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The Genesis of a Philosophical Poem: Sri Aurobindo, World Literature and the Writing of *Savitri*

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Abstract. Philosophical poetry has had a long and distinguished history in different cultural traditions. These traditions have always interacted to some extent, but today the barriers between them have largely broken down. Savitri, an epic in English by the early twentieth-century Indian philosopher and poet Sri Aurobindo, is a notable outcome of the confluence of Eastern and Western civilisations. Based on a creative reworking of a legend from the Sanskrit epic, the Mahābhārata, it incorporates in its neo-Vedantic vision aspects of the worldviews represented by the great philosophical poems of ancient, medieval and modern Europe. As vast in scope as any of these works, Savitri took shape over much of the poet's life in a way comparable to Goethe's Faust. A study of the stages of its composition reveals much about the author's artistic, intellectual and spiritual development and gives insight into the poem's autobiographical dimension.

Keywords. Philosophical poetry, naturalism, supernaturalism, affirmation, freedom.

1. PHILOSOPHICAL POETRY

Philosophy and poetry have not always been unrelated pursuits. From the earliest times in different parts of the world, there were philosophers who used poetry to express their thoughts. Xenophanes, Parmenides and Empedocles come to mind, as do the anonymous authors of several of the Upanishads. Gradually philosophy came to rely more and more on logical reasoning, leaving less and less scope for the imaginative vision and word-music of poetry. But there were still poets who dared to philosophise[1]. Some of them produced literary masterpieces that are also milestones in the history of thought.

[1] The young Keats, as Sri Aurobindo points out, wrote «To philosophise I dare not yet», not «I am too much of a poet to philosophise» (Aurobindo [2004]: 94).

The Spanish-American philosopher George Santayana (1863–1952) delivered a series of lectures in 1910 that were published under the title *Three Philosophical Poets*. The philosophically minded poets he compared were Lucretius, Dante and Goethe. Each of these, according to him, «is typical of an age. Taken together, they sum up all European philosophy» (Santayana [1910]: 1). Few would deny that Lucretius's *De Rerum Natura*, Dante's *Commedia* and Goethe's *Faust* rank among the great works of ancient, medieval and modern literature. But Santayana went further. He found in these poems the consummate expression of the contrasting worldviews of naturalism, supernaturalism and romanticism, each of which dominated a phase of European thought. His reading of Lucretius, Dante and Goethe led him to wonder: «Can it be an accident that the most adequate and probably the most lasting exposition of these three schools of philosophy should have been made by poets? Are poets, at heart, in search of a philosophy? Or is philosophy, in the end, nothing but poetry?» (Santayana [1910]: 3).

Santayana asked these questions in a Western context, but it is not only in Europe that poetry and philosophy have converged and diverged. Similar reflections can be entertained with reference to other traditions. From this point of view, I propose to examine a philosophical epic from early twentieth-century India. Although it has attracted relatively little attention in the West, it is a work that richly deserves a place in world literature[2] and is as relevant to world philosophy as are the celebrated works of Lucretius, Dante and Goethe.

The philosopher, poet and mystic Aurobindo Ghose (1872–1950) – known in the later part of his life as Sri Aurobindo – was a contemporary of Santayana's, though neither is likely to have heard of the other's existence. Born in India but growing up mainly in England and writing throughout his life mostly in English, in his early years he underwent intellectual influences rather similar to those that shaped Santayana's mind. Both of them, for instance, read Lucretius in Latin, Dante in Italian and Goethe in German. But after his return to India at the age of twenty, Aurobindo consciously set about indigenising himself. His many-sided synthesis of East and West came to be rooted in the Indian tradition without losing an atmosphere of cosmopolitan humanism.

Sri Aurobindo is best known in academic circles as a political leader turned philosopher. Yet he identified himself as a poet and spent more time on the composition of his epic, *Savitri*, than on his philosophical work. He also made a substantial contribution, like Santayana, to aesthetics and the theory of poetry. As if in reply to Santayana's questions about the affinities between poetry and philosophy, Sri Aurobindo wrote in *The Future Poetry*: «The first effort of philosophy is to know for the sake of pure understanding, but her greater height is to take Truth alive in the spirit and clasp and grow one with her and be consciously within ourselves all the reality we have learned to know. But that is precisely what the poet strives to do in his own way by intuition and imagination» (Aurobindo [1997b]: 233).

