CHAPTER II

THE COMPOSITION OF SAVITRI

Sri Aurobindo had already brought out a number of poems and poetic plays before he undertook to compose Savitri. In The Life Divine he had declared his Supramental Manifesto and in The Synthesis of Yoga he had expounded his idea of the Integral Yoga as a means of self-perfection and world-transformation. Here one may ask, what has prompted Sri Aurobindo to make a massive effort for another literary work? Three factors seem to be responsible for the composition of Savitri.

First, the Sadhanā of Sri Aurobindo gave him a vision of the Life Divine which could be established on earth by means of the Integral Yoga. Though he expressed this vision logically in his previous works, he was not satisfied with the abstract theories of philosophy and Yoga. He aspired to render his vision into a poetic reality. This aspiration is perhaps the principal cause for the creation of Savitri. Thus, Savitri is neither a treatise on philosophy, nor a dissertation on the Integral Yoga, but a spiritual poetry which reveals the vision of the poet in terms of imaginative action. K.R. Srinivas Iyengar aptly
observes: "It (Savitri) is thus an advance on The Life Divine... and The Synthesis of Yoga which is the manual of the Integral Yoga. In Savitri, theory teams with practice, Truth is wedded to Shakti and both career towards the goals of Realisation".¹

Secondly, Sri Aurobindo, after the realisation of the Overmind on 24th November 1926, probably thought that the supramental transformation was likely to come about sooner than it had seemed possible before. The writing of Savitri then became the principal means of accomplishing his aim. Sri Aurobindo himself said:

"I used Savitri as a means of ascension. I began with it on a certain mental level, each time I could reach a higher level I rewrote from that level. Moreover I was particular - if part seemed to me to come from any lower levels I was not satisfied to leave it because it was good poetry. All had to be as far as possible of the same mint. In fact Savitri has not been regarded by me as a poem to be written and finished; but as a field of experimentation to see how far poetry could be written from one's own yogic consciousness and how that could be made creative".²

Thirdly, in The Future Poem he had speculated on the future of the epic in the age of Overhead Poetry. In 1920, he wrote that, in a future society of the Supramental age, the epic would be written to reveal the way and purpose of Divinity and explain the real nature of the universe. When he withdrew himself from the external activities of the
Ashram; and decided to live in isolation, he might have felt to write this epic of the soul.

Whatever may be the motive behind the composition of Savitri, it is certain that Srl Aurobindo has devoted about fifty years to the preparation of the final draft of the epic. Mainly three reasons may be pointed out to explain this long time—span. To begin with, his life was crowded with many events—political, mystical and spiritual. Secondly, he was busy with the writing of a dozen books on a large scale. Lastly, he resorted to many revisions of the poem. These revisions are made for two reasons. One, he was very careful to make every line appear to be of greater perfection:

"I made some eight or ten recasts of it originally under the old insufficient inspiration. Afterwards I am altogether rewriting it, concentrating on the first book and working on it over and over again with the hope that every line may be of a perfect perfection"...

Secondly, he wished to make it an appropriate illustration of Overmind Poetry:

"The poem was originally written from a lower level, a mixture perhaps of the inner mind, psychic, poetic intelligence, sublimised vital, afterwards with the Higher Mind, often illumined and intuitivised, intervening. Most of the stuff of the first book is new or else, the old so altered as to be no more what it was; the best of the old has sometimes been kept almost intact because it had already the higher inspiration. Moreover, there have been made several successive revisions each trying to lift the general level higher and higher towards a possible Overmind poetry. As it now stands there is a general Overmind influence".
Sri Aurobindo put the legend of Savitri into verse during his stay in Baroda (1893 - 1908). It was just a legend and not a symbol. It consisted of two parts. The first part had four books and the second had three books and an Epilogue. As Sri Aurobindo puts it:

"Savitri was originally written many years ago before the Mother came, as a narrative poem in two parts, Part I Earth and part II Beyond... each of four books or rather Part II consisted of three books and an epilogue".5

It appears that he started revising this poem after his settlement in Pondicherry. In its earliest revised version, Savitri seemed to have three parts but without any names. The first book was called Love; then it was named Quest and Love became the second book. In some early versions there were instead of 'books', 'Cantos'. Later, the books came to include those 'Cantos'.

