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**SAVITRI BHAVAN**  
**AUROVILLE 605101, TN**  
**INDIA**

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Savitri  
Part I -  
Book I  
The Book of Beginnings

319 The Sacred Dawn

It was the hour before the Gods awake.  
Across the fall of the divine Veil,  
He lay forlornly, abandoned of Night, alone,  
Lay stretched, immobile, upon Sita's map.  
A mute incense of sun-flare of the unknown,  
A sign of the unborn infant  
Whose fatherhood you receive the world,  
Coax'd the cosmic dance of ignorant fire  
In void creative slumber, holding the time,  
That comes all things in its commandment wheel.  
Across the vast unknown tower of ether,  
Its founder at a vital mid-orbit,  
A shadow spinning through the ether vast,  
Ere wheel'd abandoned in the hollow gulf,  
Forgetful of her spirit and her fate.  
The impassive ether was neutral, empty still.  
Then a black presence, green towards that change  
Along a line of spiralling hue  
Like a vapourate tempest, a desert heat  
Tumbled the forlorn of life's divine sleep.  
Above it on some unseen eternal wing  
An eye of duty looked through the fast night,  
Calling for the centre of consciousness, and joy  
Compelled mortal conduct to see and feel.  
A thought was born in the unceded Void,  
A sense was born within the darkness' depths,  
A memory yearned in the heart of time,  
A life and long deadness moved to love;  
In the obscure that unceasing fall  
Blasted the wooded tablets of the past  
And all that was destroyed not to rebuild  
And all and never labour'd out once more.  
At first a knot that hardly seem'd to be  
Which the night's furrow in difference,  
A clear unclouded portion's dead appeal,  
The unceasing still of transfiguring truth  
Purified the mind that had been  
And beauty, and order, but the fields of God.

An earlier version of the opening lines of Savitri

## THE CHRONOLOGY OF SAVITRI

*This third issue of our Savitri Bhavan study notes focusses on the chronology of Sri Aurobindo's composition of Savitri, which extended over much of the later part of his life. The earliest known manuscript is dated 1916. The original narrative poem was recast several times in the first phase of composition, extending up to approximately 1920. By around 1930, Sri Aurobindo had begun to turn it into an epic with a larger scope and deeper significance. Transformed into "A Legend and a Symbol", Savitri became his major literary work, which he continued to expand and perfect until his last days. In order to find out more about the various stages of this process we invited Richard Hartz, of the Sri Aurobindo Archives in Pondicherry to speak to us. An edited transcript of Richard's talk at Savitri Bhavan on 15.11.1998 is given here, along with some relevant passages from Sri Aurobindo's own letters, and from Nirodbaran's memoir Twelve years with Sri Aurobindo.*

## FROM SRI AUROBINDO'S LETTERS ON SAVITRI

1931 - *From the first letter on Savitri to Amal Kiran:*

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 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.

1934

*Savitri* is a work by itself unlike all the others. 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 - but I have hardly any time now for such work.

1936

*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 (these two parts are still extant in the scheme) each of four books - or rather Part II consisted of three books and an epilogue. Twelve books to an epic is a classical superstition,

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but the new *Savitri* may extend to ten books - if much is added in the final version it may be even twelve. 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. There was no climbing of planes there in the first version - rather *Savitri* moved through the worlds of Night, of Twilight, of Day - all of course in a spiritual sense - and ended by calling down the power of the Highest Worlds of Sachchidananda. I had no idea of what the supramental World could be like at that time, so it could not enter into the scheme. As for expressing the supramental inspiration, that is a matter of the future.

1936

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, I believe, sometimes coming fully through, sometimes colouring the poetry

of the other higher planes fused together, sometimes lifting any one of these higher planes to its highest or the psychic, poetic intelligence of vital towards them.

1938

I have done an enormous amount of work with *Savitri*. The third section has been recast - not rewritten - so as to give it a more consistent epic swing and amplitude and elevation of level. The fourth section, the Worlds, is undergoing transformation. The "Life" part is in a way finished, though I shall have to go over the ground perhaps some five or six times more to ensure perfection of detail. I am now starting a recasting of the "Mind" part of which I had only made a sort of basic rough draft. I hope that this time the work will stand as more final and definitive.

1938

... the "Worlds" have fallen into a state of manuscript chaos, corrections upon corrections, additions upon additions, rearrangements on rearrangements out of which perhaps some cosmic beauty will emerge!

1946

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. There are now three books in the first part. The first, the Book of

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Beginnings, comprises five cantos which cover the same ground as what you typed but contains also much more that is new. The small passage about Aswapati and the other worlds has been replaced by a new book, the Book of the Traveller of the Worlds, in fourteen cantos with many thousand lines. There is also a third sufficiently long book, the Book of the Divine Mother. In the new plan of the poem there is a second part consisting of five books: two of these, the Book of Birth and Quest and the Book of Love, have been completed and another, the Book of Fate, is almost complete. Two others, the Book of Yoga and the Book of Death, have still to be written, though a part needs only a thorough recasting. Finally there is the third part consisting of four books, the Book of Eternal Night, the Book of the Dual Twilight, the Book of Everlasting Day and the Return to Earth, which have to be entirely recast and the third of them largely rewritten. So it will be a long time before *Savitri* is complete.

1948

... my push to write letters or to new literary production has dwindled almost to zero - this apart from *Savitri* and even *Savitri* has very much slowed down and I am only making the last revisions of the First Part already completed; the other two parts are just now in cold storage.



FROM NIRODBARAN'S BOOK  
*TWELVE YEARS WITH SRI AUROBINDO*

*The late 1940s*

The revision of *Savitri* was going on apace with regular unabated vigour. Book after Book was getting done and fascicules of them released for publication. Some 400-500 lines of The Book of Everlasting Day were dictated on successive days, since we could not spare more than an hour a day for the monumental work and that too had often to be cut short to meet other demands. We were, nevertheless, progressing quite steadily. I marvelled at the smooth spontaneous flow of verse after verse of remarkable beauty. ... At this rate, I thought, *Savitri* would not take long to finish.

(p. 263)

1950

The work on *Savitri* proceeded as usual, but slowed down in pace, especially when we came to a mighty confrontation with the two big Cantos of The Book of Fate. Revision after revision, addition of lines, even punctuations changed so many times! It seemed like a veritable "God's labour" against a rock of resistance.

.....

When the path was fairly clear and I was wondering what his next choice would be, he said in a distant voice, "Take up *Savitri*. I want to finish it soon." This must have been about two months before his departure. The last part of the utterance startled me, though it was said in a subdued tone. I wondered for a moment if I had heard rightly. I looked at him; my

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bewildered glance met an impassive face. In these twelve years this was the first time I had heard him reckoning with the time factor. ... We took up the same two Cantos that had proved so intractable. The work progressed slowly; words, ideas, images seemed to be repeated; the verses themselves appeared to flow with reluctance. Once a punctuation had to be changed four or five times. When the last revision was made and the Cantos were wound up, I said, "It is finished now." An impersonal smile of satisfaction greeted me, and he said, "Ah, it is finished?" How well I remember that flicker of a smile which all of us craved for so long! "What is left now?" was his next query. "The Book of Death and The Epilogue." "Oh that? We shall see about that later on." That "later on" never came and was not meant to come. Having taken the decision to leave the body, he must have been waiting for the right moment to go, and for reasons known to himself he left the two last-mentioned Books almost as they were. Thus on *Savitri* was put the seal of incomplete completion about two weeks before the Darshan of November 24th.

