

THE CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY OF AMERICA

“Art and Beauty, Opposition and Growth in the Sri Aurobindo Ashram”

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By
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“Art and Beauty, Opposition and Growth in the Sri Aurobindo Ashram”

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Sri Aurobindo (née Aurobindo Ghose, 1872-1950), a native of India, spent his youth studying poetry and the classics in England. Upon his return to colonial India, he became influential in Indian revolutionary politics. Inspired by his own spiritual experience, *Śaktism*, *Vedānta*, *Tantra*, and the *Bhagavad Gītā*, he later developed his own “integral yoga” in the French colonial city of Pondicherry. Instead of transcending the Earth, his yoga seeks to transform matter into what he calls “the new supramental creation.” He wrote over 30 books in the areas of yoga theory and practice, social, political, and cultural reflection, art and poetry. He wrote his most important work, his epic poem *Savitri*, over a 35-year period as a way to develop his spiritual practice. Mirra Alfassa (1878-1973) shared Sri Aurobindo’s goals and joined him in 1920. She was a gifted painter and musician and a spiritual seeker from Paris whom he named “the Mother” when they established the Sri Aurobindo Ashram in 1926. He considered her the feminine *Śakti* to his masculine *Īśvara* role, and their followers believe them to be their *Avatāras* (God/dess in human form). After he died, the Mother continued to guide the Ashram until her death. For 52 years she used painting to grow in her spiritual practice. Both gurus encouraged many of their disciples to use the arts for spiritual growth.

Sri Aurobindo’s work has inspired various prominent thinkers, and is considered a significant contribution to Hindu studies, as well as 20th-century colonial Indian history. He is regarded as one of the pioneers of the modern yoga renaissance; however, since the 1980s there has been a lack of scholarship on his thought, and particularly as this applies to art and religion. Also, the Mother’s participation has never been critically examined in this tradition. This dissertation investigates the following question: What are the Mother’s and Sri Aurobindo’s aesthetic theory and to what extent does their artwork and their collaboration with their disciples demonstrate their aesthetics? This

study uses a historical-critical methodology to examine the development of thought in their written texts on culture and aesthetics, and a visual culture approach to interpret their use of art, architecture, and visual culture. It relies upon disciples's diaries, reproductions of drawings and paintings by the Mother and her disciples, and the author's ethnographic data collected during his stay in the Ashram in India in 2012-13.

The results of this dissertation: 1) their yoga is "descendant," demanding a principle of growth that welcomes oppositions found in life to stimulate the universalization of the basic consciousness and to divinize the Earth; the arts aid this process by helping the disciple to face oppositions with sincerity and resilience, and to unveil spiritual potentials that were not known until the creative process uncovered them; 2) they prize the intuition and higher spiritual faculties of consciousness in their creative process and spiritual experience, which diminishes and potentially annihilates the importance of the intellect; 3) for them, the arts are essentially tied to beauty, which aids their goal of the "new creation;" their ideal of beauty occurs when the physical art media harmonizes with the meaning of the artwork, uniting qualities of beauty with the value of beauty.

This study concludes that if Sri Aurobindo is a *guru* who is primarily an artist, his teaching is principally found in an examination of his creative process, his poetry, and his work with his and the Mother's disciples. Likewise, as an artist-*guru*, the Mother's teaching is chiefly encountered in an investigation of her guidance of the Ashram, her painting, music, architecture, and visual culture, and most importantly her claims to the transformation of her own body. Their combined teaching is intended to be a transformative experience of growth through beauty, which for them is a way to create a non-sectarian sacred gaze in their followers. Their aesthetic goals might be characterized as expanding the basic consciousness in order to critique past uses of beauty that have become an abuse of others; to reinterpret past achievements in beauty with an intent to include all; and still further, to create new, more inclusive expressions of beauty in one's own historical context.

This dissertation by Patrick M. Beldio fulfills the dissertation requirement for the doctoral degree in Religion and Culture approved, by Michael Stoeber, Ph.D. as Director, Charles B. Jones, Ph.D., as Co-Director, and William A. Barbieri, Jr., Ph.D, as Reader.

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To my Beautiful and Beloved Teachers



The ascent to Truth

4. 7-67

My very dear little child

The "ascent" is a steep one but with the Divine's help everything is possible...

We must be more enduring than the opposition and all obstacles will disappear.

With all my love

The ascent to Truth

July 4, 1967

My very dear little child

The "ascent" is a steep one but with the Divine's help everything is possible...

We must be more enduring than the opposition and all obstacles will disappear.

With all my love

The Mother

An old pull of subconscious cords renews;
It draws the unwilling spirit from the heights,
Or a dull gravitation drags us down
To the blind driven inertia of our base.
This too the supreme Diplomat can use,
He makes our fall a means for greater rise.

—Sri Aurobindo
Savitri, Book I, Canto 3

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Preface

Aspiration for a Universal Gaze in Scholarship, Creativity, and Spiritual Practice

I. CONFLICT AND CONTROVERSY

Sri Aurobindo (1872-1950) was an Indian nationalist, poet, philosopher, yogi, and guru. He did not follow a Hindu-centric model when he founded his Ashram in 1926 in Pondicherry, India. To the contrary, he bred into its very genetic make-up a foreign influence that acts like a grain of sand in the oyster to produce a pearl: he made its spiritual director or guru a French Jewish woman with ethnic roots in Egypt and Turkey. Her name was Mirra Alfassa; Sri Aurobindo later referred to her as “the Mother” (1878-1973). She was born in Paris during the Belle Époque and enjoyed a very active lifestyle in this Western cultural capitol as a young woman. In placing the Mother in the role of spiritual teacher, Sri Aurobindo in essence introduced a Western cultural influence to oppose traditional Indian cultural and religious values. He also introduced the influence of a woman in a traditionally male role. Although he knew the Mother to be spiritually qualified, he also knew that such pressures or “irritants” exemplified in her would support the fulfillment of his yogic vision: the pearl that is his goal for the universe, which he and the Mother call “the new supramental creation,” or simply “the new creation.”¹

This “irritation” continues today, as over half the membership of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram are women, twelve percent are foreign nationals—the remaining members from diverse parts of

¹ This description can be found everywhere in their writings. For two examples, see Sri Aurobindo, “The Supramental Manifestation Upon Earth,” in *Essays in Philosophy and Yoga* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Press [SAAP], 1998), 517-592; and The Mother, *Notes on the Way* (Pondicherry: SAAP, 2002), 22-29. I will be abbreviating the publishing information to SAAP from now on.