In the early thirties he concentrated on the first book. Expanding the earlier four cantos he wrote five new books:

"The first book has been lengthening and lengthening out till it must be over 2000 lines, but I shall break up the original first four into five, I think - in fact I have already started doing so. These first five will be, as I conceive them now, the Book of Birth, the Book of Quest, the Book of Love, the Book of Fate, the Book of Death. As for the second part, I have not touched it yet".6
he revised and reshaped the previous drafts again and again with a view to translating the legend in a symbol. So each new version was the reconstruction of the whole thing:

"There is a previous draft, the result of the many retouchings of which somebody told you; but in that form it could not have been a "magnus opus" at all. Besides, it would have been a legend and not a symbol. I therefore started recasting the whole thing: only the best passages and lines of the old draft will remain altered so as to fit into the new frame."7

Sri Aurobindo was thus very particular in the expression of his vision. But this does not mean that he preferred technique to inspiration. The case is really otherwise. Inspiration and expression came to him simultaneously:

"If the inspiration is the right one, then I have not to bother about the technique then or afterwards, for there comes through the perfect line with the perfect rhythm inextricably interwined or rather fused into an inseparable and single unity; I may add that technique does not go by any set mental rule - for the object is not perfect technical elegance according to precept but sound - significance filling out the word - significance. If that can be done by breaking rules, well, so much the worse for the rule."8

The final version of the poem is intended to depict a poetic philosophy of the Spirit and of Life:
"In the new form it will be a sort of poetic philosophy of the Spirit and of Life much profounder in its substance and vaster in its scope than was intended in the original poem. I am trying of course to keep it at a very high level of inspiration, but in so large a plan covering most subjects of philosophical thought and vision and many aspects of spiritual experience there is bound to be much variation of tone: but that is, I think, necessary for the richness and completeness of the treatment."

II

The earliest extant draft of Savitri is in an exercise-book. It is based on a draft which is not now available for us. It exists in two sections which are revised with a thicker pen. Book One is complete; Book Two is unfinished. The names of the three main characters are spelt as 'Savitri', 'Uswapathy' and 'Sathyavan'. The first book comprises a short description of Night and Dawn, the Yoga of Uswapathy, the birth of Savitri, her girlhood, her quest for a consort and her talks with Uswapathy and Nārada. Its opening lines are:

In a huge forest where the listening Night
Heard lonely voices, and in the large hush
Was conscious of the sigh and tread of things
That have no sound for the rich heart of day

Book Two commences thus:

So she was left alone in the huge wood
By Death the god confronted . . .
The second version is called "Savitri - A Tale and a Vision". It is in more than one part. The first part is known as Earth and Book One is called 'Quest'. It begins with following lines:

The boundless spirit of Night dreamless, alone
In the unlit temple of immensity
Waiting upon the margin of silence sat
Mute with the expectation of her change
The hour was near of the transfiguring gods.

The third version, of which the first part is Earth, has the same general name. Book One, known as the 'Quest', starts thus:

It was the hour of the transfiguring Gods.
The huge unbound spirit of Night, alone
In her unlit temple of immensity
Waited immobile upon Silence's margin...
Mute with the expectation of her change.

In the fourth draft we get the final form of the spelling of 'Savitri'. It is not divided into parts. Book One, called Quest, begins:

It was the hour of the transfiguring Gods.
The large and vacant spirit of Night, alone
In the unlit temple of immensity
Immobile lay on slumber's waiting marge
Mute with the expectation of her change.

In the fifth version, we have part I, but it is not named. Book One is also without a name, but Book Two is called 'Love'. Its opening line is:

An hour was near of the transfiguring Gods.
The sixth version has no parts again, but Book One is called the 'quest'. Its opening line runs:

It was the hush of a transfiguring hour.

In the seventh version we have the same opening line which occurs in the final draft of the epic:

It was the hour before the Gods awake.

The eighth version is the copy of the seventh one. But it introduces the final form of the spelling of 'Ashwapathy'. Ninth and tenth version have the same opening lines. The tenth version of Book One is completed some time before 1936. It has no detailed description of Aswapathy's journey through occult worlds. But there are the brief descriptions of the planes, starting with the realm of Subtle Matter. Later, these brief descriptions are amplified and each plane gets a fairly long canto to itself.