The fusion of philosophy and poetry suggested here was worked out largely through the writing of *Savitri: A Legend and a Symbol*, as Sri Aurobindo eventually titled the epic that occupied him for significant periods spanning over three decades of the later part of his life, from 1916 to 1950. The stages through which this poem of almost 24,000 lines took shape can be traced in detail through some eight thousand pages of manuscripts and typescripts. But in order to understand the broad lines of its genesis, it will be useful first to situate it in the history of thought and literature by considering its relation to the three works discussed by Santayana and the views of the world to which they correspond.

2. GOD, MAN AND NATURE

On one of the first pages of a notebook used by Sri Aurobindo in 1916 to draft his earliest

[2] Goethe is credited with coining the term *Weltliteratur*, declaring the advent of the age of world literature in a conversation in January 1927 (Eckermann [1987]: 211).

known version of *Savitri*, he jotted down these thoughts: «God, Man, Nature, what are these three? Whence flow their divergences? To what ineffable union advances the ever-increasing sum of their contacts?» (Aurobindo [1997a]: 141).

These three terms – "God" or the transcendent, "Nature" or the universal, and "Man" or the individual (in *Savitri* often represented by "the Woman") – are the basic categories of experience which Sri Aurobindo sets out to harmonise in his philosophy, in his method of spiritual practice (Yoga) and in his poetry. One consequence of this integration is the presence in *Savitri* of features reminiscent of the naturalism of Lucretius, the supernaturalism of Dante and the classical-romantic humanism of Goethe. Sri Aurobindo's aim being the reconciliation of apparent opposites rather than the one-sided affirmation of a partial vision, each of these standpoints represents a necessary component of a larger synthesis. All three aspects are present from the first draft of *Savitri* as a narrative poem of some eight hundred lines to its final form as an epic of thirty times that length. Much of the story of the genesis and revision of *Savitri* can be understood as a gradual advance in the interpretation of these three factors in existence toward a revelation of the union of humanity with nature and the Divine.

Santayana considered his three philosophical poets, different as they are, to be nonetheless compatible «in what makes them great». He believed not only that «one may admire enthusiastically the poetry of each in turn», as many have done, but «that one may accept the essential philosophy, the positive intuition, of each, without lack of definition or system in one's own thinking» (Santayana [1910]: 1). For Santayana, «Goethe is the poet of life; Lucretius the poet of nature; Dante the poet of salvation» (Santayana [2015]: 81). Though personally inclined toward a type of naturalism, he held each of these visions to be incomplete without elements provided by the others. He concluded that «what would constitute a truly philosophical or comprehensive poet, would be the union of the insights and gifts which our three poets have possessed». Only such a poet, he ventured, could «reconstitute the shattered picture of the world» (Santayana [1910]: 84-85). It was just such an integration and reconstitution that Sri Aurobindo attempted in *Savitri*.

3. DE RERUM NATURA AND SAVITRI

Lucretius is for Santayana the unrivalled poet of naturalism, defined to include «materialism in natural science, humanism in ethics» (Santayana [1910]: 1-2). *On the Nature of Things* is a poetic presentation of the philosophy of Epicurus, an ethical thinker who taught how to achieve inner tranquillity by rejecting superstition and adopting a simple way of life. The spirit of this system was almost the reverse of the self-indulgent hedonism often associated with the modern use of the word "epicurean".

But most of Lucretius's poem is actually devoted not to a systematic treatment of Epicurean ethics, but to the scientific ideas put forward in that system to support its anti-supernaturalism. *De Rerum Natura* contains a detailed account of the material world according to the most advanced theories of the time. We might expect to find little resemblance between such a work and an ostensibly mystical poem. But scientifically accurate descriptions of the universe from the atomic to the cosmic scale, including its evolution from the Big Bang to the quantum revolution, are a recurrent feature of *Savitri*, especially as revised and expanded in the 1930s and 1940s. Lucretius's declared purpose was to explain «the nature of things» and he showed how far it can be done in poetry – as well as inadvertently exposing some of the pitfalls of the attempt. A similar motive entered increasingly into *Savitri* as the narrative poem grew into a philosophical epic much larger in its plan and varied in its subject matter than originally contemplated.