India.² Such diversity in the Ashram is meant to stimulate pearls of unity, integration, and inclusive vision. One of Sri Aurobindo's aphorisms captures this principle of growth: "This world was built by Death that he might live. Wilt thou abolish death? Then life too will perish. Thou canst not abolish death, but thou mayst transform it into a greater living." The Mother comments that this and four other aphorisms of the same nature mean that "oppositions and contraries [like death] are a stimulus to progress," and "opposites are the quickest and most effective means of shaping Matter so that it can intensify its manifestation."³

In 2008, a Western ashramite published a biography of Sri Aurobindo that is one of the most recent and public irritants within the global Integral Yoga community. This book, *The Lives of Sri Aurobindo* by Peter Heehs, has been rejected by an Indian faction both within and outside the Ashram. They claim it to be "perversely deceptive," "defamatory," and even part of a larger "pattern and strategy of vilification of India's spiritual traditions" by Western scholars.⁴ Relying on Indian defamation laws, this opposition has thus far succeeded in blocking publication of Heehs's biography in India; they have also attempted to have Heehs deported without success and are currently attempting to supplant the Ashram Trust, which they argue has not taken "appropriate" action to excommunicate him from the Ashram. Meanwhile, those practitioners of the Yoga both within and outside the Ashram who have rallied to Heehs's defense, refer to such opposition as

² The Sri Aurobindo Ashram Trust currently estimates that "1) There are about 1200 full-time members or inmates in the Ashram. A little more than half are women. 2) There are another 3000-4000 people in Pondicherry who are associated with the Ashram informally, in some form or the other. In addition, there are of course many thousands of devotees spread out all over the world. I should tell you though that we don't keep a record of the number of devotees (in Pondy or elsewhere), and hence the figure is an intelligent approximation. 3) We don't have a record of the breakup of countries and Indian states represented in the Ashram, but I know that roughly 12% of the inmates are foreign nationals from various countries." (Devdip Ganguli of the Ashram Trust, email message to author, January 30, 2015).

³ The Mother, *On Thoughts and Aphorisms*, (Pondicherry: SAAP, 2001), 164-5.

⁴ See <http://www.thelivesofsriaurobindo.com/> for a blog devoted to opposing Peter Heehs's work; accessed March 3, 2016.

“fanatical” and “fundamentalists.”⁵ On the other hand, Heehs’s biography has been accepted by scholars in both the West and in India as “first-class research and scholarship.”⁶

Yet the conflict is much broader than the reception of this book and the freedom of speech issues that are debated in the academy about India.⁷ As I understand it, the quarrel centers on what kind of religion this yoga will be now that their gurus are gone; their exclusive visions based on very different interpretations of the founders. In the words of Sri Aurobindo, the controversy expresses the concern of how the community might avoid what he calls “conventionalism” while remaining open “to the new outpourings of [his and the Mother’s] spirit.”⁸ Sri Aurobindo’s notion of conventionalism can be conceived as a negative version of Max Weber’s idea of “routinization of charisma,” which is the transfer of charismatic authority and leadership to more rational and legal forms of authority and leadership when the founder dies and leaves no charismatic replacement.⁹ The Mother did not designate a successor after her death in 1973, but she created a Trust comprised of devoted and highly respected ashramites to lead in her stead; thus, the threat of “conventional routinization” is a potential concern. The concept of “religion” is also implicated in the conflict. Heehs’s book represents a perspective that questions or even rejects “conventionally religious” connections to the Gurus, primarily worshiping them as *Avatāras*, or God in female and male

⁵ See <http://iyfundamentalism.info/htdocs/joomla15/> for relevant documents and commentary by those who defend Peter Heehs’ work; accessed November 14, 2015. The website is no longer active.

⁶ <http://www.peterheehs.com/books/the-lives-of-sri-aurobindo/review-extracts/>; accessed March 3, 2016. More reviews in English and French as well as scholarly discussions are found at this site.

⁷ See the panel discussion on this topic that took place at the American Academy of Religion conference in 2014, “The Doniger Affair: Censorship, Self-Censorship, and the Role of the Academy in the Public Understanding of Religion,” <https://vimeo.com/117937185>; accessed March 3, 2016.

⁸ Sri Aurobindo, *Supplement* (Pondicherry: SAAP, year not given), 435. Heehs quotes from this source in “The Error of All ‘Churches’: Religion and Spirituality in Communities Founded or ‘Inspired’ by Sri Aurobindo,” in *Gurus and Their Followers* ed. Antony Copley (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000), 220. Sri Aurobindo discusses conventionalism in “The Cycle of Society” and “The Age of Individualism and Reason,” in *The Human Cycle* (Pondicherry, SAAP, 1997), 5-25.

⁹ See Max Weber, “The Nature of Charismatic Authority and its Routinization,” in *Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, trans. A. M. Henderson and Talcott Parsons (New York: The Free Press, 1947).

form—though there is visual and textual evidence by the Gurus that authorizes such devotional behavior.¹⁰ Heehs's opponents reject the academic and critical approach that Heehs and others take, since they view it as an affront to the Gurus' spiritual status, although there is ample textual evidence that the Gurus never intended their written works or lives to be treated uncritically.

II. A HERMENEUTICS OF INTERSUBJECTIVITY IN THE STUDY OF RELIGION

In the chapters that follow, I will be writing with the view that the Integral Yoga is a “new religious movement,” not a mainstream religion or a variant of Hinduism. Like other NRMs, the Integral Yoga began “as a result of the migration of peoples and the exchange of ideas.”¹¹ It also grew in the context of colonialism, which is significant. Catherine Wessinger writes, “Oppressive contexts, in which an invading colonial power possessing advanced technology and military advantage seizes the land and wealth of an indigenous people, disrupts their traditional way of life, and causes loss of life, are ripe for spawning new religious movements.”¹² Scholars also note that this colonial context can often spawn NRMs with a messiah figure who claims to liberate the oppressed indigenous peoples. Sri Aurobindo was first a political revolutionary and then a yogi who sought spiritual freedom and a kingdom of heaven on Earth.

Like all other NRMs, the Integral Yoga draws from, yet also innovates on current mainstream Indian religions, so much that it deserves to be studied on its own terms. The terms that this yoga demands can be grouped under the principle that the Mother explains as “opposition and

¹⁰ For a partial, though full list and analysis of this evidence, see my article “The Androgynous Visual Piety of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo and St. Clare and St. Francis,” *Journal of Hindu Christian Studies* 28 (November 2015): 11-32. One of the most salient examples of this evidence is the Mother's use of flowers. She named Sri Aurobindo's flower “Avatar—the Supreme manifest on earth in a body,” which is the red lotus. It is related to his emblem (a lotus within a Star of David), which is found throughout the Ashram and published in all his writings. The Mother's flower called “Aditi—the Divine Consciousness” is the white lotus and was made into her emblem as well.

¹¹ Catherine Wessinger, “New Religious Movements: An Overview,” *Encyclopedia of Religion* 10 (2005): 6514.

¹² *Ibid.*, 6514.

contraries are a stimulus to progress.” I therefore critically interpret all the texts, art, architecture, and visual culture of this NRM in light of this special characteristic that the Gurus value so highly in teaching, behavior, and aesthetic ideals.

In order to study this new religious movement that is fraught with internal conflict, I have adopted Rita Sherma’s hermeneutical approach, which she calls a “hermeneutics of intersubjectivity.”¹³ Sherma contends that the scholar should stay at a critical distance from the community or tradition of study by approaching members of the group as genuinely “other.” However, she notes that this alterity must not be so overstressed as to discount the “other’s” self-understandings as valid, as these perceptions often hold the interpretive key. Sherma writes, “In other words, commenting and interpreting without accessing the conceptual *key* of the Other does not help to unlock the cultural baggage.”¹⁴ In this case of the Integral Yoga, I argue that one significant interpretive key is the principle of opposition and growth. Without this understanding, the scholar may misapprehend the oppositions between cultures, individuals, and factions within the Ashram. In consequence, it would be impossible to see these conflicts as I believe the Gurus saw them; that is, as the very field in which one is meant to practice this spiritual discipline.

