Chapter 3
The Path

Aurobindo's return from England to India shows a significant transition both cultural, as indicated in the poem "Envoi," and spiritual. He felt that the tamas that had enveloped him throughout the period of his stay in England left him when he was coming back to India. The moment he touched Indian soil a deep calm and silence descended on him. It was as if mother India revealed her soul-power and spiritual glory to him. His return is thus the starting point of his spiritual journey from the intellectual mind to the supermind. The path is mysteriously hinted to him. Since that hour his life's journey and his poetry attain a unique synthesis. For him, writing poetry gradually becomes a part of his sadhana.

The glimpse of her spiritual power that India revealed to him awakened in him the aspiration to discover India's inner glory. As a result he was totally absorbed in studies at Boroda. Through his studies he was searching for the spiritual identity of a nation destined to be the guiding light of the world in his scheme of things. The search ultimately led him to self-discovery.

13 Sri Aurobindo once described a dream at Darjeeling that he remembered: "I was lying down one day when I saw suddenly a great Tamas rushing into me and enveloping me and the whole universe. After that I had a great darkness always hanging on to me all through my stay in England. I believe that darkness had something to do with the Tamas that came upon me. It left me only when I was coming back to India" (Purani, Evening Talks, Second Series 140).
His interminable concentration, vast and deep studies gradually opened before him the cultural and spiritual world of India. With an amazing rapidity he mastered Sanskrit. The Veda and the Upanishad enlightened him revealing a new world of knowledge and bliss. The Rāmāyana and the Mahābhārata captivated him as they presented significant glimpses of Indian culture. Kalidasa and Bhartrihari enriched his mind with different shades of Indian life. Sri Aurobindo once remarked: "Valmiki, Vyasa and Kalidasa are the essence of the history of ancient India; if all else also were lost, they would still be its sole and sufficient cultural history..." (Aurobindo 3:217). He also delved deep into Bengali literature. Thus a sublime process of capturing the cultural heritage and spiritual wisdom of India was on the move. To discover the essential identity of India was an inner urge of Sri Aurobindo. G.H. Langley aptly observes:

Aurobindo’s motive in seeking the meaning of ancient tradition was not merely intellectual curiosity, but a deeper need of his spirit. He was in quest of the truth by which India would find rebirth and self-fulfilment, and through which she would bring her peculiar contribution to human progress. (15)

The poet creates out of himself. Yet the spiritual, intellectual, aesthetic tradition and environment of the nation or the national spirit and the national mind play some role, as Sri Aurobindo holds, in shaping the vision of the poet. So it will not be an exaggeration to conclude that his studies and his familiarity with the Indian ideas and tradition had a nourishing impact on
the growth of his poetic vision. He was no more the poet of "Sicilian olive-
groves." He looked at the banks of the Ganges and the "regions of eternal
snow." He was no more the poet of transient love, the fruit of feeble
passion, but of love glorified with undying passion and aspiration, of love
that conquers challenging impediments, even the cold, grim death. He
moved no more in the World of dryads and naiads, but among the gods and
apsarās. He turned his gaze from the Western classics to the Eastern ones.

Translations, interpretations and poems flowed abundantly indicating
his creative zeal inspired by his intimacy with Indian culture. Quite naturally
Indian spiritual wisdom, richly suggestive mythological episodes and highly
imaginative literary creations of Kalidasa arrested his imagination. As he
came to know India more closely and deeply he became acutely aware of the
need for her freedom. At that time the thought of India's freedom was
uppermost in his mind. In such moments of darkness in the history of a
nation the lovers of the motherland turn to her glorious past in search of the
light of inspiration and to find the reason of failure. The rejuvenation of
India's glorious cultural heritage to instil confidence in a dormant nation
might have been a goal of Aurobindonian creative afflatus. His mind familiar
with the studies of Western classics discovered a sustaining source for
creative writing in Indian classics and mythology. Prema Nandakumar
rightly observes that as he was "nurtured early in the classics of the West,
it was natural for him to make poetry out of myth and legend by rendering
anew old heroic actions in terms of a new accession of the spirit" (Circle
In India Sri Aurobindo’s poetic genius found adequate expression in Urvasie. When a young poet tried his hand to handle the Urvasie-theme, it was a challenge in many ways. It is a theme of perennial fascination for India’s creative minds. From the Veda streaming through different Purānas this theme has flowed into later Sanskrit literature to absorb a mighty mind like Kalidasa. The flow continued in the modern time through Rabindranath. Recently this theme has been treated by the Hindi poet R.S. Dinakar in his poem Urvasie. Even the writers of different regional languages have touched this appealing theme. Yet Sri Aurobindo’s Urvasie showed a freshness and presented a new interpretation. In addition he chose blank verse to be the metre of his first major poetic creation. It was also his first experiment with the epic form and design. Yet his success was not less admirable. Success, writes Iyanger, "is written on every page of the poem" (Sri Aurobindo Mandir Annual 1949: 72). The poem runs through 1,473 lines of metrical romance divided into four cantos.

