwic part of our nature, a nature of light, understanding, balance, harmony, sympathy, goodwill, kindness, fellow-feeling, self-control, rightly ordered and harmonised action, is the best we can do in the limits of the mental formation, but it is a stage and not the goal of our growth of being.'

Here Sri Aurobindo is characterizing 'sattwic part of our nature' by inspired procession of single words. The unit ends with an antithetic parallel.

Sri Aurobindo handles emphatic techniques with the utmost care.

'The master-word of the subconscious is Life, the master-word of superconscient is Light.'
The anaphoral emphasis is just to make the distinction clear. The unit has a suppressed antithesis. It has also the element of rhyme. It is only "Light" that does not rhyme with "Life".

Parallelism is often used for brevity and concentrated emphasis.

'The world lives in us, thinks in us, forms itself in us; but we imagine that it is we who live, think, become separately by ourselves. As we are ignorant of our timeless, of our superconscient, of our subliminal and subconscious selves, so are we ignorant of our universal self.'

Here, in the first sentence, the writer states the subject only once and parallels his verbs. Connectives are dropped. There is rhyme too. We get epistrophe at the very beginning ("in us"). We see anaphora in the second sentence.

Parallelism can also be seen in Sri Aurobindo's aphoristic style. The ancient rhetoricians call it
apophonema (a sententia put in antithetical form).

'Spirit is the crown of universal existence; Matter is its basis; Mind is the link between the two. Spirit is that which is concealed and has to be revealed; mind and body are the means by which it seeks to reveal itself.....' 9

The instances of _scesis onomaton_ (a string of synonymous expressions) we have given elsewhere. We should refer to the repetition of sound here. Sri Aurobindo uses homophones quite often.

"Whitman's aim is consciently, clearly, prefessedly to make a great revolution in the whole method of poetry..." 9

It is also a case of asyndeton.

Many more variations of Sri Aurobindo's parallel style are there, but these are examples enough to prove that he is a naturally powerful rhetorician.
Foot Notes


2. p.163, B.C.L. Vol.-18.


5. p.629, B.C.L. Vol.-18.

6. p.65, Ibid.

7. p.564, Ibid.


10. There is a kind of parallel style which some writers of England have used with great effect. Burke, for instance, is a master of this style. Dr. I. A. Richards uses the form in his prose of criticism. Sri Aurobindo has done miraculous things in this traditional form. Joel S. Goldsmith comes close to Sri Aurobindo.

"To complain of the age we live in, to murmur at the present possessors of power, to lament the past, to conceive extravagant hopes of the future, are the common dispositions of the greatest part
of mankind...."


"To habilitate the critic, to defend accepted standards against Tolstoyan attacks, to narrow the interval between these standards and popular taste, to protect the art against the crude moralities of Puritans and perverts, a general theory of value, which will not leave the statement "This is good, that bad", either vague or arbitrary, must be provided."


"To know, possess and be the divine being in an animal and egoistic consciousness, to convert our twilt or obscure physical mentality into the plenary supramental illumination, to build peace and a self-existant bliss where there is only a stress of transitory satisfactions besieged by physical pain and emotional suffering, to establish an infinite freedom in a world which presents itself as a group of mechanical necessities, to discover and realise the immortal life in a body subjected to death and constant mutation, -- this is offered to us as the manifestation of God in Matter and the goal of Nature in her terrestrial evolution."

pp.1-2, B.C.L.Vol.-18.

( Sri Aurobindo )
Sometimes the sentences remain incomplete in the sense that the verbs are omitted.

"To be perfectly equal in all happenings and to all beings, and to see and feel them as one with oneself and one with the Divine; to feel all in oneself and all in God; to feel God in all and oneself in all."

p.93, B.C.L.Vol.-20, (Sri Aurobindo)

This is the style of the Gita. Goldsmith seems to have caught something of this atmosphere and inner rhythm.

"To overcome the world means to overcome, or rise above, all sense desire, to be free of world attraction, to live in the world but be not of it, to attain freedom from bondage to personal ego, and to understand the spiritual world and thus gain freedom from the false sense of God's universe."

p.120, Conscious Union With God (Formerly Metaphysical Notes). Joel S. Goldsmith. L.N. Fowler & Co.Ltd. London.