And significantly The Book of Fate was the last Book to be revised. What I deemed to be minor flaws or unnecessary repetitions, and thought that a further revision would remove them, appeared after his passing to be deliberate and prophetic:

*A day may come when she must stand unhelped  
On a dangerous brink of the world's doom and hers*

...

*In that tremendous silence lone and lost*

...

*Cry not to heaven, for she alone can save.*

...

*She only can save herself and save the world.*

We know how true these words have proved.

(p.264-5)

## THE COMPOSITION OF SAVITRI - A BRIEF OVERVIEW

Edited transcript of a talk given by Richard Hartz  
at Savitri Bhavan on Sunday, November 15, 1999

*Richard has been working for many years at the Sri Aurobindo Ashram Archives, and has written the "Note on the Text" accompanying Savitri in the new 125th anniversary edition of Sri Aurobindo's Complete Works.*

The whole subject of the composition of *Savitri* remains a task for the future. It will take years and years to explore in all its details, and so far only some preliminary work has been done. Sri Aurobindo spent over thirty years working on *Savitri* and in that time it expanded enormously. We have put all the manuscripts in some kind of preliminary chronological order, but the task of transcribing those manuscripts and finding out how they differ from each other and so on has only just begun.

What I will say now is based on some work that was done a couple of years ago, when the first volumes of the new edition of Sri Aurobindo's Complete Works were being prepared. *Savitri* was one of the first of these, because it was decided to leave the text exactly as it appeared in 1993. So the only thing that had to be done for the new edition of the Complete Works, where *Savitri* forms volumes 33 and 34 of the 35 volumes, was to add a Note on the Text at the end, describing the composition of *Savitri*. I worked intensively on that for a couple of months, going through all of the manuscripts we have in cold storage in the Ashram. In order to preserve the manuscripts under optimum conditions we keep them in a cold storage room. The manuscripts of *Savitri* fill sixteen boxes, seven of which relate to the final stages leading up to its first publication. The first nine boxes are all earlier versions, going back to 1916. Very little of this material has been transcribed. It has only been arranged in a rough chronological order. I went through this to get an idea of the main stages, in order to write the Note on the Text which was published last year, at the end of volume 34 of Sri Aurobindo's Complete Works - an 11-page article to replace the previous Bibliographical Note which used to be published at the end of *Savitri*, which described only the publishing history. This new Note goes into the composition of the poem, beginning with the first manuscript in 1916. I'll just summarise this briefly and then go back to the beginning and give some more details.

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## Three major phases

There are three major phases in the composition of *Savitri*. The first is the early one, from 1916 to 1920. The second is from somewhere around 1930 to 1945, and the last is the last five years from 1945 to 1950.

The first stage is obviously distinct from the later ones, because there was a long gap in the 1920s when Sri Aurobindo didn't work on *Savitri* at all. When he took it up again he wrote in a letter to Amal that he had written it before the Mother came - meaning that before her final arrival in 1920 he had worked on the early version - and now he was working on it again. He doesn't say exactly when he took it up, but at that point, in 1931, it doesn't sound as if he had been working on it for very long. At that stage, in the early 1930s, in letters to Amal, Sri Aurobindo mentions that he was concentrating on the first book. And in fact that is what we see from the manuscripts: that for the next 15 years he worked on what is now Part One. So this is the second major phase, which was focussed on Part One.

In the first phase he was working on *Savitri* as a whole, but it was an early version that in many ways was quite different from the poem as we know it. In the second period he took the relatively short opening passage of that version and expanded it over a period of approximately 15 years into Part One, which now constitutes half of the poem.

Then in the last five years from 1945 to 1950, in addition to putting Part One into its final form, he went back to the rest of the books and revised them - by dictation, because by that time his eyesight was failing, so that most of the work in the last five years, and especially the last two, was by dictation. In this last period he worked on the rest of the poem, Parts Two and Three. He went through them in a certain order, which I'll describe later, and put them into their final form.

Before I start going into details, I'll read an excerpt from a letter of Sri Aurobindo which is rather poignant, and gives an idea of what he was doing all this time, and why it took him more than 30 years to finish *Savitri*. This letter was written in 1947 in response to some criticisms which had been made by a friend of Amal's. He wrote,

*If I have not poetical genius, at least I can claim a sufficient, if not an infinite capacity for painstaking. That I have sufficiently shown by my long labour on Savitri - or rather, since it was not labour in the ordinary sense, not a labour of painstaking construction, I may*

*describe it as an infinite capacity for waiting and listening for the true inspiration and rejecting all that fell short of it, however good it might seem from a lower standard, until I got that which I felt to be absolutely right.*

So this was what he was doing from 1916 to 1950 - trying to make every line of *Savitri* absolutely right.

### Dating the versions

I'll go back to the beginning. First of all I should mention the idea that Sri Aurobindo began *Savitri* in Baroda - because this is a widespread impression. That would mean that he began it around the turn of the century. This is based on the report a friend of his in Baroda, who said that he had seen Sri Aurobindo writing an English poem on *Savitri*. But certainly no manuscript from Baroda has survived. Sri Aurobindo also never gave the impression that he remembered having begun *Savitri* in Baroda. All his references to the early versions certainly seem to refer to Pondicherry. It's possible that what he wrote in Baroda might have been either a translation of the episode in the Mahabharata - he was doing a lot of translation from Sanskrit at that time and he might have translated the *Savitri* episode from the Mahabharata at that time and it was lost - or a poem something like *Love and Death*, which is based on another episode from the Mahabharata that is a little similar to the *Savitri* story. If he did, it was lost. It's also possible that the person who believed that he had seen Sri Aurobindo working on *Savitri* in Baroda had actually seen him working on *Love and Death*, which is similar enough that he could have confused the two. In any case, if Sri Aurobindo wrote a poem on *Savitri* in Baroda it must have been quite different from even the earliest version we have from Pondicherry, because the whole conception of *Savitri* as it appears even in the first manuscript, which is dated 1916, is such that it doesn't seem possible that Sri Aurobindo could have written anything like it in Baroda, before he even took up yoga. For all practical purposes *Savitri* begins in 1916.

Moreover this is one of the few places where we can give exact dates. The first manuscript of *Savitri* is dated on the second page, August 8 1916. A few dates follow, up to November which, even when the year is not given, seem to refer to 1916. After that Sri Aurobindo stopped dating the manuscripts of *Savitri*, so it won't be possible to give much of a chronology in the sense of precise dating until the next landmark, which comes in 1936, when he started sending excerpts from *Savitri* to Amal. Those are all dated. We know the

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exact dates on which he sent passages to Amal in 1936 and '37. Then again there are no dates up to 1942.