The outline of the story of Urvasie is simple. But the workings of the impassioned minds of Pururavus and Urvasie are delicately delineated. The poem narrates the story of "a goddess won to mortal arms" (Urvasie 3.1). Pururavus’s passion for the celestial nymph Urvasie grows vast and illimitable. He pronounces without pretension that he loves her small face more than all his worlds. Urvasie is a reward of his valour. The hero-warrior snatches her from the outrageous hands of the giant Cayshie. But love that sprouts abruptly and spontaneously makes inroads into the heart
of the valiant hero. Heaven’s unparalleled beauty stirs his heart. Thus a
dream is conceived but remains to be fulfilled. Pururavas’s passion
overpowers him and distracts him from kingly duties. Urvasie’s reciprocative
passion and desire trouble her and bring upon her the wrath and curse of
Bharuth. Indra’s intervention saves her from permanent expulsion from
 heaven and, on the other hand, deprives Pururavus of permanent union with
 her. A delightful Urvasie descends on the earth and unites with waiting
 Pururavus. Sri Aurobindo’s powerful imagination makes this moment of
 union an eternal one. In the face of the flaming passion of the lovers time
 stands still. For the next seven years all their earthly moments become the
 moments of ambrosial dreams. A race of glorious children are the fruits of
 their love. Noble influence is the natural consequence of her presence in
 Ilian, Pururavus’s kingdom. But in the heaven the gods grow infelicitous and
 jealousy is the inevitable result. They play tricks. Pururavus’s naked
 magnificence is revealed to Urvasie and the delightful dream ends. Urvasie,
a spark of the heaven, returns to her natural habitat. Grief cripples
 Pururavus; even robs him of his valiant heart. But in the sorrow’s cave rises
 the flame of indomitable resolution. He vows to pursue Urvasie even to
 unearthly distances. He moves ahead without looking back. The king in
 Pururavus is almost veiled and the disconsolate yet resolute lover in him
 acts. His mind is fixed on the path to be trodden. Penance follows.
 Benediction is won from the goddesses, viz the Mother of the Aryans and
 the Mighty Mother. Pururavus transcends his mortality because of his
penance and consequent benediction. He enters the Gundhurva world to win the embrace of Urvasie "till the long night when God asleep shall fall" (Urvasie 4.303).

Sri Aurobindo's blank verse in Urvasie is passion-charged with lines flowing ahead racily. It is mostly free from intellectual and philosophical burden. Blank verse demands the blending of poetic imagination, spontaneity and alert artistry. In Sri Aurobindo the artist's alertness and rich imagination mingle. Sethna finds that in his blank verse it is impossible to draw "a dividing line between the artist and the poet" and one hardly feels "a forced technical trick" (Circle 1947: 116). His early blank-verse also displays his many-sided poetic genius. He is a poet uttering passionate language of love, painting nature with vivid expressiveness, capable of adding intuitive significance to his poetry and bringing a mystical and spiritual vibrancy. With his forceful and lively imagination and effective verse-making power Sri Aurobindo has elevated the poem to epic heights. Highlighting the epic features in Urvasie Iyengar writes:

Urvasie has all the felicities of diction and style associated with epic poetry. Expanded similes, Nature descriptions, arrays of polysyllabic proper names, set eloquent speeches, all these are true to the type; and the whole action ultimately hinges upon a Temptation, a temptation to which the Hero succumbs. It would be therefore not inappropriate to call Urvasie an epic or an epyllion. (Sri Aurobindo 100-01)
One remarkable achievement in *Urvasie* is that the poet's first abundant poetic effusion shows the promise of his magnum opus. To scale the distance is, of course, a challenging task. Yet the journey is well-begun.

The poem begins with the triumphant return of Pururavus towards the earth. Warm memory of victory is vividly fresh in his mind. We see the victorious hero, travelling "like a star 'twixt earth and heaven" (1.3). The hero's bosom also contains the lover's passion. At the first sight of Urvasie his passion speaks: "'O thou strong god, / Who art thou graspest me with hands of fire, / Making my soul all colour?" (1.76-78). His heart craves for Urvasie and he implores: "'Set thy feet upon my heart, O Goddess! woman to my bosom move!'" (1.116-17).

Heroic-wrath blazes in the lover's heart when occasion demands. At the indication of fear from the north he turns half-wrathful and on being aware of the danger caused by the giant Cayshie he hurls after him. It is the hero and warrior Pururavus who saves "heaven's ravished flower" (1.203). In all the complex and emotional moments of his life the hero in him has awakened. Being alarmed by Urvasie at the time of stealing of the rams by the Gundhurvas he "restored to the great nature of a king. / Wrathful he leaped up and on one swift stride / Reached to his bow" (3.215-17). Even after he abandons his kingdom kingly memories rise in him. He proclaims before Goddess Indira, Patroness of Aryasthan that he "with a kingly soul did kingly deeds" (4.166). But his desire for Urvasie is vast and limitless. He frankly admits that he is "driven by a termless wide desire" (4.167).
Overpowered by the limitless desire to win Urvasie he abandons his kingly duties. Even at a stage the hero in him becomes maimed: "... the vanquished hero lay / With outstretched arms and wept" (3.313-14). But out of this crippling sorrow the hero in him grows resolute to foil the tricks of the gods and to win Urvasie’s eternal clasp. Of course only a hero without compeer can aspire to win the heart of heaven’s incomparable beauty. The fact that she is an immortal being creates an unbridgeable gap between them. But Pururavus overcomes that barrier through tapasyā. Who else than a hero hidden in a lover can undertake the adventures in tapasyā as done by Pururavus? Thus his personality is the confluence of a hero and a lover.

