Chapter 2
The Dawn

Sri Aurobindo's poetry reveals variety in theme, rhythm and form and a vast journey in the realm of consciousness. Even the geographical area which comes under his sensitive gaze in his early poems\(^{10}\) reveals vastness and variety. From the land of daisy, crocus and narcissus to "regions of eternal snow" ("Envoi" 18) in India, from the voiceful shores of Hippocrene to the shores of the Ganges where "the flowers of Eden blow" ("Envoi" 20), from Sicilian olive-groves to the Indian groves scented with soft asoca's bloom, from Glasnevin cemetery to the plains, hills, and rivers of sweet Bengal—such is the vastness of the region his "lucid eyes survey" ("Estelle" 1). Joy and grief of love, transience of life, sensuous beauty of nature in its various moods, political events, admiration for the glorious and great, thought of his motherland, occasional mystic hints are the varied themes of his early poetic efflorescence.

These early poems are the utterances of his sensitive adolescence, its response to different situations and to beauty in its diverse forms and intensities. Some critics hold that these poems are mostly derivative showing influences and echoes of the Elizabethans, the early lyrical Milton, the young

\(^{10}\) Poems included in *Songs to Myrtilla* or bunched together with the title "Short Poems 1890-1900" in volume 5 of *Sri Aurobindo Birth Centenary Library*.
Romantics and also the decadent English poets. Ghose observes that Sri Aurobindo’s literary career opens "on a poetic note alien and aesthetic, with many echoes from the Western classics" (Circle 1965: 39). K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar also points out that in these early poems "the derivative element is prominent enough" (Sri Aurobindo 38). He attributes this to his lack of knowledge about India and her culture. On the other hand he was a keen student of Greek, Latin and English poetry and literature. His studies quite naturally left some imprint on his mind and consequently on his poetry. His kinship with Greek muse resulted in a classic restraint and frequent allusions to Greek mythology. English poetic tradition and technique were in front of him and through study and practice he had been a part of that current. In reply to a comment that in his early verse written in England and included in Songs to Myrtilla the derivative element is prominent, Sri Aurobindo writes:

"He [Sri Aurobindo] knew nothing about India or her culture, etc. What the poems express is the education and imaginations and ideas and feelings created by a purely European culture and surroundings—it could not be otherwise. In the same way the poems on Indian subjects and surroundings in the same book express the first reactions to India and Indian culture after the return home and first acquaintance with these things."

(Aurobindo 26:6)

In spite of these echoes, impacts and affinities he remains fresh in inspiration and expression. He expresses his own emotion and reaction.
These literary echoes "only enhance the poetic flavour" (Iyengar, Sri Aurobindo 38). Again his drifting away from India under the compulsion of circumstances could not erase the memory of his mother country from his mind. That is why India was returning to his mind now and then. "O Coil, Coil" shows how the poet is transported to the Indian grove; the image of "bleeding, chastised, bound" ("Hie Jacet" 2) Ireland brings the image of mother India suffering the similar fate to the anguished mind of the young poet. Despite his alienation India remained a living presence in his consciousness.

In these early poems we also find verbal excellence, attempt at technical perfection and restraint. Sri Aurobindo, the poet, has never neglected the poetic art. It seems as if from the beginning he has already found his footing in English poetry. In these formative years he had already developed a keenly sensitive ear for English sound and rhythm. Yet one should not expect these poems to be above all imperfections because his London days may be regarded as the period of his poetic apprenticeship. Ghose points out that many of those earlier poems, excluding some like the sonnet on the Cuckoo, "The Lover’s Complaint" and "Night by the Sea", look like "exercises and translations from Plato, Meleager and imitations from Bengali" (The Poetry of Sri Aurobindo 61). To P.C. Kotoky those poems "do not mean much beyond their verbal excellence and technical perfection" (90). However, the young poet cannot be denied spontaneity, poetic felicity, a lyrical flow, rhythmic skill, and sensuous richness of
images. In spite of the deficiencies he had a surer beginning with regard to both poetic art and felicity of expression.