In 1942 and 1944 we have dated versions. At this time Sri Aurobindo began to write out the whole of the first part. And when he had written out a manuscript of a long passage which he considered to be the final version he would sometimes put a date at the end. So we have dates in 1942 and '44. Then we have a few dates in 1946 and '47, not from the manuscripts themselves but from Sri Aurobindo's letters, written or dictated in 1946 to '48, from which we can tell where he was in the composition of *Savitri*. And then finally at the very end we have some idea about the dating, partly based on Nirod's recollections.

## The earliest versions

Fortunately the first manuscript is dated: August 8-9, 1916. This means that Sri Aurobindo probably started *Savitri* in a break just after completing an issue of the *Arya*. August 15, 1916 would have been the beginning of the third year of the *Arya*. Since August 1914 most of Sri Aurobindo's writing had gone into the *Arya*, in which he published most of his major prose works in monthly instalments, writing several of them at one time, so that in the August 1916 issue - supposed to come out on the 15th of August, so it must have gone to the Press a little earlier - we have instalments of *The Life Divine*, *The Synthesis of Yoga*, *The Ideal of Human Unity*, and he was just beginning *Essays on the Gita* and *The Human Cycle*, which was then called *The Psychology of Social Development*. The first instalments of those two books had just been written, as well as the first instalment of *Hymns of the Atris*, translations from the Veda. So that must have been a lot of work. He was probably relaxing a little, and decided to write some poetry, and he took up the story of *Savitri* and wrote a few pages.

We don't actually know how much he wrote at that point, because there are three or four pages, and then it stops; and then we have a much longer section. He started again at the beginning and continued up to the end of *Savitri's* debate with Death - so that in fact almost the whole story was told at that point, in one continuous version. At some point he must have put it aside and taken it up again, because the next dates that occur after August 8-9 are October 17, 18, 19. These come at the bottom of a page describing the death of Satyavan, in what is now the Book of Death. All three dates occur, which probably means that some of them refer not to the original writing but to the revision. Then we have October 18 and 19 occurring again a few pages further

on. It seems that on those three days, October 17, 18, 19, 1916, Sri Aurobindo drafted what now is Books Eight, Nine and Ten of *Savitri*. He must have been writing 100 to 150 lines a day, so it was one of his first real outbursts of inspiration, during which he drafted a considerable part. Not only that, but when one compares this version to the final one, this is the first place in which large portions remained almost unchanged in the final version. That goes up to the end of Savitri's debate with Death. Then it stops, and we find several new drafts of some of the same passages which had already been written, particularly from what is now the Book of Fate. And then we have a passage which corresponds to the present Book Eleven. There's a very remarkable passage near the end of this notebook in which we find many lines that have remained in Book Eleven. There seems to have been a flood of inspiration in which he wrote one of the most inspired passages, in which many lines remained intact from the very first version up to the last one.

This was all written in a very small notebook, which is so lightly bound that we haven't yet been able to photocopy it, because of the risk of damaging the manuscript by opening it up. This represents the very first stage in the composition of *Savitri*.

### Expansion and Division

At this stage there were no divisions into books, cantos, parts or anything. In that respect the form was something like that of *Love and Death* - one long continuous narrative poem, with blank spaces here and there separating it into sections. It was not long enough to need to be divided into books and cantos. But very soon it began to lengthen out and Sri Aurobindo started subdividing it. I don't know the exact length of the very first version; but one very early version, referred to as "The First Fair Copy", was published in *Mother India* in 1981 and '82, and there the lines are numbered, so we have some idea of the length at that stage. There are about 1670 lines in that version, which is definitely from 1916. This means that the poem was later expanded to about 15 times what it started out as.

But expansion was not even all the way through. Some passages were expanded enormously, others were not expanded very much. For example in "The First Fair Copy", dated 1916, the first two sections add up to 98 lines. These cover approximately what now forms Book One, Canto One - The Symbol Dawn, and Book Three, Canto Four - The Vision and the Boon, with some lines that also correspond to the preceding canto, Book Three, Canto Three. So in 1916 this was 98 lines. What this corresponds to now has ended

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up as 11, 683 lines. So it has been expanded by roughly 120 times from what it was in 1916.

On the other hand what is now the Book of Death is only about one third longer than what it was in the very first version, with 133 lines in the very early version and 177 lines in the final form. And of those 133 lines, 108 were identical to what they are now. Which means he only changed about 25 lines later on, and added 44. In other words, this part is remarkably similar to what it was in 1916. In this case, it does not necessarily mean that he was so happy with the original version, but simply that he never came back to it. This is something we know from what Nirod has told us about the last year of the work on *Savitri*. He tells us that at the very end Sri Aurobindo dictated a passage which comes almost at the end of Book Six, Canto Two - a tremendous passage just before the final paragraph, where he expanded 13 lines into 72 lines as his very last revision of *Savitri*. This passage begins

*"Queen, strive no more to change the secret will; ..."*

and continues up to where there is a break. It was dictated around November 10, 1950 ... Nirod simply says it was completed about two weeks before the November Darshan. And then Sri Aurobindo asked what was left. Nirod said, "The Book of Death and the Epilogue", and Sri Aurobindo replied, "We'll see about that later." But he never came back to them. So we have no idea what he intended to do with the Book of Death. He simply left it as it was - more or less as it was in 1916, because even in the period between 1916 and 1920 he hadn't touched it much.

On the other hand there are some passages which he did work on in the late 1940s, but which remained quite similar to what they were in 1916. Book Nine is the most striking case of that. It was expanded to only about twice its original length. Even though Sri Aurobindo gave full attention to it around 1946; he didn't find it necessary to add much to it. Whereas Book Ten, Canto Four, as another example, was expanded to about 18 times its original length. So this gives some idea how some passages were expanded enormously, while others remained fairly similar to what they were from the beginning. Moreover we do find some lines in which from the very first draft he hit upon the perfect expression and never found any need to change it later. In the first passage which was later expanded to become Part One there are five lines which are identical to the first version. Out of the 11,683 of the final version, five lines can be traced back unchanged to 1916, in the exact same form; and



another 20 lines are quite similar. The rest is almost entirely new, and much of it was written in the 1930s and 40s.

The other major difference between the original poem and the final one is that there was nothing at all corresponding to the Book of Yoga in the original poem. In a way this corresponds to the case with Part One - there was also no Yoga of Aswapati to speak of in the original version. The whole idea of using Savitri as a vehicle for expressing his yoga was not present in the beginning. So the Yoga of the King, and the whole book of the Traveller of the Worlds, were not at all part of the original conception, just as Savitri's yoga also was not part of the original conception.