Sherma further notes that in her approach “the ‘Other’ is not just an object of study, but also a subject from whom I can learn. ...[a] ‘subject with whom we are in conversation.’”¹⁵ Sherma’s dialogical approach views “descriptive parameters ... not as limits but as starting points,” which serves both scholarship and mutual understanding.¹⁶ I concur with her contention that “the contemporary academic study of Hinduism [and NRMs influenced by Hinduism, in this case], ...

¹³ See Rita D. Sherma’s “A Hermeneutics of Intersubjectivity,” *Woman and Goddess in Hinduism*, ed. Tracy Pintchman and Rita D. Sherma (New York: Palsgrave Macmillan, 2011), 1-16.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 4. Her emphasis.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

has suffered from deeply corrosive tensions due, in part, to applications of academic frameworks deeply grounded in the Western ethos—such as Freudian and Marxist hermeneutics—to Hindu materials in ways that some individuals have perceived to be inherently distorting and disjunctive.”¹⁷ Of course this is the fear of Heehs’s opposition in this case.

I found, however, that Sherma’s intersubjective approach, no matter how well intentioned, is difficult to apply. I personally encountered this conflict in the Ashram with my use—or lack of use—of the word “Sri” in relation to Aurobindo. Many in the community consider this word, whether in conversation or writing is not an honorific, but a *mantric* part of his name. When I failed to use it in conversation with devotees, I was reminded—by those on both sides of the conflict—that the Mother expressed a wish that “Sri” always be used.¹⁸ I am not a member of the Ashram nor the wider Integral Yoga community, therefore I doubt that she intended this direction for someone like myself, an academic. Heehs reasonably chooses not to use the word in every instance, presuming it to be an honorific that should be included at the beginning of a chapter or article but not every time thereafter.

I will be writing about “the Mother,” and not “Mirra Alfassa,” without either advocating or denying her spiritual status, nevertheless, I should clarify that I use the title “Sri” in every case in order to honor the followers of the Gurus, that is, not to advocate a particular world-view or position. I hope to stay within a kind of stereoscopic vision of visual culture, which I will describe below, staying focused on the more complex object and subject of *Sri* / Aurobindo / *Ghose*. I will therefore take into consideration the cultural value of both the hagiographic and biographic accounts of the Gurus, avoiding endorsement of either account. I will therefore try to maintain a

¹⁷ Ibid., 3.

¹⁸ The proper use of the name is even more specific. Those in the Ashram Archives note that one would not use “Sri Aurobindo Ghose,” but “Aurobindo Ghose” in his early life or “Sri Aurobindo” in talking about him in his later spiritual stages of life.

hermeneutics of suspicion of both sides of the conflict even as I attempt, like Rita Sherma “a hermeneutics of intersubjectivity” to the Integral Yoga community in general. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that my visual culture perspective and autobiographical location joins my scholarship in a particular way to the Integral Yoga community that I will now explain.

III. VISUAL CULTURE OF RELIGION

1. *Background*

Visual culture has been a part of academic focus since the 1990s; but, as Brent Plate observes, “Still, there remains some confusion about what the term means—whether it names a new discipline, a new methodology, a new area of inquiry, or a combination of the three.”¹⁹ As I hope to use the term, I can see that it has two uses: as a *noun*, it includes any imagery that communicates meaning in a given community, from billboards to snap shots, from computer generated graphics to the configuration of constellations, x-rays to computer games, calendars to holy cards, action figures to dolls—especially the imagery that art authorities tend to exclude in their definition of “art.” As an area of inquiry (visual culture as a *verb*), it seeks to understand the culturally embedded nature of vision in the use of visual culture objects and art, that is, how human beings experience seeing and how this impacts identity formation within specific cultural contexts. This methodology asks: What power do images have “to frighten, seduce, deceive, influence and inspire?”²⁰ In other words, this approach seeks to discover what images do to people: how people create and use images to form identity and to put that identity into action. For the purposes of this study, I focus on the visual culture of religion and the kind of seeing that happens in the context of religious practice and

¹⁹ Brent Plate, “Visual Arts and Culture,” in *Vocabulary for the Study of Religion*, ed. Robert Segal and Kocku von Stuckrad (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill Publishing, 2015).

²⁰ David Morgan, *The Sacred Gaze: Religious Visual Culture in Theory and Practice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 259.

experience, what has been called “visual piety.”²¹ We will therefore pose the question: how do the production and use of images help communities create and maintain a shared world-view that they value as sacred, a sacred identity that they want to protect and/or extend? What ritual uses of images do they employ to achieve this identity and *lebenswelt*?

This is a much different task than is typically the case in art history, which commonly asks: what does a particular artwork mean? What is its nature? What standards of artistic excellence does it achieve? How do we categorize it or discuss its artistic and theoretical influences? Scholars note that this kind of investigation can lead to establishing a universal aesthetic norm. This normative approach has outlived its usefulness today, for it only perpetuates the insolubility of conflicts between opposing views about aesthetic standards of excellence, particularly views on images and the people who make them.²² Indeed, the scholarship with this methodology can potentially become a proxy war between irreconcilable worldviews, where language might be reduced to a tool of power to increase self-interest and to alienate the other who holds an opposing view. The promise of visual culture as a useful methodology to study visual piety, as practiced by David Morgan, Sally Promey, Brent Plate, Robert Orsi, Colleen McDannell and many others, is its potential to engage “the better angels of our nature” and provide a means to engage competing views, which in turn leads to further insight and questions. The focus then becomes, not only aesthetic standards, the visual object, and the creative process, but also the ways of seeing that are involved, what some visual culture scholars refer to as “the gaze” (a term borrowed from critical art theory). Morgan writes,

The concept of the gaze offers to scholars of religion a way of studying the social and cultural embeddedness of seeing. Understanding how sacred images configure vision makes them important evidence for the study of religion, because the

²¹ David Morgan, *Visual Piety: A History and Theory of Popular Religious Images* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

²² See Hans Belting, *The End of the History of Art?*, trans. Christopher S. Wood (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

projection of rules and the arrangement of viewer and subject that constitute a gaze contribute to the social and historical construction of the sacred.²³

The concept of the “sacred gaze” allows the scholar to attend to the embodied nature of religious experience as well as its social character in visual piety. Such an approach thus provides the opportunity to ground all images and image making on human/historical foundations without denying the differences between opposing gazes or ranking one above another. It also allows for a more transparent debate of worldviews without letting those worldviews take precedence over the subject matter being studied. Further, such visual and behavioral study adds another necessary source of evidence to scholarship that purely text-based approaches ignore, potentially avoiding less complete and even misleading conclusions. Such advantages are necessary in my study of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram.

2. Application of Visual Culture Study to the Sri Aurobindo Ashram

The use of photographs of spiritual figures in ashrams—from Ramana Maharshi to Ramakrishna, from Meher Baba to Upasni Maharaj—is common in India. These images, like all religious imagery in India, are considered powerful means by which identity is shaped and negotiated, not just “a mirror of conclusions established elsewhere, by other [verbal] means.”²⁴ The most ubiquitous image, of course, is that of Sai Baba of Shirdi, whose photograph is not only on display within his Ashram in Maharashtra State, but in many homes, on almost every taxi, storefront, and roadside brick-shrine in India (See Figure 2, which was taken of a car parked on the campus of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram in Tamil Nadu).²⁵ All of these images have power for their devotees. Just

²³ Morgan, *The Sacred Gaze*, 260.