A hero-king, who by reigning "reigned over self" (4.165), fails to tame his desire and does not find "limit to the desire that wastes my [his] soul" (4.250). This failure leads to the failure of the king. The hero-lover wins, but the hero-king fails to uphold his dharma14. His cool indifference to his people is appalling. In spite of this failure he is transmuted, in Sri Aurobindo’s hands, into a symbolic figure bearing human aspiration to win immortality. Pururavus’s quest for Urvasie symbolises the aspiration of the human soul to rise to the height of godhood and immortality. His success as a lover and failure as a king, on the other hand, raise the issue of priority between fulfilling a personal ambition and bearing a nation’s burden. The failings and subjection of India was troubling Sri Aurobindo’s mind at that

14 Ethical conduct and right law of individual and social life.
time. His motherland’s misery required the leader to bear blissfully the burden of the nation at the cost of personal ambitions. So the issue that the poet raises in this poem may be a pointer to the leaders about the need of the hour. Pururavus’s failure in his kingly or kshatriya duties may also be viewed in the context of nation’s failure or misery. Penetrating the meaning of the theme of the poet’s two early narrative poems Urvasie and Love and Death Lotika Ghose rightly observes:

We might well ask before ending our comment on the two poems why it is that the young poet has chosen to depict failure and a falling away from the high destinies which Pururavus and Ruru represent. But when we realise that the poet’s mind was occupied with the question of why ancient India had fallen to its present position of ignorance and subjection the reason is not far to seek. Both the Brahmin and Kshatriya virtues of detached service to the people and of the higher Siddhi which upholds had failed. . . ." (Mandir Annual 1949: 135)

The result is pointed out in the words of Luxmie:

"Yet hast thou maimed the future and discrowned
The Aryan people; for though Ila’s sons,
In Hustina, the city of elephants,
And Indraprustha, future towns, shall rule
Drawing my peoples to one sceptre, at last
Their power by excess of beauty falls,--
Thy sin, Pururavus -- of beauty and love:
And this the land divine to impure grasp
Yields of barbarians from the outer shores." (4.173-81)

Realisation of individual ambition by Pururavus at the cost of the upliftment of the whole race marks the starting point of a great issue which is to be solved in Savitri in a spiritual and cosmic level.

Urvasie opens not only with the bright heroic appearance of Pururavus, but also with the breaking of a new dawn. Dawn has fascinated Sri Aurobindo throughout his poetic career. From the simple "morning bright" in "Songs to Myrtilla" to the "symbol dawn" in Savitri, the dawns of Sri Aurobindo appear in different modes and contours. Here the dawn is delicately developed. It emerges as a power that adds freshness and strength to the manifested world. With the imaginative touch of the poet the dawn becomes an image of expectancy and unfoldment:

as if a line

Of some great poem out of dimness grew,
Slowly unfolding into perfect speech.
The grey lucidity and pearlyness
Bloomed more and more, and over earth chaste again
The freshness of the primal dawn returned,
Life coming with a virginal sharp strength,
Renewed as from the streams of Paradise. (1.23-30)
In the poem dawn appears in another mode too. In the night when Urvasie disappears, Pururavus awaits her return at dawn. But she does not return. In that situation, the dawn is neither fresh nor golden, but "the grey dawn came in / And raised his lashes" (3.255-56).

In *Urvasie* Sri Aurobindo really feels fascinated for the banks of sacred Ganges and snow-clad, silent mountains. That the same poet wandered, only in the recent past, in Sicilian olive-groves seems unlikely. The silent, moon-kissed, snow-capped peaks containing watchful glaciers and streaming waterfalls are chosen to be the meeting place of the extraordinary lovers and the place of penance of Pururavus. But the meditatively quiet peaks failed to quiet the tumult within Pururavus. The cold snows failed to pacify his burning passion for Urvasie. This speaks volumes for the immensity of his passion.

Love’s various and delicately changing moods find lively expression in the lines of *Urvasie*. Both the inner sublimity and outer tumult of love are expressed with equal warmth and insight. The following passage describing the union of Pururavus and Urvasie captures the thrill of union vividly and superbly. Every line vibrates the overwhelming rapture of union:

He moved, he came towards her. She, a leaf
Before a gust among the nearing trees,
Cowered. But, all a sea of mighty joy
Rushing and swallowing up the golden sand,
With a great cry and glad Pururavus
Seized her and caught her to his bosom thrilled,
Clinging and shuddering. All her wonderful hair
Loosened and the wind seized and bore it streaming
Over the shoulder of Pururavus
And on his cheek a softness. She, o'erborne,
Panting, with inarticulate murmurs lay,
Like a slim tree half seen through driving hail,
Her naked arms clasping his neck, her cheek
And golden throat averted, and wide trouble
In her large eyes bewildered with their bliss.
Amid her wind-blown hair their faces met.
With her sweet limbs all his, feeling her breasts
Tumultuous up against his beating heart,
He kissed the glorious mouth of heaven's desire.
So clung they as two shipwrecked in a surge.
Then strong Pururavus, with godlike eyes
Mastering hers, cried tremulous: "O beloved,
O miser of thy rich and happy voice,
One word, one word to tell me that thou lovest."
And Urvasie, all broken on his bosom,
Her godhead in his passion lost, moaned out
From her imprisoned breasts. "My lord, my love!" (2.332-58)

Urvasie's self-giving and surrender is total. Pururavus's acceptance
is equally reciprocal. His whole being is filled with the joy of fulfilment.
With her inarticulate murmurs, soft cheek, naked arms, golden throat, troubled eyes and tumultuous breasts she is an incarnation of youth's irresistible passion. Pururavus is also an untamed stream of passion in which her godhead is lost. Love's blissful consummation is sounded in the last line when Urvasie moans out the last words of acceptance, surrender and union in love: "My lord, my love!" (2.358).