What was then called the Book of Death corresponds to what is now Book Seven, Canto One - The Joy of Union and the Ordeal of Foreknowledge plus what is now the Book of Death. These two formed one Book called the Book of Death. There was no yoga of Savitri. In fact the yoga of Savitri was one of the very last things that Sri Aurobindo started working on, in 1947. Up to 1947 he hadn't done anything with it. In 1947 when he was still able to write, but his writing is almost illegible, he started to draft passages for Book Seven, Cantos Two to Seven. So the origin of that book, apart from its first canto, dates back to 1947 - no earlier.

### Changing subdivisions

Now I'll go into a little more detail about the way the original continuous narrative poem was gradually divided into more and more sections, so that it eventually became three Parts, twelve Books and forty-nine Cantos - starting from a poem which had no subdivisions at all.

The first division was into two Books. This was the origin of the eventual Parts. These Books had nothing to do with what are now called Books. They corresponded to the Parts. And since in the original conception there was nothing really corresponding to what is now Part One, the original Book One and Book Two correspond to what are now Part Two and Part Three.

This becomes clearer when in the next stage Sri Aurobindo further divided his poem into six cantos and an epilogue, and gave these cantos names. The first two books didn't have names, but the first one went up to the death of Satyavan, and the second one covered what follows, beginning with the appearance of Death. In the second phase he dropped that division into two books and divided his poem into six cantos and an epilogue. The names of these cantos are very significant and correspond to those of the later books. They were called: Love, Fate, Death, Night, Twilight, Day, and The Epilogue.

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Love, the first, apparently corresponds to the title of Book Five. But at that time, because the opening passage was so short, it included the opening passage which eventually became Part One, as well as Book Four and Book Five - all that was in one canto called Love. The canto called Fate obviously corresponds to what is now Book Six, but almost entirely to Book Six, Canto One. There was practically nothing of what is now Book Six, Canto Two - The Way of Fate and the Problem of Pain. That was added much later. 'Canto III - Death' included both the year leading up to Satyavan's death and the day on which he died. 'Canto IV - Night' corresponds fairly closely to the present Book Nine, The Book of Eternal Night, and the fifth canto, 'Twilight', corresponds to the present Book Ten - there was no double twilight then, it was simply called 'Twilight'. The sixth canto, 'Day', corresponds to the present Book Eleven - The Book of Eternal Day. So this was the third stage.

First there were no subdivisions, Then there were two books without names, then there were six cantos with an epilogue.

This was quite soon after the first versions of 1916. There is the First Draft - which is dated August 1916 and completed November 1916. Around the time he was finishing the first draft, Sri Aurobindo was already beginning to make fair copies of it, in other notebooks, and there are two fair copies which also seem to be dated to about 1916, which cover more or less the whole poem, and which have this division into two Books. Then we stop having any dates, so from then until 1920 we don't really know what was done when, but the cantos are not very different from the previous version in two books. Probably we can assume that he was working on it more or less regularly in the period from 1916 to 1920. And the similarity between the various versions is such that there doesn't seem to have been much of a break before he started working in the form of cantos, so perhaps it was in 1917.

The version in six cantos is the third of 15 main stages with different divisions and subdivisions. The whole poem was not written out 15 times from beginning to end, but many passages have at least one manuscript, sometimes several, for each of these 15 stages. We have identified 45 manuscripts of the opening passage - that gives some idea of how much Sri Aurobindo was working on *Savitri*. We may even have omitted some, but there are at least 45 versions of the opening passage in his own hand, plus a few more when it was copied by Nirod, typed, published in fascicle form, and finally included in the first edition, for which Sri Aurobindo revised the proofs - so altogether it comes to about 50 versions of the opening passage. That's a lot more than you have for most

parts of the poem, but still it's not unusual to find a couple of dozen versions of a passage.

And because the titles tend to appear on the first page, from looking at the first pages of all these different versions one can get an idea of how Sri Aurobindo was dividing up the whole poem.

First there are two versions, or rather, one and a half versions, without any subdivisions. The second version has 'Book II' marked at the mid-point: There is no 'Book I' at the beginning, but it implies a division into two Books. The third manuscript is explicitly divided into two Books, with 'Book I' written at the beginning and 'Book II' halfway through.

Then there are versions in six cantos. We have four versions of 'Canto I - Love', We have only two versions of 'Canto II - Death', and two versions of the epilogue. There are even more than four versions of some of the other cantos. So now Sri Aurobindo was starting to work separately on the different cantos, rather than writing the poem through from beginning to end, as he did in the first two or three ver'Book III - Death' - which corresponds to the present Book Seven, Canto One. That manuscript was used much later. When Sri Aurobindo put Book Seven, Canto One, into its final form in 1947, he took up the early 'Book III - Death'. But it stops before the beginning of what is now the Book of Death. So when he eventually did a little revision on the present Book of Death he had to use 'Canto III - Death' ... because there was no 'Book III - Death' with that passage in it.

So actually the last complete version of *Savitri* written in his own hand is in six cantos and an epilogue. Even there we are not sure that we can put together a single version which he wrote through from beginning to end in that form. We've been trying to do that, but haven't quite succeeded in piecing together the parts in a convincing way that looks as if it was really all written continuously. But in any case there are six complete cantos and there's the epilogue, with at least two manuscripts of each. That makes two complete versions representing this stage.

Up to this point we have basically five complete early versions of *Savitri*. After this, Sri Aurobindo concentrated on the individual books and we have to wait until the very end for a complete new version of the whole poem. Although he later referred to having made eight or ten recasts of *Savitri* in the early form, it doesn't mean that he actually wrote it all out eight or ten times. He wrote out parts of it much more than that, and other parts only five or six times.

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## The evolution of the opening passage

The version with six Books, 'Book I' being called 'Love', takes us up to the eighth version of the opening passage. But there seems to have been a big change in Sri Aurobindo's conception of the whole poem at the point when he substituted 'Book I' for 'Canto I'. For at this stage the opening passage becomes entirely different, and starts to look a bit like *Savitri* as we know it. The "First Fair Copy" of 1916, published in *Mother India* in 1981-82, began like this:

*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,  
For now her phantom tribes were not abroad,  
The panther's eyes glared not, the tiger slept  
Prone in his lair of jungle or deep grass,  
Startling the wide-eyed dreamer Dawn arose.  
Lain in her darker thoughtful sister's robe  
She pushed away the loving cloak that sealed  
To rest her brilliant and imperious eyes  
And waved the dim kind guardian from her side.*

There's not a single line in this that has anything to do with *Savitri* as we know it. There's only the idea of beginning the poem with the description of the dawn of the day of Satyavan's death. But at the end of the passage we have the line:

*This was the day when Satyavan must die.*

This line was there from the very beginning, and it is the only line in the whole passage which is identical to the final form. However there were a few lines which were very similar. Just after the passage I read comes the line:

*Raised were the wonderful lids that open heaven.*

Later this became

*Parted the eternal lids that open heaven.*





Further on we find:

*Once she half-looked behind for her great sun,  
Then thoughtful turned to her immortal work.*

Later 'great' became 'veiled' and 'turned' became 'went', but otherwise these lines have remained intact.