Acknowledging in *The Future Poetry* the danger of putting «a dressed-up science straight into metre», Sri Aurobindo nevertheless defends the poet's right to give us not only truth of philosophy or religion, but even «truth of science, provided

he transmutes it […] and gives us the something more which poetic sight and expression bring» (Aurobindo [1997b]: 230-31). Like Lucretius, he found inspiring material for poetry in the scientific picture of the world. For comparison, here is a translation of a passage in *De Rerum Natura* on the origin of the universe:

> *At first it was not possible to see the wheel of the sun soaring aloft with free-flowing light, nor the stars of the spacious firmament, nor sea nor sky nor earth nor air nor indeed anything resembling the things we know. There was only a newly formed, turbulent mass of primary elements of every kind […] Then the different parts began to separate, and like elements began to unite with like, thus starting the evolution of the world.* (Lucretius [2001]: 149)[3]

The beginning of our world is described in a number of places in *Savitri*. These lines are a typical example:

> *At first was laid a strange anomalous base,*
> *A void, a cipher of some secret Whole,*
> *Where zero held infinity in its sum […]*
> *A slow reversal's movement then took place:*
> *A gas belched out from some invisible Fire,*
> *Of its dense rings were formed these million stars.*
> (Aurobindo [1993]: 100-101)

Sri Aurobindo shared Lucretius's interest in explaining the nature of things, though he did not confine himself to a naturalistic view of the "things" to be explained. This is shown clearly enough by his choice of a legend containing supernatural elements as the basis for his epic. But supernature, as he understood it, is other-nature and has subtle laws and processes of its own. Contrary to much of the spiritual tradition of India, moreover, the reality and value of physical existence are not denied or minimised in his philosophy and Yoga, but heightened by the prospect of transformation and even divinisation. He often quoted the declaration in the Taittiriya Upanishad that «Matter also is the Brahman [Spirit]» (Aurobindo [2005]: 8).

Sri Aurobindo undoubtedly goes far beyond Epicurean naturalism in his spiritual vision of Nature. But a keen sense of the beauty and magnificence of the world we live in, such as has kept the poetry of Lucretius alive through the ages, is also a constant feature of *Savitri*[4].

4. THE COMMEDIA AND SAVITRI

When we pass from Lucretius to Dante, overleaping more than a millennium, we find ourselves in the midst of ideas as far as possible from those of the late Roman Republic. Naturalism has been replaced by supernaturalism as the dominant worldview – indeed, the only one permitted. Lucretius has long been forgotten, though his work was tenuously preserved for the future by a single copy of *De Rerum Natura* lying in the library of a monastery in Germany, where it would be discovered a century after Dante by the Italian humanist Poggio Bracciolini (Greenblatt [2011]). Epicurus, whom Lucretius had revered, is consigned now to one of the circles of Dante's hell – though another pagan, Virgil, is his guide for much of his journey through the next world.

There are obvious parallels between the *Divine Comedy* and *Savitri*. Sri Aurobindo's neo-Vedantic philosophy seems at first sight to have little in common with medieval Christian theology other than a general recognition that there is more to existence than the world we know through our

[3] In assessing Lucretius's influence on *Savitri*, it must be remembered that Sri Aurobindo read *De Rerum Natura* in Latin. The qualities he admired and emulated, the «majestic energy» behind its «splendid digressions into pure poetry» (Aurobindo [1997b]: 35), can scarcely be conveyed by even the best prose rendering.

[4] Sri Aurobindo's epic has been compared to the great works of Dante and Goethe more often than to that of Lucretius. But in an essay on Sri Aurobindo and Dante, Brenda Deen Schildgen remarks in passing that the «intellectual, poetic, and spiritual synthesis» of *Savitri*, besides its Miltonic blank verse and affinities with Dante's *Commedia*, has also «the philosophical and scientific grandeur of Lucretius's *De Rerum Natura*» (Schildgen [2002]: 93).

senses. Yet Dante undoubtedly provides a major precedent for poetry that ventures into other worlds. The longest section of *Savitri* is «The Book of the Traveller of the Worlds». Here Aswapati ascends and descends through subtle planes of existence to which we do not normally have conscious access – though in dreams perhaps we get glimpses of them. They include regions referred to as heavens and hells. These are not depicted as scenes of reward and punishment, however, but as fields of a greater intensity of experience than our embodied condition ordinarily allows.

These descriptions occur in a part of *Savitri* that took shape mainly from the late 1920s to the early 1940s. During this period the spiritual quest of Aswapati, described in a few pages in early drafts, was expanded to form Part One, the first of three parts, whose nearly 12,000 lines account for almost half of the final text of the epic. But parallels with Dante are not confined to Aswapati's climbing of the world-stair. In Part Three, Savitri follows Satyavan as he is led by the god of death through realms symbolised by night, twilight and day. Structurally the resemblance to Dante's Inferno, Purgatorio and Paradiso is even stronger here than in Part One – though there are few similarities in the detailed description of these domains beyond the general use of imagery of darkness and light. Passages in this part of the poem go back to the earliest manuscripts, suggesting a possible influence of the *Commedia* on the original conception of *Savitri*.