Transformation of the earth through heightening of consciousness has been the aim of Sri Aurobindo's life-long work. His primary concern is the earth. It is evident in his early poems that he writes with his gaze fixed on the earth and earthly affairs. Occasionally we confront sparks of mystic hints, however vague, which hold promise of the possibility of the future years. In some poems we get hints of his spiritual aspiration as in "Estelle" and "Perfect Thy motion."

"Songs to Myrtilla", the first piece in Short Poems 1890-1900, presents a sensuous, vivid and photogenic picture of nature's beauty that make the earth splendid and delightful. The poem is in the form of a poetic dialogue between Glaucus and Ethon who expatiate respectively on the charms and attractions of night and day. The poem shows felicity of expression, a simple passion and a sweet rhythmic movement. The lines glide along smoothly and merrily:

The year is but a masque of flowers,
Of light and song and honied showers.
In the soft springtide comes the bird
Of heaven whose speech is one sweet word,
One word of sweet and magic power to bring
Green branches back and ruddy lights of spring. (47-52)

The very first lines portraying a nightscape takes us into a hushed mystic land. The use of the words like "dim," "whispering," "solitude,"
"invisible" accentuate the mystery. The night is followed by a pleasant and bright morning. With precision the poet paints a charming morning. The lines touch us because of their simplicity and decorative touches:

   morning bright

   Has put the stars out ere the light,
   And from their dewy cushions rise
   Sweet flowers half-opening their eyes.
   O pleasant then to feel as if new-born
   The sweet, unripe and virgin air, the air of morn. (17-22)

The picturesque and lively images, simple and sweet metaphors thrill the reader's heart. One feels the dance when the poet writes: "The blue sea dances like a girl/With sapphire and with pearl/Crowning her locks" (43-45).

In another instance the poet pours similes and metaphors to create the living image of a slim maid:

   Snowdrops are thy feet,
   Thy waist a crescent moon,
   And like a silver wand
   Thy body slight doth stand
   Or like a silver beech aspire.
   Thine arms are walls for white caresses,
   Thy mouth a tale of crimson kisses,
   Thine eyes two amorous treasuries of fire. (181-88)
The third speech of Glaucus gives a beautiful account of many flowers--rose, lily, cowslip, crocus. The last speech of AEthon presents a passionate image of Love--"I found as in a jewelled box / Love, rose-red, sleeping with imprisoned locks" (155-56). The last speech of Glaucus, an adoration of the beauty of Myrtilla, compels us to feel her presence.

At places the poet employs the evocative power of sound and colour. He creates the image of Love with an apt combination of colours:

- His [Love's] wings were purple-grained and slow;
- His voice was very sweet and very low;
- His rose-lit cheeks, his eyes' pale bloom
- Were sorrow's anteroom;
- His wings did cause melodious moan;
- His mouth was like a rose o'erblown. (139-44)

With an accuracy the poet catches the refreshing sounds of the virgin air of the morning in the following lines:

- And pleasant are her melodies,
- Rustle of winds, rustle of trees,
- Birds' voices in the eaves,
- Birds' voices in the green melodious leaves;
- The herdsman's flute among his flocks,
- Sweet water hurrying from reluctant rocks,
- And all sweet hours and all sweet showers
- And all sweet sounds that please the noonday flowers. (23-30)
The cumulative melodies of the rustle of winds and trees, birds' voices, and herdsman's flute impress upon us the sweet and eternal flow of life.

The poet is yet to develop his inward gaze. Even then he views the world and life in a way little differently from others. He sighs at the ephemeral rejoicing of the people in the temporal: "For who in April shall remember / The certain end of drear November?" (55-56). He sums up the transience of life in a beautiful line: "Unwilling leaves lapse wearily one by one" (60). But this sad note gives place to a note of hope and assertion; "Stain not thy perfumed prime / With care for autumn's pale decay, / But live like these thy sunny day" (98-100).

The names of persons, flowers, plants, terms like "Dryad" and "Naiad" show Hellenic influence. The very word "Myrtilla" is derived from Myrtle, the name of the plant sacred to Venus.