In spite of youthful and romantic exuberance there is beauty and felicity of expression in these lines. The poet constructs the sensuous images of love aptly to express the intensity of the lovers' desires. Love's passion, surrender and fulfilment in union find almost a tangible expression. "A keen psychological sense", remarks Sethna, saves the rich impetuosity "from becoming mere excess" (Circle 1947: 112). These lines passionately evoke, according to Iyengar, "love's fierce storm and its aftermath of fulfilled calm" (Sri Aurobindo 98).

In addition to the pictures of happy union there are passages echoing the grief in love. His heart filled with pangs of separation Pururavus comes to the forests and mountains in search of Urvasie and entreats the Himalayas to give her back to him:

"Lo, she is fled into your silences!
I come to you, O mountains, with a heart
Desolate like you, like you snow-swept, and stretch
Towards your solemn summits kindred hands.
Give back to me, O mountains, give her back."
Long he, in meditation deep immersed,
Strove to dissolve his soul among the hills
Into the thought of Urvasie. The snow
Stole down from heaven and touched his cheek and hair,
The storm-blast from the peaks leaped down and smote
But woke him not, and the white drops in vain
Froze in his locks or crusted all his garb.

For he lived only with his passionate heart. (4.94-98, 103-10)

The passage so intensely expresses the immensity of Pururavus's grief that for a while one feels his pain as one's own. By discovering a kindred soul in the mountain he transfers his experience. The sympathetic mountains identify in him a soul capable of bearing infinite solitude and vast pain. The whole being of Pururavus is transmuted and condensed into the form of his passionate heart.

The poet’s descriptions of nature are equally varied, vivid and rich. After winning Urvasie, Pururavus spent his first two happy years in the solitary vastness of hills and green forests. The following passage presents a felicitous description of nature, ie of hills and forests. Nature here is not only a mute onlooker but a lively participant in human joys and mirth:

In solitary vastnesses of hills
And regions snow-besieged. There in dim gorge
And tenebrous ravine and on wide snows
Clothed with deserted space, o'er precipices
With the far eagles wheeling under them,
Or where large glaciers watch, or under cliffs
O’er-murmured by the streaming waterfalls,
And later in the pleasant lower hills,
He of her beauty world-desired took joy:
And all earth’s silent sublime spaces passed
Into his blood and grew a part of the thought.
Twelve months in the green forests populous,
Life in sunlight and by delightful streams
He increased rapture. The green tremulous groves,
And solitary rivers white with birds,
And watered hollow’s gleam, and sunny boughs
Gorgeous with peacocks or illumining
Bright bosom of doves, in forests, musing day
Or the great night with roar of many beasts,—
All these were Eden round the glorious pair. (3.3-22)

The poet presents, at another place, a serene picture of nature rapt in
quietude. With intense yearning for Urvasie Pururavus comes to the place
pictured in the following passage:

to a silent place he came
Within a heaped enormous region-piled
With prone far-drifting hills, huge peaks o’erwhelmed
Under the vast illimitable snows,—
Snow on ravine, and snow on cliff, and snow
Sweeping in strenuous outlines to heaven,
With distant gleaming vales and turbulent rocks,
Giant precipices black-hewn and bold
Daring the universal whiteness; last,
A mystic gorge into some secret world. (2.190-99)

The pervasiveness of illimitable snows enhance the "hushed mountain
solitudes" (2.203) and is in perfect harmony with the motionlessness of
Pururavus.

The poem contains a number of epic similes or expanded similes in
the manner of European epics. These similes adequately express an emotion
when necessary and add an intensity to it. They bear the stamp of peculiar
Aurobindonian approach and force. The following simile expresses the thrill
that Pururavus experiences as he utters the name Urvasie:

As when a man to the grey face of dawn
Awaking from an unremembered dream,
Repines at life awhile and buffets back
The wave of old familiar thoughts, and hating
His usual happiness and usual cares
Strives to recall a dream's felicity; --
Long strives in vain and rolls his painful thought
Through many alien ways, when sudden comes
A flash, another, and the vision burns
Like lightning in the brain, so leaped that name
Into the musing of the troubled king. (1.119-29)

The following simile vividly brings out the apprehension and fear of Pururavus that torture him:

And as when one puts from him desperately
The thought of an inevitable fate,
Blinding himself with present pleasures, often
At a slight sound, a knocking at the door,
A chance word terrible, or even uncalled
His heart grows sick with sudden fear, and ghastly
The face of that dread future through the window
Looks at him; mute he sits then shuddering:
So to Pururavus in session holy,
Or warlike concourse, or alone, speaking,
Or sitting, often a swift dreadful fear
Made his life naked like a lightning flash. (3.279-90)

The brief similes scattered abundantly throughout the poem are no less touching and expressive. Often like a lightning flash they hold an idea before us. Urvasie appears flesh and blood before us when the poet carves her with the help of the following brief similes: "Perfect she lay amid her tresses wide, / Like a mishandled lily luminous" (1.210-11) or "and her face / Was as a fallen moon among the snows" (1.216-17). These similes add a note of grace and a mystic aura to the revel that the body of the celestial nymph Urvasie is.
In imaginative richness, felicity of expression, and in comprehensiveness in presenting the ancient theme, *Urvasie* shows a promising poet in Sri Aurobindo. Though it is his first major poetic adventure, the poet attempts to present the ancient legend with an epic grandeur and, at the same time, to bring out its significance in the context of a nation's crisis of existence. On the whole his weaknesses found in the poem fail to mar his achievements.