The *Divine Comedy* opens with lines in which the poet, who presents himself as the main character in the story, recalls an acute mid-life crisis:

Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita
mi ritrovai per una selva oscura
ché la diritta via era smarrita.

In the middle of the journey of our life, I found myself in a dark wood, for the straight path was lost. (Shaw [2014]: 3)

Sri Aurobindo's epic also begins with a critical moment in the life of the protagonist, summed up at the end of the first canto:

This was the day when Satyavan must die. (Aurobindo [1993]: 10)

Dante's journey is said to be that of *our* life, «nostra vita», making him a representative of all of us. Similarly, Savitri's state of mind as she anticipates the death of her husband is generalised to reflect upon the human condition:

An absolute supernatural darkness falls
On man sometimes when he draws near to God:
An hour arrives when fail all Nature's means […]
That hour had fallen now on Savitri. (Aurobindo [1993]: 11-12)

The difficult conjunction of poetry and philosophy, Sri Aurobindo pointed out, can be achieved most effectively by focusing on a moment of crisis. Referring to India's best-known philosophical poem, the *Bhagavad Gītā*, he commented: «The Gita owes its poetical success to its starting from a great and critical situation in life, its constant keeping of that in view and always returning upon it» (Aurobindo [1997b]: 35). Santayana sheds further light on how such situations help to realise the highest possibilities of the union of philosophy and poetry: «As in a supreme dramatic crisis all our life seems to be focused in the present […] so for each philosophic poet the whole world of man is gathered together; and he is never so much a poet as when, in a single cry, he summons all that has affinity to him in the universe, and salutes his ultimate destiny» (Santayana [1910]: 5).

5. FAUST AND SAVITRI

Half a millennium after Dante, Goethe also begins *Faust* with a crisis in the life of the central personage of the drama, who again represents in some way an aspect of humanity as well as the poet himself. In the few centuries from Dante to Goethe, the Western world has changed as much as it had in the considerably longer period between Lucretius and Dante. The modern mind has rejected the medieval worldview, though it has not found any new foundation in experience

to replace the old certainties of faith. It has been irreversibly enlarged and freed from the authority of irrational tradition and a hierarchical order. The liberated individual has begun to assert himself with a new-found self-confidence.

Momentous as these changes are, the difference between Dante and Goethe should not be exaggerated. Dante's influence is palpable at times in *Faust*, especially in the redemption scene with which it ends. Dante himself had in certain respects transcended his age. One cannot help being struck by his sympathetic portrayal of some of the strong characters he was compelled by medieval moralism to relegate to Inferno. In the early modern period, the Faust tradition grew up around just such a man, whose legendary pact with the devil destined him for damnation until Goethe decided he deserved to be saved.

But Faust is not merely an amoral forerunner of Nietzsche's Übermensch. Goethe contrasts Faust with Mephistopheles. The translator David Luke observes that the «motif of the Devil as cynic, and his dialectical relationship with Faust as romantic or idealist […] has strong claims to be considered the unifying and integrating theme of the work as a whole» (Goethe [1831]: xx). Mephistopheles introduces himself as «the spirit who always negates» («der Geist, der stets verneint» [Goethe (1963): 47]). His role in the drama is to undermine Faust's idealism which, however faltering at times, is summed up in the latter's words: «To strive continually toward the highest existence» («Zum höchsten Dasein immerfort zu streben» [Goethe (1963): 148]).

In Sri Aurobindo's epic, the spirit of negation takes the form of Death. As the nemesis of human aspirations, Death in *Savitri* plays an analogous role to Mephistopheles in *Faust*, though he is depicted with a cosmic grandeur absent from Goethe's sometimes light-hearted portrayal of his anti-hero. Like Mephistopheles, Death is the ultimate cynic,

> *With the ironic laughter of his voice*
> *Discouraging the labour of the stars.* (Aurobindo [1993]: 634)

Just as Mephistopheles wagers that he can make Faust «lick the dust, and with pleasure» («Staub soll er fressen, und mit Lust» [Goethe (1963): 18]), so Death scorns the hopes and dreams of humanity voiced by Savitri:

> *O human face, put off mind-painted masks:*
> *The animal be, the worm that Nature meant.* (Aurobindo [1993]: 634)

In cantos entitled «The Gospel of Death and Vanity of the Ideal» and «The Debate of Love and Death», Savitri defends her affirmations against the nihilism of this «dark-browed sophist of the universe» (Aurobindo [1993]: 621).

