

# Early Poetic Influences

## Influences on *Love and Death*

I shall be really happy if you will tell me the way in which you created *Love and Death* — the first falling of the seed of the idea, the growth and maturing of it, the influences assimilated from other poets, the mood and atmosphere you used to find most congenial and productive, the experience and the frequency of the afflatus, the pace at which you composed, the evolution of that multifarious, many-echoed yet perfectly original style . . . In my essay, “Sri Aurobindo — the Poet”, I tried to show the white harmony, so to speak, of *Love and Death* in a kind of spectrum analysis, how colours from Latin, Italian, Sanskrit and English verse had fused here together with an absolutely original ultra-violet and infra-red not to be traced anywhere. Among English influences the most outstanding are, to my mind, Shakespeare, Milton, Keats and Stephen Phillips, along with something of Shelley and Coleridge.

I cannot tell you much about it from that point of view; I did not draw consciously from any of the poets you mention except from Phillips. I read *Marpessa* and *Christ in Hades* before they were published and as I was just in the stage of formation then — at the age of 17 — they made a powerful impression which lasted until it was worked out in *Love and Death*. I dare say some influence of most of the great English poets and of others also, not English, can be traced in my poetry — I can myself see that of Milton, sometimes of Wordsworth and Arnold; but it was of the automatic kind — they came in unnoticed. I am not aware of much influence of Shelley and Coleridge, but since I read Shelley a great deal and took an intense pleasure in some of Coleridge’s poetry, they may have been there without my knowledge. The one work of Keats that influenced me was *Hyperion* — I dare say my blank verse got something of his stamp through that. The

poem itself was written in a white heat of inspiration during 14 days of continuous writing — in the mornings only of course, for I had to attend office the rest of the day and saw friends in the evening. I never wrote anything with such ease and rapidity before or after. Your other questions I can't very well answer — I have lived ten lives since then and don't remember. I don't think there was any falling of the seed of the idea or growth and maturing of it; it just came — from my reading about the story of Ruru in the *Mahabharata*; I thought, Well, here's a subject, and the rest burst out of itself. Mood and atmosphere? I never depended on these things that I know of — something wrote in me or didn't write, more often didn't, and that is all I know about it. Evolution of style and verse? Well, it evolved, I suppose — I assure you I didn't build it. I was not much of a critic in those days — the critic grew in me by Yoga like the philosopher, and as for self-criticism the only standard I had was whether I felt satisfied with what I wrote or not, and generally I felt it was very fine when I wrote it and found it was very bad after it had been written, but I could not at that time have given you a reason either for the self-eulogy or the self-condemnation. Nowadays it is different, of course, — for I am conscious of what I do and how things are done. I am afraid this will not enlighten you much but it is all I can tell you.

3 July 1933

### General Influences on His Early Poetry

In that long letter on your own poetry, apropos of my friend's criticisms [*see pp. 332–57*], you have written of certain influences of the later Victorian period on you. Meredith's from *Modern Love* I have been unable to trace concretely — unless I consider some of the more pointed and bitter-sweetly reflective turns in *Songs to Myrtilla* to be Meredithian. That of Tennyson is noticeable in only a delicate picturesqueness here and there or else in the use of some words. Perhaps more than in your early blank verse the Tennysonian influence of this kind in general is there in *Songs to Myrtilla*. Arnold has influenced your blank verse in respect of particular constructions like two or three "buts" as in

No despicable wayfarer, but Ruru,  
But son of a great Rishi,

or

But tranquil, but august, but making easy . . .

Arnold is also observable in the way you build up and elaborate your similes both in *Urvasie* and in *Love and Death*. Less openly, a general tone of poetic mind from him can also be felt: it persists subtly in even the poems collected in *Ahana*, not to mention *Baji Prabhau*. I don't know whether Swinburne is anywhere patent in your narratives: he probably does have something to do with *Songs to Myrtilia*. Stephen Phillips is the most direct influence in *Urvasie* and *Love and Death*. But as I have said in my essay on your blank verse he is assimilated into a stronger and more versatile genius, together with influences from the Elizabethans, Milton and perhaps less consciously Keats. In any case, whatever the influences, your early narratives are intensely original in essential spirit and movement and expressive body. It is only unreceptiveness or inattention that can fail to see this and to savour the excellence of your work.

The influences I spoke of were of course influences only such as every poet undergoes before he has entirely found himself. What you say about Arnold's influence is quite correct; it acted mainly however as a power making for restraint and refinement, subduing any uncontrolled romanticism and insisting on clear lucidity and right form and building. Meredith had no influence on *Songs to Myrtilia*; even afterwards I did not make myself acquainted with all his poetry, it was only *Modern Love* and poems like the sonnet on Lucifer and on the ascent to earth of the daughter of Hades [*The Day of the Daughter of Hades*] that I strongly admired and it had its effect in the formation of my poetic style and its after-effects in that respect are not absent from *Savitri*. It is only Swinburne's early lyrical poems that exercised any power upon me, *Dolores*, *Hertha*, *The Garden of Proserpine* and others that rank among his best work,—also *Atalanta in Calydon*; his later lyrical poetry I found too empty and his dramatic and narrative verse did not satisfy me.

One critic characterised *Love and Death* as an extraordinarily brilliant and exact reproduction of Keats: what do you say to that? I think Stephen Phillips had more to do with it.

7 July 1947