Love and its accompanying passion and grief, the resolution that rises out of the intensity of grief and the consequent achievement--these again form the theme of *Love and Death*. The lovers are Ruru and Priyumvada. The poet here presents a battle fought by man against the grim force of death. About one thousand lines of blank-verse of sustained grandeur constitute this poetic piece *Love and Death*. The central idea of the story is taken from "Adi Parva" of the *Mahābhārata*. Sri Aurobindo's powerful imagination gives the story a transformed shape. He himself makes it clear that "the central idea of the narrative alone is in the *Mahābhārata*" and "the meeting with Kama and the descent into Hell were additions necessitated by the poverty of incident in the original story." The poet has also substituted the name Priyumvada for Pramadvura as the new name is "more manageable to the English tongue" (Aurobindo 5: 258). A significant fact about *Love and Death* is that this is a creation of 14 days of inspired writing. It was written, according to Sri Aurobindo, "in a white heat of inspiration during 14 days of continuous writing--in the morning, of course." He further adds:
"I never wrote anything with such ease and rapidity before or after"
(Aurobindo 26: 267).

The events narrated in the poem happened in the distant past when people were "free and unwalled" (22), rivers "undammed" (27), and love was "new and warm / And stainless" (2-3). Love's bliss made these two souls one. But an unexpected and shocking snake-bite brought all bliss to an abrupt end. With piteous sobbing Priyumvada succumbed to death. Her death emptied Ruru of all his joys. He became dumb and silent bearing enormous grief in his lonely bosom. But the strength of his love made him bold enough to face the horrors of the nether world and to confront Death. He resolved:

"O secrecy terrific, darkness vast,
At which we shudder! Somewhere, I know not where,
Somehow, I know not how, I shall confront
Thy gloom, tremendous spirit, and seize with hands
And prove what thou art and what man." (240-44)

One finds in these lines a faint gleam of the epic theme that was silently growing in the poet's mind. The immensity of Ruru's burning grief even grieved the gods. He raised silent prayer to heaven and it responded. The golden boy Kama descended and stood in front of him.

After an excellent and significant self-explication Kama made Ruru aware of the almost impossible and hard path to Death and of the great sacrifice the "pale ghost" (523) demands, ie "half sweet life" (525). He tried
to make Ruru rational enough not to give vainly half his "sweet portion of this light and gladness" (536). But Ruru, the resolute lover, bluntly refused to be "coldly wise" (564) and expressed his readiness to brave hell's pain. Kama yielded and blessed him with a flower "whose petals changed like flame" (613). That would protect him from the horrors of the hell. Passing through many dismal regions of hell and observing diverse gradations of suffering unbearable to man Ruru proceeded towards the throne of Hades. At last he approached the throne where sits Yama "who keeps the laws of old untouched" (865). The presence of the breathing man was quite disturbing and the mention of love was painfully unwelcome in the dismal surrounding of hell: "But at the name of Love all hell was moved. / Death's throne half faded into twilight" (890-91). All Hades tried to dissuade Ruru from making so great a sacrifice to make Priyumvada reblossom only to fade again. Hell made a two-pronged attempt to influence Ruru. On the one hand it cautioned him against the hard fact that the sacrifice was stronger and the gain was short lived, only "a few years--how miserably few!" (940); on the other it posed to enlighten him on the significance of all his "fruit-bearing years " (946). Hell eulogized the ripe years in men's life:

"Not as a tedious evil nor to be
Lightly rejected gave the gods old age,
But tranquil, but august, but making easy
The steep ascent to God. Therefore must Time
Still batter down the glory and form of youth
And animal magnificent strong ease,

To warn the earthward man that he is spirit

Dallying with transience, nor by death he ends." (916-23)

Hell addressed him as "son of Rishis" to remind him of his glorious lineage. In a further attempt it showed him the picture of his enlightened future in case he did not choose to renounce his precious ripe years, ie "A Rishi to whom infinity is close" (964). Here Yama placed the alternatives before Ruru as Luxmī had done in case of Pururavus. But instead of the vision of the "dawn of that mysterious Face" (975) his mind was seized by the piteous vision of the suffering faces of the dead. Despite its transience and vulnerability to grief love won.

Throughout the poem Ruru has maintained his identity not only as a lover but also as a Rishi's son. A lover's grief awakens in him an invincible will. The awareness of his ancestry also acts as a source of inner strength for him. But when choice is to be made he abandons his fruit-bearing years and prefers "glad briefness, aeons may envy!" (580). Lover's constancy weighs against the higher attainments of an ascetic, ie closeness to infinity. Ruru gladly and unhesitatingly accepts mortality. Of course his sacrifice glorifies love. He, in the core of his being, establishes a complete identification with his beloved. But the world is deprived of the wisdom of a Rishi that Ruru would have been one day, and his enlightening influence. Such influences contribute positively to make life worthy. Thus he fails the humanity by denying ascetic attainments. This may be viewed, as Lotika
observes, as the failure of the "Sattwic or Brahminic Sakti of India" (Mandir Annual 1949: 132). But this is one side of the story. On the other hand, by transforming a lover's intense and immense grief into an invincible will he indicates the infinite possibility hidden in man. Man buried under the fear of death catches a glimpse of its hidden potentiality to confront death. So Ruru's adventure awakens man to aspire after immortality. At the same time one cannot be oblivious of the fact that for the attainment of his goal Ruru, the lover, took the help of his inherited ascetic force. While forcing Kama's descent he depended on the ascetic force born of lover's pain. While urging the grey ocean to open its path he impressed it by disclosing his identity as son of a great Rishi. He could bear the breath of Hades not only because of Kama's flower, but also because of his spiritual force inherited from his enlightened ancestors, namely, Chyavan, Bhrigu and great Brahma. The soul-power of the lover yoked with the ascetic force achieves the impossible. Ruru's victory is thus not only the victory of the lover, but also the victory of the son of a great Rishi.