For all the differences between the protagonists of Goethe's poem and Sri Aurobindo's, the two works have in common an interaction between a human individual, striving obscurely or luminously toward the heights, and a nonhuman figure who contradicts this upward effort. Moreover, this feature can be traced back to the earliest versions of both poems.

The fact that *Faust* and *Savitri* both took shape in several stages over a period of decades is perhaps the most interesting similarity between them. One can hardly imagine Goethe scholarship today without the *Urfaust*, though a copy of the manuscript survived only by sheer accident. The two parts of *Faust* itself, in its published form, contain such heterogeneous material that an intelligent reading requires familiarity with its genesis (Entstehung), about which so much has been written. This is partly because, as Sri Aurobindo remarked, Goethe's work «is always an act of reflection of the subjective changes of his personality, a history of the development of his own soul in the guise of objective creation» (Aurobindo [1997b]: 117).

This is also true to some extent of *Savitri*, of which Sri Aurobindo wrote in 1936 that he did not regard it «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» (Aurobindo [2004]: 272). The first draft is

dated August 1916 and the last revision was dictated in November 1950, within a month before the author's passing. Thus its composition was spread out over more than three decades. This is a good deal less than the sixty years between Goethe's first and last work on *Faust*. On the other hand, the periods when work on *Savitri* was completely suspended, mainly in the early 1920s and late 1930s, were also fewer and shorter than the interruptions in the writing of Goethe's drama. But in both cases there was time for significant differences in style and content to develop between passages written at various times, some of which coexist side by side in the final work.

Although the manuscripts of *Savitri* go back only to 1916, the legend of Savitri and Satyavan as told in Sanskrit in the *Mahābhārata* had attracted Sri Aurobindo's interest long before that, as is shown by references in essays he wrote around the turn of the century. An associate, Dinendra Kumar Roy, who stayed with Sri Aurobindo for some time in Baroda, even claimed to have seen him working on a poem on the subject during this period. The report is probably due to confusion with the narrative poem *Love and Death*, based on a similar story from the *Mahābhārata*, whose manuscript is dated 1899. But in any case, *Love and Death* has a close relationship to *Savitri*. In both poems a spouse is brought back from the dead after a sojourn in the other world, with the roles of husband and wife interchanged in the two stories. *Love and Death* proves that in his twenties Sri Aurobindo was already fascinated by the possibilities of this theme. That fascination would deepen as time went on. But at first he can hardly have had more than an inkling of where it was leading him.

6. THE GENESIS OF SAVITRI

In 1946, thirty years after drafting his first version of *Savitri*, Sri Aurobindo wrote to a correspondent who had seen passages of it in the 1930s: «You will see when you get the full typescript [*of the first three books*] that *Savitri* has grown to an enormous length so that it is no longer quite the same thing as the poem you saw then […] 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» (Aurobindo [2004]: 279).

This was written halfway through the third and last major stage of his work on the epic, a stage that covered most of the 1940s and included the revision of material that had not been touched for at least twenty-five years. From this vantage point, the poet could look back and comment on how it had started and grown in the previous stages of composition. In a letter written fifteen years earlier, during the second period which extended from around 1927 to 1938, he had already referred retrospectively to the genesis of the poem: «As to *Savitri*, there is a previous draft, the result of the many retouchings of which somebody told you; but in that form it would not have been a magnum opus at all. Besides, it would have been only a legend and not a symbol» (Aurobindo [2004]: 261).

We learn from this letter that the present subtitle, «A Legend and a Symbol», was in Sri Aurobindo's mind by the middle of the second stage of composition. Previously it was «A Tale and a Vision». The new subtitle suggests a change of approach not altogether unlike Goethe's more allegorical and symbolic treatment of the Faust material in Part Two of his drama, most of which was written long after the publication of Part One. But Sri Aurobindo never set out merely to retell an old story. This is implied even by the original subtitle and is clear from many features of his creative reworking of the legend. The vision with which he began evidently had a deeper meaning all along.