Then in the description of Savitri waking on that day, we have

*Sighing she laid her hand upon her bosom,  
Nor knew why the close lingering ache was there,  
So quiet, so old, so natural to its place.*

This has been changed just a little in the final version, but substantially it's the same.

And then comes one more line:

*Daily oblation of her unwept tears.*

The lines preceding that are now quite different, but this one line has survived almost intact.

For about seven or eight manuscripts, the poem remains very similar to this. The last manuscript of 'Canto I - Love' starts a little differently:

*In a dense forest under moonless skies*

With 'moonless' we are getting nearer to the feeling of the final version, and in fact the term 'moonless' seems to have suggested the line which we have at the beginning of the next version: the whole tone is now quite different:

*A starless hush prepared epiphany.  
Near was the hour of the transfiguring gods.*

And so on. In fact, everything has been changed, almost the whole opening passage as it was before has been thrown out and something else has been substituted. So we have

# Invocation

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*Waiting upon the marge of silence sat  
Mute with the expectation of her change.*

These lines in some form remain for a long time, although some of them were eventually altered beyond recognition or discarded completely, but the line

*Near was the hour of the transfiguring gods*

which is here the second line, after some time was shifted to become the first line. And having become the first line, it comes again in slightly different forms:

*The hour was near of the transfiguring gods*

then

*It was an hour of the transfiguring gods.*

Here he's put the words "it was" at the beginning. This remains through several versions. Then we have

*It was the hush of a transfiguring hour*

which seems to relapse towards an earlier form. And then suddenly

*It was the moment when the gods awake*

and the first words have been crossed out and replaced by

*It was the hour before the gods awake.*

So at last we have the first line in its final form. This is in the 21st manuscript of the opening passage.

## A Tale and a Vision

Most of these manuscripts have been titled, no longer 'Book I - Love', but 'Book I - Quest'. Because after the first eight versions - in which Sri Aurobindo had written out the first book more times than he had written out any of the



other ones - it was getting longer and longer, and so he found that he had to subdivide it. So he divided it into 'Book I - Quest', and 'Book II - Love'. 'Book I - Quest' at first extended up to "In Nature's solitude Love met Savitri". The present Book Five, Canto One ends "Love in the wilderness met Savitri". That means that 'Book I', which was called 'Quest', extended up to what is now Book Five, Canto One. And 'Book II - Love' corresponded to the present Cantos Two and Three of Book Five. But in one of the last versions of 'Book I - Quest', as the book was continuing to expand, he wanted to shift some more material from that to 'Book II'. So he ended with

*The spring winds failed, the sky was set like bronze.*

This line now ends Book Four, The Book of Birth and Quest. 'Book II - Love' then began with what is now Book Five, Canto One. So 'Book II' came to correspond to what is now Book Five, and 'Book I - Quest' corresponded to the present Books One to Four. We have a lot of versions of this: 16 versions are entitled 'Book I - Quest'. The first few begin

*A starless hush prepared epiphany*

and about half-way through, the beginning changes to

*An hour was near of the transfiguring gods*

and then finally, in the 21st version as I said, it became

*It was the hour before the gods awake.*

The poem was expanding constantly throughout this period, and so Sri Aurobindo begins to reintroduce the larger subdivision into what was originally two Books. Now they become two Parts. At first they are not called Parts, but before long they are called Part One and Part Two. To begin with they are simply called Earth and Beyond. The twelfth manuscript has a title page for the whole poem as it stood at that point:

*Savitri - A Tale and a Vision*

*Earth*

*Book I - Quest*

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We have several manuscripts with the subtitle "A Tale and a Vision". And in a letter of 1936 Sri Aurobindo referred to the arrangement which is represented by *Savitri - A Tale and a Vision*, which began with 'Book I - Quest'. He wrote:

*"Savitri was originally written many years ago before the Mother came...."*

This is one of our dating clues, because "before the Mother came" evidently means 'before she came in 1920'. So we know that the work on *Savitri* in the early phase ended in roughly 1920.

*"... as a narrative poem in two parts, Part One - Earth and Part Two - Beyond, each of four books - or rather Part Two consisted of three books and an epilogue."*

And then he gives the names of the books, which I have already told you: Quest, Love, Fate and Death form Part One, and Night, Twilight, Day and the Epilogue are Part Two. Then he speaks about breaking up the first one into two, to make five books in the first part. This goes into the next stage, because the first book kept getting longer and longer and longer, and after writing 16 versions of Quest, there was another major change, represented by a manuscript which has the heading

*Part One - Earth  
Book One - The Book of Birth*

So Book One is now called the Book of Birth. Actually, it doesn't really represent such a major change in the beginning, because Book Two was still called the Book of Love. That means that the Book of Birth essentially corresponded to the earlier 'Quest', except that he had removed the last section, what now is Book Four, Canto Four - The Quest. He had removed that from the first book and included it in the second one, so that the Book of Love now began with the Quest, where *Savitri* goes off to seek her mate. This is now Book Four, Canto Four.

## The middle phase

So this takes us into the 1930s.

At first Book One was still called 'Quest'. But soon Sri Aurobindo changed

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'Quest' to 'Birth' and we have manuscripts with the title 'Book I - The Book of Birth'. One of these begins:

*It was the hour before the gods awake,  
The huge unslumbering spirit of Night, alone  
In the unlit temple of immensity,  
Lay stretched immobile upon silence' marge,  
Mute with the expectation of her change.  
The impassive skies were neutral, waste and still.*

In these six lines there are quite a number of resemblances to the final version, but in the final version the corresponding passage covers about 30 lines. This manuscript from the early 1930s, which is entitled the Book of Birth, has first a section of approximately three pages corresponding to the present first canto, which now covers ten pages. Then come another three pages corresponding to what is now the second canto, The Issue - there were no titles yet for these sections, but they were separated by blank spaces. Then there's another three-page passage which describes the yoga of Aswapati, corresponding to what is now Book One, Cantos Three, Four and Five - nearly eighty pages in the final version. In the early 1930s it is three pages. Then we have one page which corresponds to what is now Book Two - The Book of the Traveller of the Worlds, which is now over two hundred pages long. At this stage, in the early 1930s, it's about one page. Then there are 16 more pages which correspond to what is now Book Three - The Book of the Divine Mother, leading up to The Vision and the Boon. This passage was much more developed at a fairly early stage than any of the earlier passages. Of the 32 pages of this version, half correspond to the present Book of the Divine Mother, and it is unfinished ... if this manuscript had been finished the passage on the vision of the Divine Mother would have been a bit longer than the whole preceding passage.

But things were just about to begin to change fairly dramatically.