On the eve of the Dharshan Day in November 24, 1938, there was an accident and Sri Aurobindo sustained a fracture. He was conveyed to bed where he seemed to have struggled with Death. He got the first-hand experience of death which enabled him to describe Savitri's encounter with Death as well as Satyavan's death in the forest. However, due to this accident the work of revision was put off for a long time. It was resumed only at the end of 1940.
Having recovered from the accident, Sri Aurobindo started working on *The Life Divine*. After its publication in 1940, he resumed his work on *Savitri*. Mirodbaran provided him with three exercise-books for copying the extant draft of the poem. From the dates mentioned in these three exercise-books, it is surmised that, from 1940 to 1944, Sri Aurobindo was busy with first three books. He also wrote two new books — 'The Book of the Traveller of the Worlds' and 'The Book of the Divine Mother'.

Sri Aurobindo spent one full year for re-copying the entire three books. After 1946, his eyesight became dim. Then Mirodbaran was told to read to him this final copy. Sri Aurobindo asked Mirodbaran to make many alterations and additions in the manuscript. Mirodbaran was not happy to make these recasts:

"I regret to say that they marred the clean beauty of the original, and I realise now that it was a brutal act of sacrilege on my part tantamount to desecration of the carved images on the temple wall". 10

This is the story of the first three books. Book Four, The Book of the Quest, was fairly revised by the poet. It was based on several revisions which were prepared before 1936. Mirodbaran was then asked to work as a scribe. He helped the poet to correct and amplify Book Four. In redoing Book Five, the Book of Love, Sri Aurobindo took up a version which was prepared before 1936. Book Six, the
Book of Fate, was also revised. There were three old versions of Book Six. They were expanded and developed into two cantos.

Book Seven, the Book of the Yoga, was not in the original scheme of the poem. Later on, Sri Aurobindo takes up one old version called Book Three 'Death' and turns it into the Book of Yoga. Book Eight, the Book of Death, is based on the three old versions which were called Canto III. Book Nine, The Book of Eternal Night, depended on the old version called canto IV. It is revised and split into two cantos. Book Ten, the Book of Double Twilight, is based on what is called Canto V. This book is divided into four cantos. Book Eleven, The Book of Everlasting Day, has three old drafts. One which is larger than the other two has been used for the final version. It is largely expanded and hundreds of new lines are added to this book. Book Twelve, the Epilogue, reproduces the single old version. Thus, even Part II and Part III of Savitri are either thoroughly revised or almost entirely rewritten.

From 1945 onwards Nirodharan worked as a scribe. Sri Aurobindo dictated him line after line and the scribe was surprised to take them down:
"He would dictate line after line, and ask me to add selected lines and passages in their proper places, but which were not always kept in their old order. I wonder how he could go on dictating lines of poetry in this way, as if a tap had been turned on and the water flowed, not in a jet of course, but slowly, very slowly indeed."

When a book was completed and copied out it was given to Wolini Kanta Gupta for typing. On the typescript again fresh lines were added or the order was changed. The Book of Fate was altered many times. It contained the prophetic hints of his own passing away.

In the last years of his life Sri Aurobindo speeded up the work of Savitri. One day in 1950, he said to Nirodharan: "My main work is being delayed." He started dictating lines of Savitri from 11:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. per day without any break. Once, it is noted, he continued his dictation even beyond 4:30 p.m. It was a rare occurrence which implied how the poet was anxious to complete his lifework.

Sri Aurobindo has, thus, devoted a long time to the preparation of the final version of Savitri. And yet it is not a complete epic. The Seventh Canto of Book VII is not named. Book Eight has only one canto called Canto III. The first two cantos are not written or they are missing. Despite this fact, Savitri has a structural unity. Nirodharan remarks:
"One fact alone makes me dumb with a reverent awe and exalted admiration: the colossal labour Sri Aurobindo put forth to build this unique structure. It reminds me of one of those majestic ancient temples like Konarak or of a Gothic architecture like Notre Dame before which you stand and stare in speechless ecstasy, your soul takes a flight beyond time and space."

Savitri, as we have it, is in twelve books of forty-nine cantos. The twelve books add up to over 23,813 lines, though the Mother seems to have once remarked that there should have been 24,000 lines. K.D. Sethna has noted an interesting point that the title and the sub-title, 'Savitri - A Legend and a Symbol', make twenty-four letters.