In the midst of a schedule of serial publication of prose works on a remarkable range of topics that required him every month to turn out a chapter for each of several books, what led him to select the legend of Savitri as the subject for a poem that would eventually occupy so much of his time and energy? An answer to this question can be hazarded if we juxtapose what he chose to utilise, emphasise, omit or alter in the traditional

legend with what we know of his preoccupations at that time. An important source for the latter is his diary, the *Record of Yoga*. Unfortunately, the writing of *Savitri* began during a gap of several months in the diary. Nevertheless, the diary tells us much about Sri Aurobindo's inner life and provides certain kinds of information about his outer activities from 1912 to 1920 and again during most of 1927. Some of what we learn from this source appears directly relevant to his treatment of the Savitri legend. But to be sure of the connections, we must start by identifying the salient themes of the story as he interpreted it.

A study of the structural development of the poem in the early manuscripts yields valuable information. After two or three versions in which the continuity of the narrative is broken only by an occasional blank line, we find it divided first into two more or less equal halves: "Book I", ending with the death of Satyavan, and "Book II", where Savitri follows his soul into other worlds and wins it back. At a later stage these "Books" would become two "Parts", the first called "Earth" and the second "Beyond", each containing several books that would eventually be subdivided into cantos. Ultimately the original two parts were destined to become Parts Two and Three, after some introductory passages in "Earth" were expanded between the late 1920s and the early 1940s into a huge Part One concerned mainly with the spiritual experiences of King Aswapati, Savitri's father, preceding her birth.

But going back to the early version in just two books, we find next a division into six cantos, each with a single word as its title: Love, Fate, Death, Night, Twilight and Day. The first three cantos in this scheme – Love, Fate and Death – relate to events on earth; the others take place against the backdrop of dark, twilit or luminous realms of the beyond. Most of the first canto, Love, is about the meeting of Savitri and Satyavan. In the next canto, Fate, the divine sage Narad reveals that Satyavan is destined to die in a year. The fateful day itself is described in the third canto, Death, up to the moment when Satyavan passes away on Savitri's lap. The remaining cantos – Night, Twilight and Day – deal, in a sense, with the same themes in reverse order, but this time from the perspective of invisible worlds. Eternal night is Death's own kingdom, where his law is unchallengeable. The twilight of the play of forces behind the veil is the domain of infinite possibilities where Fate can be changed. Finally, the triumph of Love ushers in the transformation symbolised in the last canto by the vision of everlasting day.

What is at issue throughout is the affirmation of the value of life and love against the negation represented by death. In his youthful poem, *Love and Death*, Sri Aurobindo had dealt with this question in a more romantic vein. There it was resolved by a compromise, the lover sacrificing half of his life to restore that of his beloved. In *Savitri*, on the contrary, there is an unconditional victory of the principle of affirmation. This outcome depends on the handling of the term that intervenes between Love and Death in the names of the original cantos. To conquer Death is to alter Fate. But this cannot be done lightly, for it could overturn the existing order of things.

7. FATE AND FREEDOM

It is especially with regard to the role of fate in *Savitri* that the *Record of Yoga* sheds light on what attracted Sri Aurobindo in this story. From the first entries in 1909 to the last in 1927, the diary shows his preoccupation with the faculty for which he usually used the Sanskrit term *trikāladṛṣṭi*. Meaning literally «the vision of the three times» or «triple time knowledge» (Aurobindo [1999]: 792, 889), *trikāladṛṣṭi* encompasses «the direct knowledge of the past, the intuitive knowledge of the present and the prophetic knowledge of the future» (Aurobindo [2001]: 1473). What especially interested Sri Aurobindo was the aspect of precognition. He believed the power of foreknowledge to be latent in us and was methodically cultivating it, but he also thought that what is foreseen can under certain circumstances be changed. Working out the implications of the latter possibility was what absorbed him most of all.

The role of *trikāladṛṣṭi* in the Savitri legend is obvious. Satyavan's death is foretold by Narad, whose only function in the story is to make this prediction. The heavenly seer's prevision is infallible and Satyavan dies exactly as foretold. But that is not the end of the matter. For the young woman calmly refuses to accept Death's right to take her husband away. She follows them into other worlds and at last brings Satyavan back.

She achieves this is an utterly different way in Sri Aurobindo's version of the story than in the *Mahābhārata*. Savitri in the ancient Sanskrit epic, for all her strength of character, essentially embodies wifely virtue or, to be more precise, the *dharma* of the *kṣatriya* woman. After Satyavan's death, she leaves her body in trance and comes face to face with Yama. In the Indian tradition, Yama is the god not only of death, but of *dharma*, the social and moral law. He rewards Savitri's learning, eloquence and constancy with boon after boon, including finally her husband's life.