The poet succeeds in creating a world of wonder filled with joy and delight. He captures the sounds and colours; songs and scenes and presents them for our delight. But mostly the things are on the surface.

Love lyrics written by Sri Aurobindo in this period generally present love accompanied by passion, grief, and despair. An undercurrent of pathos and grief flows through the poems "The Lover's Complaint" and "Love in Sorrow". Though these two poems have little substance, they are impassioned poetic effusions. "The Lover's Complaint" is, as Ghose finds, "stylised fancy" (The poetry of Sri Aurobindo 60) composed on classical
models. Both the poems are little puzzling. At places we feel tempted to sense a personal note, but we are not sure if these are the poet's personal feelings or passionate expression of the feelings of human heart. "The Lover's Complaint" is replete with classical allusions. Of course, these do not hinder spontaneity of feeling and poetic music. The refrain "O plaintive, murmuring reed . . . ." intensifies the feeling of grief. The pain of frustration, the burden of loneliness and a silent, over-powering grief pervade the lines of "Love in Sorrow." Pale sunset, sigh of breeze and the wailing river set the tone and temper of the poem. The sense of frustration lingers throughout the poem with Autumn's "pale requiem" (51) increasing its intensity. In this poem the melancholy note is more poignantly felt. Iyengar appropriately points out that "neither the burden of classical allusion in the former ['The Lover's Complaint'] nor the accents of romantic frustration that punctuate the latter ['Love in Sorrow'] should blind us to the reality of poignant grief that sustains the two lyrics as moving poetic utterances" (Sri Aurobindo 40-41).

Again, moods of joy and grief, the natural companions of worldly love, find expression in the poem "Night by the Sea." Grief intrudes on the love-laden happy solitudes. Ocean, the old historian, tells the wind solemnly: "All the dreadful heart of tears / Hidden in the pleasant years" (27-28). One can discern the poet's voice in that of the Ocean. Lover's felicity suddenly changes into thoughts of transience and death. The poem opens with a note of sadness: "Love, a moment drop thy hands; / Night within my soul expands" (1-2).
This poem has also little substance as in the two above mentioned love poems. But the regular rhyme-beat carries the reader along. In its sensuous imagery it appears to be Keatsian:

Many a girl's lips ruby-red
With their vernal honey fed
Happy mouths, and soft cheeks flushed
With Love's rosy sunlight blushed.
Ruddy lips of many a boy
Blithe discovered hills of joy
Ruby-guided through a kiss
To the sweet highways of bliss. (35-42)

These poems, graceful and pretty in their expression, still fail somehow to bring out the simplicity of real emotion that buds in the heart.

The love-lyric "Song" is an explicit expression of passionate love. The poet proclaims his desire to love "a woman's royal heart" and prays to Venus to bind her for him. Compactness and pointedness give the poem its strength. A different mode of love finds expression in the poem "The Spring Child." The whole poem is vibrant with the tenderness of a wellwisher's love--the love that prays and blesses.

"The Island Grave" is set in an elegiac mood. It opens with the "slow moan" of the blue waves. Juxtaposition of the slow-moaning ocean and the evening accentuates the sense of an all-pervading silence like the silence of the grave. The hushed approach of "January with cold eyes and clear"
intensifies the prevailing sombreness. The poet in line 12 ("Pale child of winter, dead ere youth was old") shocks his reader by making him aware of death which is enterally tagged with life. The poem seems to convey the idea that death is the ultimate destiny of man. The concluding lines carry the poet's awareness of death and powerlessness of man who cannot but yield "to the silent ways":

And I will meet thee in that lonely place.