In Urvasie Pururavus climbed the snow-clad lofty and silent peaks in search of Urvasie. To win her, he had to leave his land and people. Ruru, on the otherhand, entered the hopeless Patala, the region not to be trodden by any breathing man, in search of Priyumvada. She woke up to life as Ruru sacrificed half of his sweet life and together they returned to the green world they loved too deeply. Pururavus met Urvasie on the sky-kissing snowy peaks of the Himalayas where the "heaven's ravished flower" (1.203) was
dropped by the kidnapper Cayshie. But the meeting place of Ruru and Priyumvada was the colourful, perfumed, warm and bright woodland:

In woodlands of the bright and early world,
When love was to himself yet new and warm
And stainless, played like morning with a flower
Ruru with his young bride Priyumvada. (1-4)

Their love for the earth, the woodlands and sunshine is a natural feeling of their heart. Even the parting words that dropped from dying Priyumvada’s lips are: "Alas the green dear home that I must leave / So early!" (159-60). When they returned from hell the earth was also no less thrilled: "but the earth breathed round them, / Glad of her children, and the koil’s voice / Persisted in the morning of the world" (1061-63). Thus both the lovers belong to this mortal earth. This fact makes love’s victory more significant as it indicates the inherent potentiality of man to win over death. Manoj Das appropriately observes that the story of Love and Death belongs to a much later time "when on one hand man has been more deeply rooted to the earth, and on the other hand his aspirations have matured; he is potentially capable of winning the virtues of heaven" (Sri Aurobindo 24).

Love is the central force in Love and Death. It inspires a spirit of adventure in Ruru to face Death. In the beginning of the poem the exuberance of love seems to be unending. The poem opens appropriately in the lively and beautiful early-world setting. The delight of youth finds expression when Ruru, overwhelmed with the joy of love, brusts out:
He cried, "how good it is to live, to love!
Surely our joy shall never end, nor we
Grow old, but like bright rivers or pure winds
Sweetly continue, or revive with flowers,
Or live at least as long as senseless trees." (112-16)

The images brim over with youth's revelry and restlessness. Ruru is like a bright river or pure wind, a young horse or a bright bird. His limbs feel "sharp-edged desire" (88) around them. He is "a happy flood" (7) of passion. Priyuvadha is an epitome of earthly beauty, a casket where beauty compact lies. She is "fresh-cheeked and dew-eyed" (5). Her "dangerous happy breasts" (68) are flames of desire. Her "sweet physical delight" (50) defies any limit. The poet epitomises in a line the "ravishing realm" (62) of her body: "An empire for the glory of a God" (63). The forest with its greenness and colourful, fragrant new blooms looks like a delightful expanse of youthfulness. In the midst of the gleeful nature Ruru and Priyuvadha are engaged in the "fiery play of love" (76):

Fresh-checked and dew-eyed white Priyuvadha
Opened her budded heart of crimson bloom
To love, to Ruru; Ruru, a happy flood
Of passion round a lotus dancing thrilled,
Blinded with his soul's waves Priyuvadha.
To him the earth was a bed for this sole flower,
To her all the world was filled with his embrace. (5-11)
To her Ruru is love incarnate. To him Priyumvada is the cream of creation. Lost in love's bliss, they are oblivious of the world. To them, they themselves constitute the whole world. But physical enjoyment is not the only end of their love. Physical union often leads to a union of souls. Priyumvada’s eyes lure Ruru’s "attracted soul" (52) and she is overwhelmed by his "soul’s waves" (9). Ruru seeks to experience complete identification with his beloved in this life. He tells Kama with confidence and soul’s conviction: "O too deeply I know, / The lover is not different from the loved" (571-72). He cherishes the hope of winning the bliss of soul-union even after their earthly sojourn ends and their bodies cease to exist: "Us / Serenely when the darkening shadow comes, / One common sob shall end and soul clasp soul" (585-87). Thus the poet suggests two levels of love. Physical love seeks fulfilment in the union of souls. Similarly there seems to be two levels of beauty in the "ravishing realm of her [Priyumvada’s] white limbs" (62)--physical and psychic. With her attractive physical beauty she arouses "sharp-edged desire" in Ruru. Her "dangerous happy breasts" (68) vanquish all his strength. At the same time her eyes "like deep and infinite wells" (51) attract his soul. The "ravishing realm of her white limbs" is transmuted into an "empire for the glory of a God" (63).

Their love never reduces to mere sensual and lascivious. It is a "stainless" passion which finds sustenance in constancy and surrender. Priyumvada not only gladdens and attracts Ruru, but also remains a source of inspiration. It is the memory of her sweet love that inspires Ruru to face
Hell's dread, confront Yama and to make the rare sacrifice. Again, it is love's constancy that forces the descent of Kama. The lovers seem to be one with the forest pool, dancing lotus, virgin rivers, flying birds, green meads and fresh blooms. It is as if they transcend their physical limit and expand into the multifarious manifestations of nature. Above all Ruru's joy of sacrifice makes their love a celestial experience.