In Sri Aurobindo's poem, on the other hand, the being whom Savitri opposes is «the Spirit of the Void» who claims the world «for Death and Nothingness» (Aurobindo [1993]: 717). Here, too, Death represents law, but primarily the laws of nature and cosmic order, not the moral and social law. As such, he warns her:

> *Touch not the seated lines, the ancient laws,*
> *Respect the calm of great established things.* (Aurobindo [1993]: 651)

Savitri's reply, in a passage dating back to the first draft of 1916, breathes the defiance that, among other qualities, distinguishes Sri Aurobindo's heroine from her ancient namesake:

> *I trample on thy law with living feet;*
> *For to arise in freedom I was born.* (Aurobindo [1993]: 652)

The tone of the utterance calls to mind Sri Aurobindo's background as a leader of an anti-colonial movement to expel foreign rulers from India. But an outward, political liberty is not overtly at issue here. Savitri's dialogue with Death brings us back to the fundamental question of fate. For fate seems to be the ultimate contradiction of human freedom.

Free will can be denied for two types of reasons. First, the chain of causality can deprive us of all but an illusory freedom, since what we imagine to be our free will is predetermined in ways of which we are unaware. As Sri Aurobindo puts it in *Savitri*:

> *All now seems Nature's massed machinery;*
> *An endless servitude to material rule*
> *And long determination's rigid chain […]*
> *Annul the claim of man's free human will.*
> *He too is a machine amid machines.* (Aurobindo [1993]: 20)

Epicurus – and Lucretius following him – had seen long ago that Democritus's atomism led to a mechanistic determinism, undermining the free will required for their ethical system. In what looks like an anticipation of quantum theory, they posited therefore a random «swerve» in the movements of atoms. Whether this helps to restore freedom of the will in any meaningful sense continues to be debated. Be that as it may, it was not in the idea of the «quantum dance» as «a sprawl of chance» (Aurobindo [1993]: 254) that Sri Aurobindo found a liberating way out of the prison of causal determinism.

Besides, he had to deal with another aspect of the free will conundrum, suggested in *Savitri* by lines such as:

> *Fate followed her foreseen immutable road.* (Aurobindo [1993]: 465)

Foreknowledge such as Narad's implies that the future is mapped out in advance and cannot be altered any more than the past can. In the history of thought, metaphysical naturalism has always risked swallowing up the freedom of the will in the determinism of the laws of nature, posing the problem that Lucretius's atomic swerve was meant to solve. On the other hand, the supernaturalism of medieval Christianity presented another challenge to the notion of free will

which Dante likewise found himself compelled to address.

The difficulty of what is now called theological fatalism is that divine omniscience must include the knowledge of the future, but what is so foreseen cannot be changed since that would falsify God's prescience. Where, then, is there room for individual freedom of choice? Yet such freedom seems necessary for the moral responsibility on which the justice of the vision of hell, purgatory and heaven depends. Convincingly or not, therefore, Dante does his best to reconcile divine foreknowledge with free will: «Contingent things […] are all outlined in the eternal gaze, though predetermination does not follow from this, no more than a boat slipping downstream is driven by the eye in which it is reflected» (Alighieri [1472]: 346).

In Indian thought, the theory of *trikāladṛṣṭi* implies an equivalent of theological fatalism in that it supposes the existence, as Sri Aurobindo puts it, of «a simultaneous eternity of Time in which past, present and future exist together for ever in the self-knowledge and self-power of the Eternal» (Aurobindo [1999]: 886). Meanwhile the influential Sankhya philosophy and the widespread Indian notion of Karma, both of which Sri Aurobindo accepts in some form, seem to entail deterministic views of nature and human action which likewise threaten to rule out free will. Theological fatalism and causal determinism are conceptually distinct, but their consequences for our freedom are similar. In Sri Aurobindo's poem, with its synthesis of naturalism and supernaturalism, the freedom asserted by Savitri has to be vindicated from both standpoints: Satyavan's fate has to be cancelled and the law of death overridden.

The key to Sri Aurobindo's solution lies in his concept of freedom or liberty. In an essay on «Self-Determination», written in 1918 while he was working on an early version of *Savitri*, he explained: «This great indefinable thing, liberty, is in its highest and ultimate sense […] self living in itself and determining by its own energy what it shall be inwardly and, eventually, by the growth of a divine spiritual power within determining too what it shall make of its external circumstances and environment» (Aurobindo [1997c]: 624).