Then the grey dawn shall end my hateful days
And death admit me to the silent ways. (16-18)

The poem "O Coil, Coil" presents an Indian scene. Even though the poet lives in an alien land mentally he travels to his mother country. "Soft asoca's bloom," "peepel tree" and "chocrobacque" take the readers to India. The poet's description of the coil as "honied envoy of the spring" (1) brings the scene of an Indian grove full of the fragrance of mango blossoms. The following lines make us intensely aware of an Indian love-scene that symbolises the lover's passionate longing for his beloved:

Thou by the waters wailing to thy love,
O chocrobacque! have comfort, since to thee
The dawn brings sweetest recompense of tears
And she thou lovest hears thy pain. (29-32)

The legend of the bird chocrobacque's separation from his sweet-heart for the whole long night, their anguished cry caused by the pangs of separation and the sweet reunion that follows at dawn finds repeated
expression in Indian literature. Contrastingly the lover’s sorrow, in this poem, grows deeper and deeper and the coil’s “too happy voice” seems to be “grief’s record” (2). As the poem moves forward the intensity of sorrow increases. Coil’s honied song becomes “voice of tears” and “sweetness uttering death” (23). The immensity of sorrow reaches its climax when the final disclosure comes:

But I

Am desolate in the heart of fruitful months,
Am widowed in the sight of happy things,
Uttering my moan to the unhoused winds
O coil, coil, to the winds and thee. (32-36)

Crossing the boundary of love and sorrow and the dreamland of rose, lily, cowslip, and crocus the mind of the young poet wandered into the area of contemporary events and situations, especially Irish politics, vindicating that he was not aloof from life. Sri Aurobindo was never alienated from the world either in the early days of his poetic career or in the later days when his poetry expressed his spiritual vision. Irish politics inspired the poems “Charles Stewart Parnell,” “Hic Jacet” and “Lines on Ireland.” Perhaps he discovered an identity between the prevailing condition in India and Ireland:

"Erin, his mother, bleeding, chastised, bound, / Naked to imputation, poor, denied, / While alien masters held her house of pride" (Hic Jacet”2-4).

The six lines on Parnell mark a condensed adequacy. The first line and half of the second, "O pale and guiding light, now star unsphered, /
Deliverer lately hailed" awaken us to the greatness of that noble patriot. The words "our lords" in the second line indicate that Sri Aurobindo was aware of the yoke of British rule under which both India, his motherland and Ireland, that of Parnell’s were suffering alike. The fourth line ("Who smot’st them with an edge surpassing swords!") gives us a glimpse of the blazing wrath of a hero who is also a patriot and who stands against all oppression and unjust rule. But even the "most feared, most hated" (3) Parnell was to prove but "a child of tragic earth" (5).

Both the poems "C.S. Parnell" and "Hic Jacet" forcefully express the patriotic spirit and political awareness of the poet and achieve beauty through clarity and economy of words. In "Hic Jacet" the sad end of a great and noble career awakens spontaneous sympathy. With deep sorrow and sigh the poet hurls accusation at the thankless nation:

And he who raised her from her forlorn life
Loosening the fountains of that mighty strife,
Where sits he? On what high foreshadowing throne
Guarded by grateful hearts? Beneath this stone
He lies: this guerdon only Ireland gave,
A broken heart and an unhonoured grave. (19-20)

"Lines on Ireland" is an indignant dig at the abject state after Ireland had given Parnell "a broken heart and an unhonoured grave." Ireland, the "nurse and mother of heroic men" (24) was the light in whom "races of weaker destiny / Their beauteous image of rebellion saw" (10-11). But it has
now fallen by being ruled by "ignoble hearts, courageous to effect / Their country's ruin" (63-64). The poet exposes the blindness of animal humanity eager to be misled by the proud and equally blind leaders who pose themselves as the upholders of wisdom. The inevitable result is self-destruction and disgrace.

The poet analyses the fall of Ireland from glory and her ancient spirit and attributes the present state to her renouncing the divine help and her disloyalty to her own self. No adversity can bring disgrace to a nation unless something essential in it erodes. The poet exhorts the unhappy country to be wise to understand her own self. Many years later, with a sage-like wisdom he exhorted the people of his country at Uttarpara to rise to the spirit's call. Ireland can be transfigured and resurrected by a "power within" (39) that directs like "effective spirit unseen / Behind the mask of trivial forms, a source / And fund of tranquil and collected force" (40-42).