The main narrative of the poem takes up no more than fourteen cantos (I.1-2; IV. 1-4; V. 1-3; VI. 1-2; VII - 1; VII. 3 and XII), while the remaining thirty-five cantos are about Ashwapathy's Yoga, Savitri's Yoga, and a dialogue between Death and Savitri. But it is not desirable to separate the narrative from the non-narrative part. The poem must be seen as a unity, an organic wholeness and a fulness of revelation.

From 'dawn' to a 'greater dawn' is the whole passage of the poem's action. A momentous 'something' that happens during the day will transform the next dawn and make it a greater dawn. What happens during the day is the defeat or the transformation of Death. Thus, the structure of the
poem helps the poet to express his vision.

III

Sri Aurobindo has particularly concentrated on the opening Canto, 'The Symbol Dawn', because for him it was 'a key beginning and announcement'. Dawn was originally described in sixteen lines:

It was the hour before the Gods awake.
Across the path of the divine Event
The huge unslumbering spirit of Night, alone
In the unlit temple of immensity,
Lay stretched immobile upon Silence's marge,
Hate with the unplumbed prevision of her change,
The impassive skies were neutral, waste and still.
Then a faint hesitating glimmer broke.
A slow miraculous gesture dimly came.
The insistent thrill of a transfiguring touch
Persuaded the inward back quietude
And beauty and wonder disturbed the fields of God.
A wandering hand of pale enchanted light
That glowed along the moment's fading brink
Fixed with gold panel and opalescent hinge
A gate of dreams ajar on mystery's verge. 14

At present this prelude stands in a passage of ninety three lines. Some lines are quoted here to show the difference between the two:

It was the hour before the Gods awake.
Across the path of the divine Event
The huge foreboding mind of Night, alone
In her unlit temple of eternity,
Lay stretched immobile upon Silence's marge
A nameless movement, an unthought Idea
Insistent, dissatisfied, without an aim,
Something that wished but knew not how to be,
Teased the Inconscient to wake Ignorance.
The persistent thrill of a transfiguring touch
Persuaded the inert black quietude
And beauty and wonder disturbed the fields of God.

Sri Aurobindo elaborately describes the emerging dawn
because he intends to draw a long, sustained picture of
Dawn with a single, continuous image or variations of the
same images. There is no logical chain of figures, but
rapid transitions from one image to another. For instance,
there is first a black quietude, then the persistent,
touch, then the first 'beauty and wonder' leading to the
magical gate and the 'Lucient Corner'.

A particular dawn is here rendered into a symbol
with manifold significance. On the metaphysical level, it
suggests a transition from inertness to a wakeful activity
and from Ignorance to Knowledge. It also symbolises the
transition from Death to Life. On mystical level, it
signifies an important stage in the spiritual evolution.
At the same time it indicates the first outbreak of the
illumination from the supramental realms on the lower
nature. This emergence of the divine consciousness is the
first condition for the possibility of the subsequent
transformation. For there is first the darkness or ignorance
enveloping the soul. Thereafter comes the dissatisfaction,
the disturbance and a vague yearning. It is only when man
is discontent with the present state of his life that his
soul begins to move towards the higher level of consciousness.
Savitri, on the symbolic level, enacts such a transformation. The dawn, here, is at once a physical dawn of the day when Satyavan must die, as also a symbolic dawn reverberating with the Vedic suggestions. It stands for the full range of its theme and sets the tone for the poem. This device is obviously intended to fuse the legend and the symbol. Therefore, it is appropriately described as 'a key beginning and announcement'.

Sri Aurobindo, thus, carefully composes his epic and repeatedly revises to make it an appropriate illustration of Overhead poetry. Though he concentrates a good deal only on Part I of the poem, he has fairly reshaped Part II and Part III of Savitri. His perseverance indicates the quality of 'high seriousness' which is considered as one of the attributes of the epic poet.
REFERENCES

3. Ibid., p. 728.
4. Ibid., p. 729.
5. Ibid., p. 728.
6. Ibid., p. 728.
7. Ibid., p. 727.
8. Ibid., pp. 729—730.
11. Ibid., p. 178.
13. Ibid., p. 186.