This idea of freedom is not unlike the political philosopher Isaiah Berlin's concept of positive liberty, except that Berlin's «freedom as rational self-direction» (Berlin [2005]: 191) is replaced here by freedom as spiritual self-determination. True freedom in this sense, Sri Aurobindo maintains, «is only possible if we live in the infinite, live, as the Vedanta bids us, in and from our self-existent being» (Aurobindo [1997c]: 624). This is what the heroine of his poem means by the freedom for which she declares that she was born. This, perhaps even more than the power of love, is the secret of the strength she brings to her encounter with the cosmic spirit of denial who appears in the form of Death.

8. THOUGHT, WORD AND VISION IN THE WRITING OF SAVITRI

Thousands of pages of manuscripts attest to the fact that Sri Aurobindo's poetic magnum opus did not come into the world fully developed like Athena springing from the head of Zeus. In 1933, halfway through his work on what was by then becoming an epic, he commented on how it had begun: «What I wrote at first was only the first raw material of the *Savitri* I am evolving now» (Aurobindo [2004]: 262). A year later, he remarked that his numerous early recasts of the poem had been made «under the old insufficient inspiration» and that now he was «altogether rewriting it […] and working on it over and over again with the hope that every line may be of a perfect perfection» (Aurobindo [2004]: 211). The continual expansion of the scope of the poem meant that new books and cantos continued to be added up to 1947. Meanwhile, the reworking of material already written resulted sometimes in as many as fifty versions of a single passage. This constant revision was motivated by considerations of both style and substance.

Style pertains to the wording of the text, as distinct from the content it expresses, which we call

the substance. But separating style from substance is not always easy or even possible. A thought inadequately expressed loses much of its force; this subtly changes and may actually falsify the idea itself. Conversely, a simple perception can be transmuted into an inspired and veridical utterance by the magic of a perfect style. Style is of the utmost importance in poetry, but hardly less so in prose. When pressed to do so, Sri Aurobindo gave sound advice not only to aspiring poets, but also to those who asked him how to improve their prose. His recommendations, such as «avoid over-writing» and «let all your sentences be the vehicle of something worth saying and say it with a vivid precision neither defective nor excessive» (Aurobindo [2004]: 627), apply to the cultivation of what he called an adequate style. But "adequate" designates in his vocabulary only the first and lowest of five levels of style. Nothing short of the highest of these could qualify as the «perfect perfection» he was striving for in *Savitri*.

His terms for the levels surpassing mere adequacy are, in ascending order: effective, illuminative, inspired and inevitable. Sri Aurobindo considered the first three styles – adequate, effective and illuminative – to be possible in prose as well as poetry (Aurobindo [1997b]: 16-17). He reserved the last two levels, the inspired and the inevitable, for poetry on its rarest heights. It is clear from his diary that the cultivation of these intensified powers of expression was for him an integral part of his spiritual self-discipline or «Yoga of self-perfection». The notion of the poetic mind elevating itself to higher and higher levels brings to mind his statement that he «used *Savitri* as a means of ascension» (Aurobindo [2004]: 272). The process of writing the poem is thus connected with its content, since a spiritual ascension from plane to higher plane is one of its central themes.

By the second major stage of the composition of *Savitri*, in which Sri Aurobindo concentrated on Part One, he was treating it as a sort of spiritual autobiography with the Yogi Aswapati serving as a thinly disguised representation of himself. Even the inspiration and other faculties he needed to write the poem are described in a number of places, as in these lines:

Oft inspiration with her lightning feet,
A sudden messenger from the all-seeing tops,
Traversed the soundless corridors of his mind
Bringing her rhythmic sense of hidden things.
(Aurobindo [1993]: 38)

Regarded by Sri Aurobindo as «a field of experimentation» rather than something «to be written and finished» (Aurobindo [2004]: 272), *Savitri* is a poem whose genesis and development are of unusual interest and are inseparable from the evolution of its author's philosophical vision. Sri Aurobindo's poet-disciple K.D. Sethna first drew attention to how *Savitri* «moved from its beginning to its final shape across nearly half of the poet's life like a grander *Faust*» (Sethna [1981]: 424). Fusing this-worldly and other-worldly elements as well as Western and Eastern influences in a vision even more wide-ranging than those of Lucretius, Dante or Goethe, Sri Aurobindo's epic seems to meet the requirements of a philosophical poem for our global age – an epic such as Santayana imagined, with the ambition to «reconstitute the shattered picture of the world» (Santayana [1910]: 85).

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