Among the early poems there are a series of tributes to the great and glorious. With warmth the young poet explores their noble traits and showers praises and compliments. In these tributes one feels a more personal tone.

The well-chiselled eulogies "Goethe", "The Lost Deliverer" and "Saraswati with the Lotus" are compact and adequate. The poet's heart flows out to sing the glory of already famed Goethe with a conviction, clarity and neatness: "Traveller with calm, inimitable paces, / Critic with judgement absolute to all time" (3-4).
The poet is no less adequately expressive in eulogizing the less-known heroic figure Ferdinand Lassalle in the poem "The Lost Deliverer." The potential greatness of this man had hardly been recognized and he did not get a chance to blossom fully because he was killed in a duel by the man whom his fickle-hearted beloved had married. In a few lines the poet presents an immensely potential leader who strides the mortal earth like the heroes of ancient Greece. Lassalle’s life began gloriously: "Pythian he came; repressed beneath his heel / The hydra of the world with bruised head" (1-2). Thus the poem opens with an allusion to Greek mythology. Then it moves ahead to disclose the abrupt turn in the life of Lassalle. All his greatness was to end in vain. The word "vainly" in the third line awakens us to the irony of life. The poet condenses, with a sense of finality, one of life’s recurrent paradoxes in the following lines: "since Fate’s immeasurable wheel / Could parley with a straw" (3-4). The extraordinary hero fell prey to the bullet "a weakling sped" (4). A highly gifted leader shines only to vanish being counteracted by pretty circumstances. Little frailty or untamed impulse or sudden turn of event can extinguish bright and vast possibilities. Such is the irony and tragedy of life and the irrevocable role of "Fate’s immeasurable wheel." The closing line also unveils another facet of life’s irony: "We fell because a woman’s faith was light." Though brief, the poem contains life’s

11 "The opening lines telescope two incidents of classical legend. Apollo is called Pythian because he slew the serpent Python which was tormenting the god’s mother Latona, while the killer of the terrible Lernaean Hydra with the hundred heads was Hercules "(K.D. Sethna, Sri Aurobindo 63)
drama with its turns and tragedies expressed in a well-measured and vigorous language.

"Saraswati with the Lotus" suggests Bankim's greatness. Shedding of honeyed tears by Saraswati, the goddess of learning, at the passing away of Bankim Chandra signifies his greatness. The poet describes him as "the golden light, the fragrance heaven rears" (4).

Then three other memorial poems, namely "Bankim Chandra Chatterji," "Madhusudan Dutt" and "Transiit, Non Periit" follow. The last of these three poems relates to Rajnarayan Bose, the poet's grand father and a saintly soul. He died or, as the poet sees, "with vastness wed" (13). The poet's vision exceeds the worldly limits. He sees Rajnarayan's earthly days as earthly hour of "the omnipresent Thought" (5). Death did not bring annihilation, rather it added vastness and grandeur:

As when a sacred river in its course
Dives into ocean, there its strength abides
Not less because with vastness wed and works
Unnoticed in the grandeur of the tides. (11-14)

The poem is remarkable for its gravity and sustained movement. It shows to some extent the maturity and sublimity perceptible in the later poems of Sri Aurobindo.

The poems "Bankim Chandra Chatterji" and "Madhusudan Dutt" are tributes to these two great writers of Bengal. Wordsworth in his poem "London, 1802" once sang of the poetic beauty as well as glorious personality of Milton with warmth and fervour:
Thy soul was like a Star, and dwelt apart:
Thou hadst a voice whose sound was like the sea,
Pure as the naked heavens, majestic, free;
So didst thou travel on life’s common way
In cheerful godliness. (Palgrave 176)

Sir Aurobindo’s heart opens in admiration of Bankim’s creative beauty
and his noble personality and godly demeanour with similar fervour:

His nature kingly was and as a god
In large serenity and light he trod
His daily way, yet beauty, like soft flowers
Wreathing a hero’s sword, ruled all his hours.
Thus moving in these iron times and drear,
Barren of bliss and robbed of golden cheer,
He sowed the desert with ruddy-hearted rose,
The sweetest voice that ever spoke in prose. (27-34)

In the same exalted and emotional vein the young poet sings the glory
of Madhusudan Dutt. His contribution to enrich Bengali language has been
acknowledged with frankness and warmth: "Poet, who first with skill
inspired did teach / Greatness to our divine Bengali speech" (1-2). The poet
brings out the rare achievements of this great literary figure: "These accents
are not of the imperfect earth; / Rather the god was voiceful in their birth"
(33-34).