### **The Worlds**

I've brought an enlarged photocopy of a page that shows how the Book of the Traveller of the Worlds began [see pp. 18-19]. The notebooks which Sri Aurobindo was using at this time are quite large, and although this is an extreme case, there are several notebooks like this, with page after page in which the margin is entirely filled, with lines pointing this way and that, numbers indicating the arrangements of the lines, lines added in the margin or written between

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the lines, and so on; about half of what is written on this page is in the margins, and there are major rearrangements. But what's particularly exciting about this particular page is that it is the beginning of the "big bang" which produced the Book of the Traveller of the Worlds. Not only do we have Sri Aurobindo suddenly jotting in the margin all kinds of lines which occurred to him, but at the end of the same notebook he has written out some of these passages at much greater length. He has begun to write whole pages on some of the different worlds which Aswapati travels through, whereas up to this point there was a fairly extensive description only of what is now Book Two, Canto Fifteen, the last canto of the Book of the Traveller of the Worlds, called The Kingdoms of the Greater Mind. We have

*And wandered through stupendous realms of Mind,  
The borders of the inexpressible Light,  
And saw above him the flaming hierarchies  
And the tiered planes and the immutable Lords ...*

*The Gods conversed with him behind Time's veil ...*

*Arising from the marvel of the depths,  
And blazing from the superconscious heights,  
And sweeping in vast horizontal gyres,  
A million forces joined to grow the One.*

Quite a number of these lines are now to be found near to the very end of Book Two. But above that we have only a few lines, in which very briefly some of the worlds are described, after the line "He broke into another Space and Time" which now ends Book One.

We have just two lines on "subtle Matter's reign", then a few lines beginning "He through the astral chaos built his road" - this now corresponds to The Godheads of the Little Life, Book Two, Canto Five. Then "Bore the fierce inner wounds that are slow to heal" - This is now in Book Two, Canto Eight - The World of Falsehood. Also "Traversed the ambush of the opponent snake" - there are a few lines from The World of Falsehood. Then a few lines from what is Book Two, Canto Nine in the final version, The Paradise of the Life Gods, about "scenes forbidden to our pallid sense" and so on. This is what eventually became about 200 pages from Book Two, Canto One to Book Two, Canto Fourteen. But in this version there were only about ten lines, before

revision. With the revisions in the margin it becomes at least double that; and then if you look at the last pages of the same notebook, there are several pages in which Sri Aurobindo started to write at some length about these worlds which Aswapati travels through.

So that's a very important stage, and it comes in the early 1930s. It's well before 1936, when Sri Aurobindo started sending passages from *Savitri* to Amal. But even in 1936 the first book was still called the Book of Birth, implying that the second book was the Book of Love. So we still don't have anything like Part One with three Books and 24 cantos. It's just one Book with spaces indicating different sections.

### **A Legend and a Symbol**

Around this time there is one interesting manuscript of Book One - The Book of Birth which for the first time gives the titles of some of the books on the title page, and it's called

*Savitri - A Legend and a Symbol.*

The subtitle which the poem now has is first given here.

*Part One - Earth*

- that remains the same. Then it lists the titles of four books:

*Book One - The Book of Birth*  
*Book Two - The Book of Love*  
*Book Three - The Book of Fate*  
*Book Four - The Book of Death*

This represents the phase at which this notebook was used, which was before 1936. 1936 is one of our solid dates, because the letters to Amal are dated. But because Sri Aurobindo had written this title page, some time later he re-used the same title page and wrote out a new set of titles, which don't actually correspond to the contents of the notebook which has this title page, but represent a scheme which he arrived at a few years later. There he's written

*Book One - The Book of Beginnings*

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He has crossed out 'Birth' and put 'Beginnings'

*Book Two - The Book of Birth and Quest*

*Book Three - The Book of Love*

*Book Four - The Book of Fate*

*Book Five - The Book of Death*

So this was the scheme of Part One around 1937, because there's a letter of 1937 in which Sri Aurobindo first mentions the idea of a Book of Beginnings and a Book of Birth and Quest. That means that the whole part describing the birth of Savitri, as well as her setting out on her quest, is included in a single book at this stage, as it is now in the final version in Book Four. What is Book Two at this stage, The Book of Birth and Quest, is now the title of Book Four. Book One, The Book of Beginnings in this version, corresponds to what is now Part One, of which the first book is still called The Book of Beginnings. So he hadn't yet divided it into three books, but he had finally separated Part One from the rest of the poem, and realised that the role of Aswapati in the whole poem is extremely important, much more than he had realised when he started it, when there was just a brief passage, a sort of prologue to the birth of Savitri, in which he described very briefly some kind of yoga of Aswapati. That gradually came to interest him more and more and got longer and longer.

So finally around 1937 he had the Book of Beginnings, which covered everything which precedes the birth of Savitri. I have marked that as representing the 8th major stage in the composition of Savitri, apart from all the different separate manuscripts. In terms of the subdivisions of the poem we have come to about eight stages, except that I haven't described the seventh stage. The seventh stage is still "*Savitri: A Legend and a Symbol*" with Book One - The Book of Birth. This can be dated fairly precisely to 1936, and the difference is that Sri Aurobindo now starts giving titles to sections of the Book of Birth. The first title he gave was "The Last Dawn". This title is written in the margin next to the beginning of the first passage. Later on he has written "The Issue", the present title of the second canto; and a little later comes "The Yoga of the King", and still later on, "The Ascent through the Worlds". These were "sections".

There are quite a lot of letters on Savitri written at this period, because this was when Sri Aurobindo was sending passages to Amal and writing in more detail than previously. He refers to sections - and if one doesn't know anything about how Savitri was composed, some of the references to sections

won't make any sense. He sometimes talks about "the third section", "the fourth section" - these sections refer to precise divisions of the Book of Birth as it stood in 1936. So section four refers to what became the Book of the Traveller of the Worlds. For example in 1938 he writes:

*I have done an enormous amount of work on Savitri. The third section has been recast - not rewritten ...*

(The third section means what is now Book One, Cantos Three to Five, and it was called "The Yoga of the King")

*... recast - not rewritten - so as to give it a more consistent epic swing and amplitude and elevation of level. The fourth section, the Worlds, is undergoing transformation.*

And then he goes into some detail about that.

A little later, in 1938, he writes

*The "Worlds" have fallen into a state of manuscript chaos, corrections upon corrections, additions upon additions, rearrangements on rearrangements, out of which some cosmic beauty will perhaps emerge.*

### The early 1940s

The cosmic beauty may have started to emerge around 1942, which is the next major stage. The poem is still called *Savitri - A Legend and a Symbol*, Part One - Earth, Book One - The Book of Beginnings, Section One (he was using sections marks, which look like two interlocked 's' - he wasn't writing the word 'section' but simply put the number 1 with section marks before and after it), and then the title, which was now The Symbol Dawn.

In 1942 for the first time Sri Aurobindo wrote out the whole of the Book of Beginnings in 110 pages. More than half of this was section four, which was called "The Ascent through the Worlds", and corresponds to what is now the Book of the Traveller of the Worlds. It was still only section four of the Book of Beginnings, and at the very end of it he wrote "Last draft of the first Book..." - that was a little optimistic, because it was very far from being the last draft, but anyway he thought it was the last draft - "... Completed; September 6, 1942".