²⁴ Christopher Pinney, *“Photos of the Gods”: The Printed Image and Political Struggle in India* (London: Reaktion, 2004), 8.

²⁵ See William Ellison’s study of the influence of Sai Baba’s image in visual culture on religions in Bombay, as well as the influence of religious interests on his image: “Sai Baba of Bombay: A Saint, His Icon, and the Urban Geography of *Darshan*,” *History of Religions* 54, no. 2 (November 2014): 151-187.

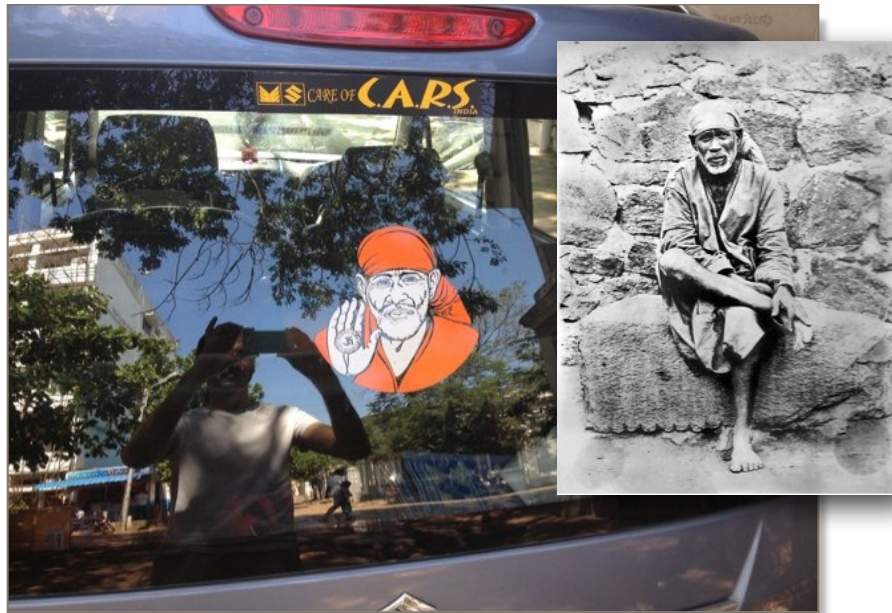


Figure 2. Contemporary Indian visual culture: a sticker of Sai Baba of Shirdi based on a photo on the back of a parked car in Pondicherry. Photo by author. The black and white image of Sai Baba is taken from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sai_Baba_of_Shirdi#mediaviewer/File:Shirdi_sai2.jpg; accessed March 3, 2016.

as the spiritual figure had a divine trace and presence when they were alive, the photograph carries that trace for the worshipper today. I will briefly examine this kind of visual piety in the Sri Aurobindo Ashram to demonstrate my visual culture approach.

Peter Heehs begins his book *The Lives of Sri Aurobindo* with a provocative comparison of two photographs taken of Sri Aurobindo at about the same time in his life, between 1915-1916 (See Figures 3 and 4). Version one (Figure 3 below) is retouched by the developer. This is an otherworldly image of a beloved seen with the gaze of a lover, who is captivated by the divine, the perfect, or “hagiographic” within this man. This image invites the viewer to become a *bhakta* or worshipping lover of the object. For Heehs, this is the false image of the two. He writes, “I sometimes wonder why people like [Figure 3]. There is hardly a trace of shadow between the ears, with the result that



Figure 3. What Heehs interprets as a hagiographic photo of “Sri Aurobindo,” the God-Realized Soul. With permission from the SAA Trust.



Figure 4. What Heehs interprets as a biographic photo of “Aurobindo Ghose,” the genius human being. With permission from the SAA Trust.

the face has no character. ...As a historical document it is false. As a photograph it is a botched piece of work.”²⁶

The second version, Figure 4, depicts the Yogi, in Heehs’s words, with “pockmarked skin, sharp features, and undreamy eyes. To me it is infinitely more appealing than [Figure 3].”²⁷ This second version is compelling to me as well, for it shows a man with the intensity of some great purpose. This image seems to embody another kind of gaze that appreciates the nobility of the ordinary, imperfect, or the “biographical” within the human. Heehs uses this image for this purpose in his text.

Heehs continues his comparison with a clear judgment: “It is the task of the retoucher to make the photograph accord with the reality that people want to see. Hagiographers deal with

²⁶ Peter Heehs, *The Lives of Sri Aurobindo*, xiv.

²⁷ Ibid.

documents the way that retouchers deal with photographs. Biographers must take their documents as they find them.”²⁸ Heehs thinks hagiographers unselfconsciously produce false images because they alter what they find, and historians consciously reproduce “true” images because they just “take” their evidence as “they find it.” This begs the question: are not historical images and their interpretations themselves constructed, themselves something that the historian “wants to see” because he or she is a product of his or her times, times that shape desire and values? Are historians immune to the desire to retouch what they find, in other words? Given these suspicions, scholars of visual culture can rightly identify the gaze of the devotee and the gaze of a secular historian, both of whom are culturally embedded. One practices a particular kind of visual piety and the other a particular kind of visual record keeping based on what is “worth keeping” at that time and place.

Figure 3 is constructed for a context of worship and devotion that supports what I would call “an interior gaze” of the spirit—inward and up to what one considers sacred; while Heehs uses Figure 4 within a context of historical scholarship that supports “an exterior gaze”—outward to space and time to what he considers historically noteworthy. Heehs’s interpretation that Figure 4 is “truer” than Figure 3 is also a construction meant to convince the reader that devotion to another person as being divine is problematic, not only for academic study but for his own practice of the Integral Yoga.²⁹ In the light of a visual culture methodology, the question of whether the first or the second image is “truer” becomes superfluous and even spurious, for each context has its own value and meaning that does not need the sanction of the other. In my view, this kind of comparison does not lead to any more interesting insights or questions of research. It leads only to irresolvable

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ In the book, Heehs writes in ways that further mystify Sri Aurobindo’s claims to being an *Avatāra*. He writes, “Disciples took it for granted that he was an avatar, or incarnation of God. He never made any such claim on his own behalf.” This statement is debatable and very provocative for his opponents. He does at least admit that “on the other hand, he never dissuaded anyone from regarding him in this way, and he wrote that the Mother was an incarnation of the Shakti. She reciprocated when speaking about him with disciples.” *The Lives of Sri Aurobindo*, 380.

quarrels between the religious-devotional and the other secular-historical. One must make a choice, in Heehs's comparison, between the one who loves "Sri Aurobindo" the *Avatāra*, and therefore spends her time with a "false" historical image, and the one who studies "Aurobindo Ghose" the man, and therefore spends her time with an ostensibly truer image.