"Envoi" ventilates a feeling of discontentment and a desire for
transition. Here discontentment signifies an aspiration to rise above the "pale
poems" (1) and to soar towards the "unattainable spheres" (2). The sense of discontentment is almost changed into a pain caused by lack of fulfilment:

"... but stay not here to pain / My heart with hopeless passion and renew / Visions of beauty that my lips shall ne'er attain" (10-12). The call of Saraswati "from her lotus heaven" (17) adds flame to this aspiration and the young poet's heart pines for the "regions of eternal snow" (18), the symbol of highest achievement. Consequently, the urge for transition seems to be irresistible and the poet bids farewell to the Hellenic muse. Sri Aurobindo himself has indicated that in this poem the statement was "of a transition from one culture to another" (Aurobindo 26: 7). Almost with a decisive note the poet sings: "For in Sicilian olive-groves no more / Or seldom must my footprints now be seen" (13-14). "Envoi" is thus a record of the poet's awareness that Hellenic muse, despite its grandeur and grace, is not for him and that for the genuine expression of his poetic self he requires to turn to India. He articulates with force and quiet zeal his desire to return to his native land:

Me from her lotus heaven Saraswati
Has called to regions of eternal snow
And Ganges pacing to the southern sea,
Ganges upon whose shores the flowers of Eden blow. (17-20).

These lines acquire significance as they indicate a line of transition. Some critics discover symbolic and spiritual significance in these lines whereas others find only a feeling of nostalgia and an awareness to look
homeward. Attempting an interpretation, Sethna writes that the call of Saraswati symbolises the "great and high work" awaiting Sri Aurobindo in India, regions of eternal snow stand for "pure spiritual wisdom," the pacing Ganges for the "majestic flow of the wisdom-touched soul through life's lands until it joins the ocean of the Infinite," and the flowers of Eden for the "perfected happy details of those soul-fertilised places" (Sri Aurobindo 338). Ghose, on the other hand, finds in the expression "flowers of Eden" the sign of the "classicist" and in the reference to Saraswati and Ganges indication of "the conventional and the nostalgic." For back home, Sri Aurobindo talks "not of philosophy and religion, rather of love, deathless love..." (The poetry of Sri Aurobindo 63). But a close reading of the poem reveals that these lines do not carry such vibrant symbolic significance nor do they convey mere nostalgia. They show the young poet's faint awareness of the glorious cultural heritage of his motherland. Indian cultural heritage is most explicitly represented by the Himalayas and the Ganges. A silent and thrilling hope that somehow his motherland's cultural heritage will be able to open the door of inspiration in him for poetic creation flows through these lines. This poem creates a distinct impression that the young poet has already decided his future course of action, ie to know and be inspired by the cultural heritage of India. Hence it is not simple nostalgia; it rather seems to carry a thrill, a fascination, a hope and a calm aspiration for a new adventure. The inner call urges the poet to take a decisive leap and look beyond the inspiration of the Hellenic muse to explore the highest and the subtlest in him.
In this poem Sri Aurobindo creates an impression that his highest poetic potentiality was still dormant. Greek muse, art and philosophy could not offer him the elevating inspiration necessary for the great leap at poetic and spiritual consummation. So his heart naturally pines for the Indian shores. With a blazing aspiration he looks to India, the land of tapasyā, for an enlightening inwardness and for fulfilment.

12 Concentration of the will and energy to control the mind, vital and physical and to change them or to bring down the higher consciousness or for any other yogic purpose or high purpose.