To Ruru love is a heavenly passion and a blissful experience that dissolves difference. But Kama, the godhead of vital love, views love in an objective manner. Neither passion nor grief colours his view. Kama's self-exploratory speech is an excellent capturing of love's varied moods. It is Kama who awakens love's attracting passions knitting life to life and forcing "the virgin's fainting limbs" (422) to the "one breast meant eternally for her" (424) He arouses in human breast "many affections bright" (433), such as fraternal love, filial love. But love is not all Eden. Kama can equally arouse venomous feelings. The first part of Kama's speech flows out like a happy flood. But the second part, expressing heart's venom, darts out like "fiercer shafts":

"But fiercer shafts I can, wild storms blown down
Shaking fixed minds and melting marble natures,
Tears and dumb bitterness and pain unpitied,
Racked thirsting jealousy and kind hearts made stone:
And in undisciplined huge souls I sow
Dire vengeance and impossible cruelties,
Cold lusts that linger and fierce fickleness,
The loves close kin to hate, brute violence
And mad insatiable longings pale,
And passion blind as death and deaf as swords.
O mortal, all deep-souled desires and all
Yearnings immense are mine, so much I can." (442-53)

The whole speech of Kama gushes out spontaneously as if the poet expresses the feelings and ideas caught at a moment of inspired perception. In the felicity of expression and power of passion the passage is quite remarkable. Decades later Sri Aurobindo wrote, making comment on this passage, in a private letter:

... but I do not think I have, elsewhere, surpassed this speech in power of language, passion and truth of feeling and nobility and felicity of rhythm all fused together into a perfect whole. And I think I have succeeded in expressing the truth of the godhead of Kama, the godhead of vital love (I am not using "vital" in the strict Yogic sense; I mean the love that draws lives passionately together or throws them into or upon each other) with a certain completeness of poetic sight and perfection of poetic power, which puts it on one of the peaks—even if not the highest possible peak—of achievement.

(Aurobindo 26: 270)

Yama's view of love is much different and it is marked by contradiction. Though he describes love as "warm great Love" (895) he
considers it to be anarchic. He considers love to be the promoter of "tumult and wanton joys" (901). He talks of love with a sense of disdain: "All worlds his breath confounds, / Mars solemn order and old steadfastness" (895-96). His view is coloured by his apprehensions and his cold concern to keep the steadfast laws of hell unaffected. Thus the poet brings out many faces, moods and colours of love in *Love and Death*.

Another poetic splendour in the poem is the description of the "dire land", ie the patala. The poet portrays the hell with almost a painter's accuracy. The legendary pictures of the Indian patala and the Greek underworld fan his imagination. In spite of the Hindu setting and sentiment of the poem the faint impression of the Greek underworld is discernible. Sri Aurobindo himself admits:

> For full success, however, it [the story of Ruru and Priyumuada] should have had a more faithfully Hindu colouring, but it was written a score of years ago [1899] when I had not penetrated to the heart of the Indian idea and its traditions, and the shadow of the Greek underworld and Tartarus with the sentiment of life and love and death which hangs about them has got into the legendary framework of the Indian Patala and hells. (Aurobindo: 258)

From the land of Shatadru and Bipasha Ruru comes to "trackless countries" inhabited by warring tribes and having forests full of beasts. From the forests a "white-winged" (638) boat almost resembling a magic boat
comes heaving over the "multitudinous waves (635) of the Ganges. The appalling and cold indifference of the "silent helmsman marble-pale" (639) perhaps suggests the grim and cruel atmosphere of the hell. By that boat Ruru comes to a world of shoreless water. Sailing through darkness and shoreless water he approaches the ocean who responds to his entreaty as he is the descendent of a great Rishi and is armed with that mysterious and magnificent Bloom, the boon of Kama. The magic of the poet's description compels the reader to feel the vast expanse and dreadfulness of the Sea:

And like a living thing the huge sea trembled,
Then rose, calling, and filled the sight with waves,
Converging all its giant crests; towards him
Innumerable waters loomed and heaven
Threatened. Horizon on horizon moved
Dreadfully swift; then with a prone wide sound
All Ocean hollowing drew him swiftly in,
Curving with monstrous menace over him. (675-82)

Through gloom and horror Ruru moves ahead boldly. His strong love inspires his adventure. In the hopeless Patala

Dwell the great serpent and his hosts, writhed forms,
Sinuous, abhorred, through many horrible leagues
Coiling in a half darkness. Shapes he saw,
And heard the hiss and knew the lambent light
Loathsome, but passed compelling his strong soul. (723-27)
In the above passage things appear as real. The words convey the associated feeling. Pictures breathe. The painter's brush, the poet's art and the creator's imagination work together. Similar is the imaginative vigour when the poet describes the wondrous dias carrying Yama's throne. The dias, the pedestal and the throne appear real and the feeling of horror penetrates into one's marrow:

... a dias brilliant doubtfully
With flaming pediment and round it coiled
Python and Naga monstrous, Joruthcaru,
Tuxuc and Vasuki himself, immense,
Magic Carcotaca all flecked with fire;
And many other prone destroying shapes
Coiled. On the wondrous dias rose a throne,
And he its pedestal whose lotus hood
With ominous beauty crowns his horrible
Sleek folds, great Mahapudma; high displayed
He bears the throne of Death. (851-61)

Passing the hissing serpents Ruru proceeds and reaches a nether region filled with anguish and witnesses the agony and suffering of the dead.