Of course, there are those who oppose Heehs's work and take the opposite and equally problematic stance. They claim that one must make a choice between the two kinds of gazes that each photograph invites, and choose the first and exclude, limit, or subordinate the second. Both Heehs and his opponents are in positions 180 degrees from each other and therefore exist on the same line of divisive and irreconcilable bias. Visual culture potentially lies in between these two stances, which influences my intersubjective hermeneutics in this dissertation. In this light, both images are relevant and meaningful for the two different contexts for which they were made. If one wants to understand a *bhakta* of Sri Aurobindo and how he is seen as a beloved guru, who is worthy of devotion and surrender (a concern for a scholar of religious studies), the first image is quite true. In this sense, it is "successful," for far from being a "botched piece of work," the image functions in the way the retoucher and fellow *bhaktas* intended. In this approach, this image and the intention of the retoucher are historical artifacts of spiritual practice and visual piety, data of how a given group of people in time and space sees "Aurobindo Ghose" as "Sri Aurobindo" in the Ashram or their personal lives. Given what we know about this Yogi's desire to make his body immortal in his text *The Record of Yoga*, part of which describes his effort to become eternally youthful in appearance with bright skin, about his poetry in his master work *Savitri*, which describes a future human species as "the great creators with wide brows of calm," whose "faces that wore the Immortal's glory still," and whose "bodies [are] made beautiful by the spirit's light," then it is quite logical that his followers would depict him in the way that we see in Figure 3.³⁰

³⁰ Sri Aurobindo, *Savitri*, (Pondicherry: SAAP, 1997), 343-344.

On the other hand, if the intention is to use photography as a form of mimesis for the purposes of historical record, like a snap shot taken at the Department of Motor Vehicles for a form of identification, then from a physical point of view Figure 4 is quite successful. In our age of digital technology, however, when Photo-shopped images can deceive the most well-trained eye, we know that no matter their origin, all photographs are just like verbal modalities, unstable carriers of limited self or shared interest, not ever neutral conveyers of reality. This need not be a suspicious and ultimately nefarious characteristic of historical record keeping, however. The second photograph of the Yogi can also tell a helpful story about the values and gazes held in portrait photography in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in colonial India. Such photography would be different than say, Annie Leibovitz's portrait photography a hundred years later. One can imagine that she would have made very different choices if given the chance to photograph this spiritual figure that express the ways of seeing in her own time and place. Her choices would even be different still compared to the ones taken by photo-journalist Henri Cartier-Bresson in the mid-twentieth century when he photographed the Yogi right before he died in 1950 (See Figure 5).

IV. MY AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL LOCATION

Though I am no photographer, my social and historical location influences my own choices to portray the Mother and Sri Aurobindo. I am a heterosexual, married man with no children. I am of mixed ethnicity (Italian on my mother's side and Native American and European on my father's).³¹ I grew up in a lower middle-class Catholic family in the United States of America with its challenges and opportunities of class, race, religion, gender, and sexual orientation. I have extensive experience of this highly pluralistic country, having lived in various parts of the U.S. during the late

³¹ According to www.ancestry.com, I learned that within ranges, I am about 45% "Italian/Greek," 21% "Native American," 8% "West European," and 8% "Caucasus," with trace amounts from the Middle East and other parts of Eastern and Northern Europe to make up the remaining percentages.



Figure 5. Photo of “Aurobindo Ghose,” 1950 by Henri Cartier-Bresson. With permission from the SAA Trust.

1900s and early 2000s: I was born and partially raised in the Rocky Mountain West in the 1970s, grew up in the South in the 1980s, educated in the Midwest and Southern California in the 1990s and settled with my wife (who is from the North East) in the Mid-Atlantic region in the 2000s. I have also been living in the Bay Area in California for about four years while I complete my dissertation and sculpture responsibilities. Like the Mother and Sri Aurobindo, I have felt charged to nurture the role of an artist in every stage of my life, and I hope to continue its development until I can no longer lift my hand in expression.

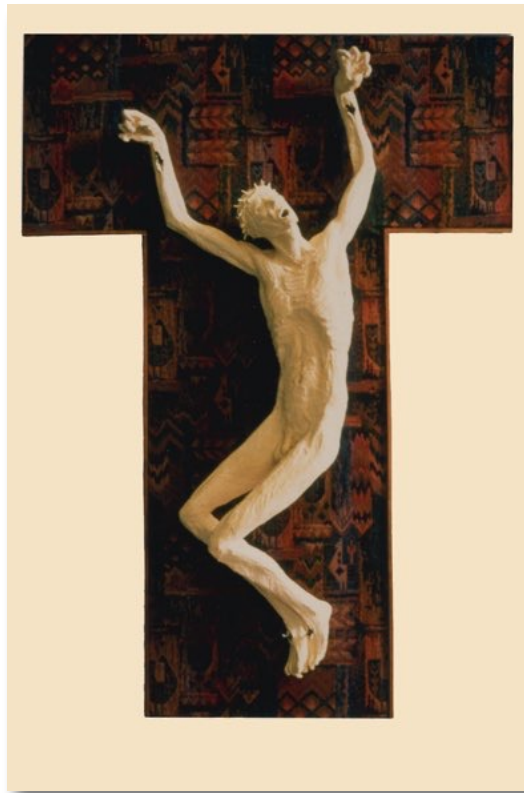
My creative process is an attempt to collaborate with matter in an intimate way: with clay, bronze, precious metals, clear acrylic, light, gilding and plating precious metals, among many other media. This collaboration has been a means for me to grow in greater awareness of the unity that encompasses myself, others, and the Earth. Over the years, I have paired these creative skills and “love of learning” with “a desire for God.”³² At the heart of this education is Francis of Assisi.

³² This phrase is taken from the classic text by Jean Leclercq, O.S.B., *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God: A Study of Monastic Culture*, 1957 (New York: Fordham University Press, 1982).

In my study of his life and work, I noticed that Francis’s celebration of God and service to others manifested in art: in his poems, songs, dramatic reenactments of the Christ’s life, and church rebuilding. The heart of his creative process—the way that he gained inspiration—is demonstrated most poignantly in his first encounter with a leper. As I understand it, this encounter expresses the experience of learning to see the reality of beauty hidden within everything, especially within those who the lower nature deems ugly, poor, and unworthy of my gaze and care. Francis writes about this important encounter in this last “Testament” to his brothers right before he died in 1226 to signal its value to his followers. He writes, “while I was in sin, it seemed very bitter to me to see lepers...that which seemed bitter to me changed into sweetness of soul and body.”³³

Inspired by this encounter, I began to think of my muse, not as a source of beauty as this might conventionally be understood (as a rhetorical quality of something merely pleasing to the senses, emotions, and intellect), but as a “Someone” beyond duality, who embraces all of life—a Beauty that is present in both conventional experiences of beauty and ugliness, sweetness and disgust, yet also beyond them. I thought of my muse as “Lady Ugliness” just as Francis thought of “Lady Poverty” as his. This muse encourages me to overcome the lower mind’s duality of ugliness and beauty by welcoming and embracing the “negative” pole in art, just as Francis aspired to overcome the duality of poverty and wealth by being the “holy fool” for poverty. (See Figure 6 for one of my first experiments). Paradoxically, as poverty proved to be the call of abundant spiritual Wealth for Francis, ugliness proved to be the call of universal Beauty for me. The call sounds something like the following: “Ugliness is not real, but a construct of your lower nature, whereas I, Beauty, *am* and quite universally inclusive of all things. Welcome and embrace what you fear as ugly and you will find me.” His poem “Cantico di Frate Sole” holds this universal vision, praising

³³ “...quando ero nei peccati mi sembrava cosa troppo amara vedere i lebbrosi...ciò che sembrava amaro mi fu cambia in dolcezza di anima e di corpo.” Francesco d’Assisi, “Testamento (1226),” *Fonti Francescane*, ed. Ernesto Caroli (Padua, Italy: Editrici Francescane, 2004), 99; my translation.