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I believe this is the first date we have come across in a manuscript since November 1916, apart from the correspondence with Amal in 1936-37. This is September 6, 1942, and we have a 110-page version of the Book of Beginnings, which was followed, probably the next year, by a 150-page version, also covering the same ground. But here, although he started with Book One - The Book of Beginnings, and marked Section Four - The Ascent through the Worlds, he later crossed this out, and wrote "Book Two - The Book of the Traveller of the Worlds". The Book of the Traveller of the Worlds at this stage occupies pages 31 to 123 of this notebook. It's divided into 12 sections, and it's followed by Book Three - The Book of the Divine Mother. For the first time we have the titles of the first three books, as they are in the final version.

This is not yet called Part One, but it amounts to being Part One in more or less its present form, except that there were no cantos as yet. Having abandoned the word canto very close to the beginning, he didn't use it again until 1944.

In 1944 we have another major stage. Sri Aurobindo now started writing on loose sheets - quite large sheets which he wrote on sideways in two columns. He could write about forty-four lines in a column, and he started to write out the first three books in this form. He wrote out a number of versions, at least two complete versions, of the whole first three books, and quite a number of versions of different passages and cantos. Actually they were not yet called cantos until the very final manuscript in this form, with two columns.

Although he was still originally marking them as sections, he wrote out a contents page for this manuscript, the most detailed contents page yet, in which he gave the titles of the three books. There were now fourteen sections in Book Two, three sections originally in Book One, and four sections in Book Three. But this was the point at which he divided The Yoga of the King into three new sections and he now first introduced the word canto. We have a date at the very end of this manuscript: May 7, 1944. So now in 1944 we have three Books, the first divided into five cantos, the second into fourteen cantos and the third into four cantos. This is almost the final scheme of the whole of Part One. And we have the heading Part One - except that this was written in, not by Sri Aurobindo himself, but by Nirod.

This means that a final revision of this manuscript was done in 1945 or so when Sri Aurobindo was finding it difficult to see and revise in his own hand, and was starting to revise by dictation. He would have Nirod read out the manuscript to him and then he would dictate revisions - very extensive

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and complicated ones in some places. Then he would have Nirod copy the whole manuscript. Having revised it at Sri Aurobindo's dictation, Nirod would then make a copy of the first three books in a 393-page ledger.

But before Nirod's copy there was still one more stage, which was that, after having written out the first three books in two columns, in the double column manuscript, Sri Aurobindo was now finding it difficult to see, but he was still writing. For a couple of years, although he was beginning to dictate things to Nirod, he was still writing, or at least scribbling, in his own hand. And now he was finding it more convenient to use small chit pads which he could rest on the arm of his chair - the chair which now stands in his room. He could write 10 to 15 lines on one page. These could be torn out of the pads and pinned to the larger manuscript.

So now he was no longer writing out the whole of Part One continuously from beginning to end, but he was going through passages of it, passages which he thought needed more work, and he would write them out on these little chit pads. Sometimes he would go through several versions like that. But then the final one would be torn out and pinned to the double-column manuscript. So the final manuscript of Part One in Sri Aurobindo's hand consists of large sheets written in two columns, plus small chits, in much more illegible handwriting, pinned at the appropriate places, with some indications of where these new passages were to go.

Sometimes whole pages of the original large manuscript were entirely replaced by versions on chit pad sheets, and in fact for Book One, that means the first 90 pages in the final version, we have 127 pages of these chit pad sheets which were pinned to the manuscript. The manuscript itself was only 20 pages long because he was writing in two columns, and sometimes a column would be up to 45 lines or so, and sometimes there were more lines written in the margins. So the whole of Book One, which now in print is 91 pages, was 20 pages in two columns, with 60-odd of these little sheets, 127 sides, pinned on to the manuscript. This is the final version in Sri Aurobindo's hand.

This is not counting about eight of these chit pads which have remained intact, which were not final versions but drafts. These pads have about 150 pages each, on which Sri Aurobindo was writing an average of 12 lines per page, and certain passages he was writing out again and again on these chit pads which he rested on the arm of his chair, and then later he would ask Nirod to try to decipher them.

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## The third phase

So we are pretty far along with Part One. Unfortunately this is about 1945 now and for the last 25 years Sri Aurobindo had hardly touched anything after the present Part One, except a little bit of what is now Books Four and Five, because they were originally included in Book One, and only later got shifted and removed from the Book of Beginnings. So in the 1930s he had worked a little bit on the present Books Four and Five. And in the early 1940s, when he started writing out the whole of what is now Part One, he was also beginning to take up Books Four and Five of the final version. So we have some versions of those from the early '40s. But for Books Six through Twelve of the final version we don't have anything between 1920 and 1945. That whole second period was entirely spent working on what is now Part One - the first half of the poem.

So at this stage it was fairly urgent to start working seriously on the later books. And he started doing it, first writing out passages on small chit pads, then working with Nirod on versions of the complete books.

Now because he hadn't worked on them for more than 25 years, he had to go back to very old versions. For example, he took up something which was called 'Canto II - Fate' as a basis for writing out the final dictated version of Book Six, Canto One. Nirod must have been asked to take out the various versions of 'Fate' from the early period, of which some were called 'Canto II - Fate', some were 'Book II - Fate', there was even something called 'Book III - Fate' after he had divided 'Book I - Love' into 'Book I - Quest' and 'Book II - Love', so that 'Fate' became 'Book III'. We have at least one version of 'Book III - Fate'.

For some reason, Sri Aurobindo didn't always use the latest manuscript from the early period when he took it up in the late 1940s. He sometimes went back to something called a Canto. In some cases that was because the Book version was not complete. They wanted a complete version. 'Canto II - Fate' was complete. 'Book III - Fate' may not have been complete, or it may have been difficult to read, or something. For some practical reason Sri Aurobindo went back to 'Canto II - Fate'. He did the same with Book Nine. He took up 'Canto IV - Night', although there was a 'Book IV - Night', and even a 'Book V - Night' which must have been written later in the early stage.

Fortunately when Sri Aurobindo had written *Seviri* out in cantos around 1917 he had left the backs of the pages blank. I don't know how short of paper they were during the war, but it seems they were economising a lot on paper, and

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Nirod often used the back of the page for the revision. When Sri Aurobindo had dictated a lot of changes in a passage on a page and they ran out of space, Nirod would sometimes turn over the page and use the back and fill it up.

Later on we have the strange phenomenon that in the case of Book Ten about three different versions of 'Canto V - Twilight' were used; but mostly the pages were used for the sake of the back side, and in many cases whole long passages were written on the back that had nothing to do with what was on the front. Sri Aurobindo was dictating long passages that were entirely new and these were written out on the backs of the pages used 30 years earlier. This is what it was like in the late 1940s, for Books Six, Nine and Ten especially.

Sri Aurobindo was using many passages which belonged to the very early versions, just revising them here and there. He was also writing out completely new passages on the chit pad sheets, which were now not being pinned to the manuscript but rewritten in a dictated form, often on the back side of the page, or sometimes on a blank sheet of paper.