The miserable fate of the human race shocks him:

Then Ruru, his young cheeks with pity wan,
Half moaned: "O miserable race of men,
With violent and passionate souls you come
Foredoomed upon the earth and live brief days
In fear and anguish, catching at stray beams
Of sunlight, little fragrances of flowers;
Then from your spacious earth in a great horror
Descend into this night, and here too soon
Must expiate your few inadequate joys.
O bargain hard! Death helps us not. He leads
Alarmed, all shivering from his chill embrace,
The naked spirit here. Oh my sweet flower,
Art thou too whelmed in this fierce wailing flood?" (744-55)

This dismal scene and the feeling of pity it arouses add fresh strength to his determination.

At times the Hellenic touch interrupts the typical Hindu setting. This is evident in the following passage when Ruru is shown the picture of "the glory he would renounce" (948):

And over the flaming pediment there moved,
As on a frieze a march of sculptures, carved
By Phidias for the Virgin strong and pure,
Most perfect once of all things seen in earth
Or Heaven, in Athens on the Acropolis,
But now dismembered, now disrupt! (949-54)

The whole picture of hell—its many regions, diverse gradations of suffering, the solemn, weird building, the wondrous dias containing the
throne of Death, the dismal and horrible surrounding—is depicted with a unique flash of imagination.

The poem abounds in passages of sustained poetic grandeur, sweet sensuous lines flowing continuously, and extensive similes. The sheer joy of expression animates the lines. The richly sensuous opening lines describing the love-play of Ruru and Priyumvada run like a happy stream of passion through first three pages. The following passage describing the realm of Priyumvada’s body is rich in sensuous evocations and psychic implications.

Her eyes like deep and infinite wells
Lured his attracted soul, and her touch thrilled
Not lightly, though so light; the joy prolonged
And sweetness of the lingering of her lips
Was every time a nectar of surprise
To her lover; her smooth-gleaming shoulder bared
In darkness of her hair showed jasmine-bright,
While her kissed bosom by rich tumults stirred
Was a moved sea that rocked beneath his heart,
Then when her lips had made him blind, soft siege
Of all her unseen body to his rule
Betrayed the ravishing realm of her white limbs,
An empire for the glory of a God.
He knew not whether he loved most her smile,
Her causeless tears or little angers swift,
Whether held wet against him from the bath
Among her kindred lotuses, her cheeks
Soft to his lips and dangerous happy breasts
That vanquished all his strength with their desire. (51-69)

Extensive similes of tremendous vigour are appropriately placed where necessary. The following passage effectively brings out Ruru's fiery passion:

As a bright bird comes flying
From airy extravagance to his own home,
And breasts his mate, and feels her all his goal,
So from boon sunlight and the fresh chill wave
Which swirled and lapped between the slumbering fields,
From forest pools and wanderings mid leaves
Through emerald ever-new discoveries,
Mysterious hillsides ranged and buoyant-swift
Races with our wild brothers in the meads,
Came Ruru back to the white-bosomed girl,
Strong-winged to pleasure. (36-46)

Thus the poet's creative joy finds adequate expression in Love and Death. His vivid imagination, handling of English rhythm with growing felicity, and the theme of epic dimension articulating man's hidden aspiration to defeat Death and presented with the aroma of love make the poem a unique piece.
Love and Death deals, in one way, with the theme that continues to be Sri Aurobindo’s main concern as a poet throughout his long poetic career, i.e. "Earth and Love and Doom" (Aurobindo 28: 1.1.3.316). The mystery remains to be unveiled by the yogi-poet in Savitri. To seek resemblance between Ruru’s confrontation with Death and Savitri’s will not be a sane attempt. But it will not be irrelevant to point out that Love and Death carries the seed of the poet’s spiritual epic. In between lies a long way to be covered—from "romance to Reality" (Ghose, Sri Aurobindo: Poet 23). Savitri and Satyavan are enlightened souls. Ruru and Priyumvada are passionate lovers. Savitri conquers death with her soul-power. Ruru achieves victory by "a romantic intensity of passion" (Reddy, Mother India, June 1968: 356). Savitri shows a vast growth in theme, dimension, purpose, spiritual adventure, utterance and vision. This growth is synonymous with the growth of the poet’s mind and his adventure in the realms of consciousness.

The poet’s progress from early short poems to Love and Death signals not merely a poetic journey away from the Western muse, but a journey to a new world that embodies a new culture and awareness. It is a shift from the land of intellect to the land of tapasyā, his spiritual home. For Sri Aurobindo, this is a world of possibilities and new opening. His searching mind finds the path to go ahead. Future is to reveal volumes. Even in Urvasie and Love and Death we are given occasional hints through sublime thoughts expressed in passages touched by inspiration.
In spite of this sporadic touch of inspiration, thoughts still remain mentalised. The poet is yet to attain intuitive or spiritual vision. Urvasie and Love and Death are the creations of "a mind vibrant with an idealistic sensuousness", writes Sethna, "in which body and soul mingle their fervours" (The Poetic Genuis 27). A powerful and noble passion unstained by the crudities of sense-urge runs through the lines of these poems. These poems undoubtedly show the mark of an "assiduous, accomplished" (Ghose, The Poetry of Sri Aurobindo 53) Indo-Anglian poet. The seer-poet is yet to evolve. At the same time it is clear that the future poet, ie the poet of vision and creator of mantra, has already found his path.