Figures 6. “The Abandonment,” 4’ x 3’, ceramic and textile on wood, 1992. I made this as a way to face “the ugly” while in seminary and working for Hospice, caring for a man dying of AIDS, the leper of my day, who inspired this crucified figure.

creatures and even death itself as intimate members of his own family, worthy of his hospitality and care.

With this call of Beauty through ugliness, and the inclusive vision of Francis’s “Canticle of Brother Sun,” I felt internally led, within the American context of intensely diverse people, religions, forms of nature, and varied land and cityscapes, to increasingly use the arts in a non-sectarian or all-inclusive way. What that means for me is that I see my artwork as a means to serve and amplify the devotion and spiritual growth of any religious or non-religious client or community that would find my artistic vision, style, and media relevant.

My being an artist is, therefore, one of the most important characteristics of my autobiographical location, one that shapes my own sacred gaze and approach to scholarship. Being an artist, I find that I need constantly to practice an “intersubjective hermeneutical” approach—not just with the Integral Yoga community, but also in relating to the academic community to which I belong, even as I continually feel a certain distance from it. Owing to the training and experience in this creative role, I value experience over theory, silence and poetic expression over prose, process over products, and if products there be, I value their ability to serve growth in myself and others rather than how they may serve the discipline to which they belong. This is not to say that I *devalue* theory, prose, products, and academic disciplines. I simply see them as expressions of the head and the others as values of the heart: silence, poetry, process, and growth. In my experience, the values and expressions of the head must follow the heart to be of service for growth and progress in the most inclusive way.³⁴ These principles already position me in a sympathetic way to the work of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram since I find that the Gurus and their students share them. Therefore, there are many ways that “going inside out” in an emic way from this community feels quite natural to me.

However, I am not a member of the Ashram and have never lived more than three months in India. I have, however, worked with (and am still working with) other spiritual teachers on art and spiritual growth in an ashram context. I am, in fact, a member of another new religious movement called Sufism Reoriented.³⁵ Like the Integral Yoga, this spiritual path prizes the arts as an important means for spiritual development, seeks to be non-sectarian, and thinks of itself as a “descendant

³⁴ See my article, “My Creative Experience: Finding Voice, Finding Silence,” *The Arts in Religious and Theological Studies* 25, no. 2 (April 2014): 19-26.

³⁵ Sufism Reoriented was chartered in 1952 by the Indian spiritual teacher Meher Baba (“Compassionate Father,” A.K.A. Merwan Sheriar Irani, 1894-1969). This sufi order belongs to the Moinuddin Chishti (1141-1236) lineage, first brought to the USA in a previous form by Hazrat Inayat Khan (1882-1927) in the early twentieth century. See Charles C. Haynes, “Meher Baba” *Encyclopedia of Religion* 9. (2005): 5829-5830. See also www.sufismreoriented.org.

spiritual approach,” “descending” into matter to face its oppositions to spirit in order to free its own divinity. My participation in this community has taken many forms, which includes the visual arts.

2. A Sculpture, a Ph.D., and Lessons in Opposition and Growth

About two weeks after I began my Ph.D. program in the Fall 2007, Murshida Carol Weyland Conner, the spiritual director of Sufism Reoriented, commissioned me to collaborate with her on an important monumental bronze sculpture, thirty-nine feet tall, that she titles *The New Divine Person*; it is installed in our new Sanctuary in Walnut Creek, CA.³⁶ The design, creation, enlargement, fabrication, assembly, and final installation of my sculpture has all coincided with all of my Ph.D. work. At the time of this writing, these projects together are taking almost nine years to complete (2007-16). Given my life experience, skills, and my vocation as an artist working with a spiritual teacher of a sufi order, I am able to internally relate my sculpture project experience with the artists of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram. Our experiences are not identical, but they have family resemblances that are significant.

I have found that the sometimes crushing anxiety and pressure of the sculpture project is often mitigated by the compelling research that I am able to discover for my dissertation, and the weight of my studies is often mitigated and balanced by the intense and inspiring work on the sculpture project. Somehow, this artist is learning to write scholarship with the support, challenge, and guidance of my advisors and the many authors who model this for me in my research. Somehow this artist is also learning to be a project manager on a monumental sculpture project, which requires cost estimating, budget development and tracking, acquisition management and contracting, scheduling, risk management, teaming and personnel management. In fact, the very practical experience of my sculpture project helps me to more meaningfully interpret my scholarly

³⁶ “Murshid” or “Murshida” means teacher of guide in Arabic.

research; and the process of writing this dissertation makes me more consciously aware of the many interesting dimensions of my creative and spiritual practice.

One of the things that allows me to feel like an “insider” to the Sri Aurobindo Ashram and its yogic discipline is the principle that opposition is necessary for growth and creativity. At a younger age, I recognized a version of it in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures: the oppression of the Pharaoh and the difficulties of the wilderness of the Exodus stimulated Moses and the Hebrews to seek the Promised Land; the New Testament version is found in the Pascal Mystery that “whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.”³⁷ As I briefly described above, I saw it most clearly in Francis’s embrace of poverty and ugliness to grow beyond the limitations of the lower self. Francis discovered the experience of “true and perfect joy” (*vera e perfetta letizia*) in facing and welcoming rejection and bodily harm from even his most intimate companions.³⁸

I became more conscious of this perception of growth in a recent experience in our sufi order. When Sufism Reoriented needed to publicly share its Sanctuary project in order to receive a Land Use Permit from county officials, it was opposed by a vocal minority in our Walnut Creek, CA neighborhood, who became legally organized and publicly slanderous and vitriolic, which delayed the permit process and cost our community a lot of time, effort, and money. Like many new religious movements, this minority views Sufism Reoriented as a “cult” in the pejorative sense; this was meant to dehumanize our community, expressing the unfounded feeling that it is a threat to traditional and mainstream religions. However, as we had the chance to witness, such “unjust” opposition comes with a surprising amount of outside support, as the majority of our neighbors in

³⁷ Mt 16: 24-25, *NAB*.

³⁸ See Francesco d’Assisi, “Della Vera e Perfetta Letizia,” *Fonte Francescane*, ed. Ernesto Caroli (Padova, Italia: Editrici Francescane, 2004), 278:1-15, pp. 193-94.

Walnut Creek, exemplifying the best of the American character, spoke up for religious freedom and our right to build our Sanctuary in our shared neighborhood.

Murshida explained that our experience of the neighborhood opposition was an example of what Meher Baba calls the “Law of Resistance or Reaction.”³⁹ This “law” describes how adverse and atavistic forces in nature, society, and culture automatically seek to oppose new growth and creativity since any new growth, by law, displaces the old, established forms. Meher Baba uses the traditional Sanskrit word for this atavistic force, “*Māyā*,” comparing it to a certain kind of Indian bat that, once it has clutched one’s ear, holds on tighter the more one tries to remove it. However, if one leaves it alone, eventually it may just let go all on its own. He writes, “It is the law, which could not be avoided, and what cannot be cured must be endured. That is why all the great saints, Masters and Avatars suffer so terribly!”⁴⁰ However, he said that “spiritual work is strengthened by opposition It is like shooting an arrow from a bow—the more you pull the bowstring towards you, the swifter the arrow speeds to its goal.”⁴¹

In another instance, Meher Baba addressed the relationship between art and opposition, a matter which has direct significance for me. An unidentified man once asked him, “I am an artist and have encountered opposition always. I am trying to find a clear way in the face of it all, and I have always to go in for pure influence.”⁴² Meher Baba replied, “There lies the fun of the game, to meet opposition, to face and encounter it.” He continues,

If not, life becomes dull and monotonous. One can find spirituality only through opposition. But when you are facing it, if you are determined, it becomes enduring, just like a wall which stands erect, unaffected, against any number of balls struck at it,

³⁹ Ivy O. Duce, *How a Master Works* (Walnut Creek, CA: Sufism Reoriented, Inc., 1975), 475.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Bhau Kalchuri, *Lord Meher*, <http://www.lordmeher.org/rev/index.jsp?pageBase=page.jsp&nextPage=1417>; accessed March 3, 2016.