We can date Books Six, Nine and Ten approximately to 1946, from a letter written by Sri Aurobindo in that year. In 1947 he finally got to the Book of Yoga, after first very dramatically expanding Book Ten, Canto Four - it was expanded to about 18 times what it was in the early version. And for Book Ten, Canto Four he was beginning to use a very thick notebook. This notebook contains his very last handwritten passages for Savitri. It's has about 350 pages. Some pages are left blank, but he was writing out passages for Book Ten, Canto Four in a really almost illegible handwriting. There are about 100 pages like that. Then one starts to see passages for Book Seven, Cantos Two through Seven - not Canto One, because for that he went back to an early version. These cantos were almost completely new, and he was first-drafting them in this notebook. Sometimes also he would work from the back end of the notebook. If he just had a few lines that he wanted to note down, he would write them at the back, and sometimes number them and then insert them later on near the front of the notebook, where he was going through more or less in order, but sometimes backtracking and starting again on something he had already written.

So this is 1947, and Book Seven can basically be dated to 1947. All the work on it was probably done in 1947, because in 1948 he was concerned mostly with the final revision of Part One. He went back to Part One and revised the typed copy which had been made from Nirod's handwritten copy. Nirod's handwritten copy was given to Nolini, and Nolini typed it all out, and

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that was revised. Many parts of Part One were revised so much on the first typed copy that a second typed copy was made and then that was revised. The whole last part of Book Two was revised so much in the second typed copy that it was typed out a third time. Nolini had to type the whole thing out again with all kinds of lines that had been added in the margin and in between the lines and so on. So there was finally a third typescript which was again revised. And finally it was ready to go to Press.

The proofs were made and read to Sri Aurobindo, and again he made all kinds of revisions, so that when it finally first appeared in print the cantos of the first three Books were quite different even from the typescript. Unfortunately we don't have the proofs. The proofs are missing, so we just have to infer the revision from the differences between the revised typescript and the printed fascicles.

Between 1946 and '48, the whole of the first three books appeared in fascicles, mostly canto by canto except for Book Two, which appeared in two big fascicles. The publication was finished in 1948.

It must have been this period that Sri Aurobindo was referring to in a letter when he said that he was occupied with the final revision of Part One, because these fascicles were then read to Sri Aurobindo by Nirod and he made further very extensive revisions, which were marked on a printed copy.

Finally Part One went to Press in 1950. Again there was fairly substantial revision of the proofs, but at this stage Sri Aurobindo added only 100 lines or so to Part One, which meant that he must have been pretty happy with Part One as it was finally after all these 50 versions of the first canto. It's hard to count the versions of the other parts. But anyway Part One was finally printed in 1950, and on the whole Sri Aurobindo was evidently fairly happy with it because he only added 100 or so lines when the proofs were read out to him.

Meanwhile in 1949 and '50 he had gone back - he still had a lot of work to do on Parts Two and Three, and in letters written in that period he describes how much he still planned to do. The last somewhat detailed letter is dated April 22 1947, when he talks about how he was beginning on the Book of Yoga, Book Seven. He says,

*A drastic recasting of the last two books still remains to be done.*

The drastic recasting was mostly of Book Eleven, because in fact the epilogue ended up remaining more or less as it was in a very early version. But in 1949 or 50, Sri Aurobindo finally took up Book Eleven for dictated revision. Now we don't have anything in the chit pads - there's nothing scribbled by Sri Aurobindo in any form because it had become impossible for him to write at all. So finally he worked entirely by dictation.

He had Nirod read a version from before 1920 called 'Book VII - Twilight'. Fortunately this is one of the few cases where he actually used the latest pre-1920 version as the basis for the final version. And 'Book VII - Twilight' was very well developed on the whole. There were only some passages which required a lot of work, and there was one entirely new passage which Sri Aurobindo added, which is thought to be the longest single passage which he dictated practically all at a stretch, not on one day but in the course of several days, the passage which begins on page 702.

*"Descend to life with him thy heart desires.*

*O Satyaven, O luminous Savitri ...*

After "*Built is the golden tower, the flame-child born*" there is a 10-page passage which ends "*This earthly life become the life divine*." This passage was dictated, some time in 1950 I believe, in the course of several days and it was entirely new, there was nothing like it in any earlier version of *Savitri*. Actually the last few lines of the preceding passage were also added at this stage:

*O Mind, grow full of the eternal peace;*

*O Word, cry out the immortal litany;*

*Built is the golden tower, the flame-child born.*

These lines too were part of this very final revision. But one of the great lines of the preceding passage "*For ever love, O beautiful slave of God*" goes back to 1916, it's part of the very first draft made in the small notebook which he was using in August to November 1916; and on the previous two pages there's a very inspiring passage, which is the longest passage of which we have the Mother's recorded reading. And much of that goes back to 1916. So we have juxtaposed passages from the very first version, and some of the very last lines that Sri Aurobindo dictated in 1950.

## Invocation

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We find the same thing in Book Six, because Book Six, Canto Two, The Way of Fate and the Problem of Pain, was one of the last cantos that Sri Aurobindo worked on very extensively. Right near the end of it comes the very last passage that he dictated, the passage which I already mentioned, beginning "*Queen, strive no more to change the secret will.*" There was a 13-line version of that, which must have been made in about 1946, or maybe in 48, because extracts from Book Six, Canto Two were published in 1948 in fascicle form; but anyway there were only 13 lines when Sri Aurobindo started working on the end of Book Six, Canto Two with Nirod just before his passing, at the beginning of November 1950. He dictated this passage which is extremely important for understanding the whole meaning of *Savitri*, ending with

*Intrude not twixt her spirit and its force  
But leave her to her mighty self and Fate.*

After that there are only twelve lines, most of which go back to a very, very early version, relating the final disappearance of Narad, chanting the anthem of eternal love. In the very first version in 1916 the line was:

*Chanting the anthem of triumphant love.*

Apart from the change of *triumphant* to *eternal*, that line has remained the same in the final version, juxtaposed with the very last passage which he dictated in November 1950. On the very last day on which he worked on *Savitri* he made some changes in these closing lines:

*But still a cry was heard in the infinite,  
And still to the listening soul on mortal earth  
A high and far imperishable voice  
Chanted the anthem of eternal love.*

These must have been the very last lines of *Savitri* that were read out to him and in which he made some revisions - the last lines that he worked on before he himself, like Narad, "*spoke and ceased and left the earthly scene.*"

## ABOUT SAVITRI BHAVAN

We dream of an environment in Auroville

that will breathe the atmosphere of Savitri

that will welcome Savitri lovers from every corner  
of the world

that will be an inspiring centre of Savitri studies

that will house all kinds of materials and activities  
to enrich our understanding and enjoyment of Sri  
Aurobindo's revelatory epic

that will be the abode of Savitri, the Truth that has  
come from the Sun

**We welcome support from everyone who feels that the  
vibration of Savitri will help to manifest a better tomorrow.**

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*All correspondence may be addressed to:*

**Savitri Bhavan, Auroville 605101, TN, India**

And that doctor looked at Dante

And the doctor <sup>columns</sup> looked at Dante  
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1947 draft for  
Book Ten,  
Canto Four