⁴² Meher Baba, *The Answer: Conversations with Meher Baba*, ed. Naosherwan Anzar (Ann Arbor, MI: Glow Publication, 1972), 11.

the balls rebounding with the same force with which they are struck against the wall. On encountering opposition, life becomes enduring, determined and unaffected, like the wall that stands erect and unaffected against the continued strokes of the ball thrown against it. And art is a divine thing. It can only be rightly expressed if opposed, to bring out its inner beauty that lies behind. I will help you spiritually.⁴³

The sacred art and architecture that Sufism Reoriented is creating has occasioned an identical experience in my view. To bring out the inner beauty that lies behind life expressed externally as our new Sanctuary, it would seem we needed the opposition to rightly express it, *if* we can be “enduring, determined, and unaffected” by the number of forceful and sometimes painful balls thrown our way.

V. CONCLUSION

Given my autobiographical location, education, and training, I investigate the following broad research question: What is the Mother’s and Sri Aurobindo’s aesthetic theory and to what extent do their important creative projects in the Ashram demonstrate it? As we will see, their aesthetic theory is based on their idea of growth through opposition and the experience of beauty in art, life, and nature. In fact, trying to become more sensitive to beauty in life and nature, and to create beauty in a creative process, invite important forms of opposition for the Gurus that stimulate this growth. As spiritual consorts who advocated an “Integral Yoga” as their basis for the “supramental manifestation” or “new creation”—one which embodied an integration of both inward and outward sacred gazes as well as Western and Eastern cultures—the Gurus modeled this aesthetic theory for their artist-students. Inspired by their spiritual teachers, these artists of the Ashram aspired to create “the new creation” as a means for their own spiritual growth and for that of others. This dissertation illustrates and analyzes that dynamic.

⁴³ Ibid.

Acknowledgements

I am deeply grateful to Dr. Charles Jones, my dissertation co-director for seeing potential in this artist to also be an academic, encouraging me through all phases of my Ph.D. with candid, helpful, and often humorous advice. He helped me to create my program of studies when it did not fully exist. When there was not a faculty member at the Catholic University of America who could handle the work of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo, he found a very capable one at another university, Dr. Michael Stoeber at the University of Toronto. I am also heartily grateful to Michael, my main director whose academic example has inspired me. His deep insight and compassionate wisdom in the field of religious studies, in his own artistic practice, and in his insights on the life and work of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo have been a force of helpful and challenging pressure on my young academic mind to become more capable of contributing to the conversation of scholarship. Dr. Bill Barbieri, my reader, is an example to all his students of what it can mean to bring justice into the conversation of any worthy topic of study. His work on justice is also a kind of pressure for me to discover how beauty relates to a more compassionate world.

I am grateful for the giving presence of Dr. Bill Dingis and his always helpful advice and encouragement, especially in the field of ethnography; for three wonderful professors at Georgetown University whose courses trued my mind: Dr. Ariel Glucklich, Dr. Diane Apostolos-Cappadona, and Dr. Shaligram Shukla and his beautiful love for language and his invaluable help in my study of Sanskrit. His *sattvika* presence lingers still in my memory. Thanks to Vyaas Houston for introducing me to Sanskrit through chant and music, making a permanent love in my body for this remarkable language; to Dr. Michael Witzel's intensive course in Sanskrit, which stretched me beyond myself; to Dr. Stephen Phillips and his willingness to share unpublished material that he presented on Sri Aurobindo for a conference; to Dr. Debashish Banerji and his willingness to read a

draft of one of my chapters; to Julio Bermudez for reading and critiquing my chapter on the Golconde Dormitory; to Dr. Nelly Lambert, whose love and intimate knowledge of poetry and life illumined my understanding of Sri Aurobindo's *The Future Poetry*; to Rita Sherma and her insights and friendship, "picking low hanging fruit" in life and scholarship; and to David Morgan, whose advice and example continues to inspire.

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I am grateful to the leading members of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram who welcomed me into their community, allowing me to witness first-hand the issues I had at first only read about. At the beginning of my two and half month stay in Pondicherry in 2012-13, when I first met the Managing

Trustee of the Ashram, Manoj Das Gupta, he told me, my wife, and our guide, Susan Crothers, a story related to my research. It had the coincident effect of reducing my anxiety about coming to live in the Ashram. He said that the Mother was once teaching a group of her students about art and yoga when another student arrived late. The Mother asked the late-comer, “What is the relationship between art and yoga?” The student did not miss a beat and said, “A good one, Mother.” We laughed heartily, as the Mother and her students did in the story.

Towards the end of my stay in the Ashram, Bob Zwicker of the Ashram Archives told me a moving story about a friend who followed another guru in northern India. The episode described my experience in a sweet and supportive way. I do not recall who the guru was, but Bob’s friend wanted to meet the Mother and receive her blessings. It was arranged and when the day finally arrived, the Mother and he gazed into one another’s eyes. The Mother was impressed by the character of this person and asked, “What would you like from me?” He responded he wanted to be able to surrender more to his guru and would she help him with this. She looked deeply into him and then said that he had surrendered already. He responded that it was not enough. The Mother was impressed with this answer and his sincerity and gave her blessing.

My own intersubjective exploration of the gazes of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo and their noble students has had the effect of anchoring, for me at least, the possibility that a visual piety, which embodies a descendant and non-sectarian sacred gaze is indeed not only possible, but also completely desirable.

I am grateful to the Sri Aurobindo Ashram Trust, especially Manoj Das Gupta, under whose aegis I was welcomed and hosted with grace and loving kindness. I am grateful to the Trust for the permission to use most of the images throughout this dissertation. Thanks for my most caring and attentive hostess, Sue Crothers. She allowed me to understand in a deeper way what it is to follow her spiritual teachers with sincerity and incredible strength of aspiration; for Richard “Sri Sri” Hartz,

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Sri Aurobindo Center of Los Angeles, who was the gateway to all of these lovely human beings in India from her home in Culver City, CA.

Where would I be without my family, especially my “Madre” and “Pops” who have endured too many years of my being a student, graduations, and coming home to proclaim that yet again, I read a book “that changed my life!” I have only compassion for them for producing such a child. Their continual grace in growing with me through all these years strikes wonder in my heart and deepens my love for them more and more and still yet more; for my brother Paul and my sister Shannon, my first companions in visual art, music, play, and love of God. I do not know any better mates than these who prepared me so well for playing and working and worshipping with others; for my Grandma Birge, who died early in my life but left a lasting mark on my soul to always turn with my highest awareness of love in her devotion to Mary, and my deceased grandparents on my mother’s side, who continually saw my potential as an artist and fanned its flame whenever they could.

Where would I be without my faith community in Washington, DC and Walnut Creek, CA? Sharing work, play, and devotion to our teachers with them is the stable backbone of my life, the sure rock that supports my ongoing maturation. I love these “goofy sufi” companions and scoundrels more than words can say. I found my home and my fulfillment in this modern-day School of Athens, this holy Band of drunken Lovers of God.

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*Patrick Michael Beldio, MFA, PhD
Walnut Creek, California*

Introduction

Sri Aurobindo (née Aurobindo Ghose, 1872-1950) remained a popular figure in India throughout his life. His work has since inspired many prominent thinkers and is considered a significant contribution to Hindu and religious studies, as well as twentieth-century colonial Indian history. He is regarded one of “the founding fathers of the modern yoga renaissance” with Swami Vivekananda and Shri Yogendra.¹ Though there was more interest in his work for about three decades after his death, in recent years there has been a lack of scholarship on his thought in general, and in particular on art and religion. In essays, William Cenkner (1984) explores the role of art as a spiritual discipline for Sri Aurobindo, and Diane Apostolos-Cappadona (1980) examines his understanding of poetry in relation to yoga, but there are no detailed and comprehensive studies of the relation of art and religion in his thought and spiritual practice. This initial research also does not adequately address the relationship of his spiritual collaborator, the Mother (née Mirra Alfassa, 1878-1973), which has not been the object of very much scholarly focus in any discipline. Of the seventy-six dissertations that have been written since 1952 on Sri Aurobindo, none examines the topic of art and religion in his thought and spiritual practice, nor in the Mother’s.² Therefore, the purpose of this dissertation is to investigate the following broad research question: What is the Mother’s and Sri Aurobindo’s aesthetic theory and to what extent does their art work and their

¹ Mark Singleton and Ellen Goldberg, *Gurus of Modern Yoga* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 9.

² Fifty of the dissertations were written with either a philosophical, religious, or theological approach, fifteen have a psychological focus (a more recent phenomenon), four in education, three in political science or history, three in comparative or Asian literature, and one in cultural anthropology. The dissertation in cultural anthropology studied theater as part of its investigation, but its focus is the utopian city that the Mother founded in 1968 called Auroville, which was her civic experiment based on broad principles of the Integral Yoga that has a purpose other than the Ashram, which is the focus of this dissertation. Most of these dissertations only briefly mention the Mother, and the rest do not include her work at all. Only one of these dissertations focuses on the Mother, and it is in the fields of religious history and psychology.

collaboration with specific members of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram demonstrate their aesthetics?

The specific scholarly literatures to which this dissertation aims to contribute are the growing field of religion and art, twentieth-century colonial Hindu studies in philosophical aesthetics, material and visual culture studies of new religious movements in India, and the study of the aesthetics and spiritual praxis of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo.

In this introductory chapter, I will first analyze the initial research of Cenkner and Apostolos-Cappadona, and then briefly outline the biographies of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo, which will contextualize the historical-critical methodology I use in the following chapters. The third item I will cover in this chapter will be the relationship between the Mother and Sri Aurobindo, which can be understood within a model of celibate “spiritual consorts.”³ Their Yoga and their aesthetic ideals can make sense only with an understanding of this spiritual partnership, since they thought of themselves as one in their work for their spiritual goals and in their work with their students who sought their counsel. Next, I will clarify what I think the Gurus meant by opposition and how welcoming it is a central ingredient in their yogic practice. Lastly, I will trace the development of my thesis in an outline of the dissertation. My thesis is that in the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, while the two Gurus were alive, art was used as an important means for growth, fueled by what the Mother called “opposition and contraries” that the Gurus themselves designed or supported as they naturally occurred within the lives of their students.⁴

³ Mirra was married to Parisian painter Henri Morisset from 1897 to 1908 (she never took his name, though reference to Mirra Morisset is sometimes made in resources). She was also known as Mirra Richard when she was married to Paul Richard, her second husband, in 1911. This marriage dissolved in 1920 and she then went back to her maiden name, Mirra Alfassa. She never married again. In 1926, when the Sri Aurobindo Ashram was founded, Sri Aurobindo started to call her “the Mother.” He was married once to a girl, Mrinalini Bose in 1901 (she was 14 and he was 28), which lasted until her death in 1918. The marriage was never really a priority for him, as he internally grew away from any notion of a conventional marriage and he lived away from her most of the time doing work that did not allow him to give much financial support. He increasingly followed his political, poetic, and spiritual interests to the exclusion of a domestic life.

⁴ The Mother, *On Thoughts and Aphorisms*, (Pondicherry: SAAP, 2001), 165.

I. THE INITIAL RESEARCH

Only two secondary sources critically consider the relationship between art and religion in the thought of Sri Aurobindo and they are an early work by Diane Apostolos-Cappadona, and another by her former teacher William Cenkner, OP.⁵ The key insight that these writers make is that art is the very heart of Sri Aurobindo's yogic practice, a point often overlooked by other scholars of Sri Aurobindo. Cenkner says it well: "[w]riting poetry is Sri Aurobindo's ritualization of yoga."⁶ He concludes,

The focal point of poetry as ritual process in Sri Aurobindo is that the divine breaks into the consciousness of the artist. Sri Aurobindo's theory of aesthetics speaks of creativity from a divinely infused consciousness. Poetry as ritual also brings one into encounter with the creative Force manifested in the world. Consequently, the poet's *sadhana* advances not only one's personal ascent but also conditions one for the divine descent into human life.⁷

Cenkner and Apostolos-Cappadona note that aspiration and surrender are essential to Sri Aurobindo's Yoga, as well as his creative practice as it occasions opportunities to practice them. This is true, though it neglects the third essential element of "rejection"—rejection of the lower motivational patterns of thought, feeling, and behavior which both Gurus teach in many of their texts. This rejection presupposes the discovery of the parts of one's being that oppose a change from selfishness to selflessness and the principle that this opposition of the lower nature actually

⁵ Diane Apostolos-Cappadona, "Poetry as Yoga: The Spiritual Ascent of Sri Aurobindo," *Horizons* 7, 2 (1980): 265-284; William Cenkner, "Art as Spiritual Discipline in the Lives and Thought of Rabindranath Tagore and Sri Sri Aurobindo Ghose," chap. in *Ultimate Reality and Spiritual Discipline*, ed. by James Duerlinger (New York: Paragon House Publishers, 1984), 169-186. It seems important to note that I am part of a healthy tradition of scholarship on the Mother and Sri Aurobindo at the Catholic University of America. Both Cenkner and Apostolos-Cappadona are connected to the Catholic University community; Cenkner as a professor (1969-2002) and Dean (1985-1993) in the Department of Religion and Religious Education within the then School of Religious Studies, and Apostolos-Cappadona as a Master's degree student in Religion under his direction (MA, 1979). Other scholars from the Catholic University community who have written on the work of Sri Aurobindo are Thomas Berry (PhD, 1950), who was a friend and mentor to me in his retirement in Greensboro, North Carolina; Edward T. Ulrich (PhD, 2001); and Michael Stoeber, associate professor of Religion at CUA in the late 1990s, who is also my main advisor for this dissertation.

⁶ William Cenkner, "Art as Spiritual Discipline in the Lives and Thought of Rabindranath Tagore and Sri Aurobindo Ghose," 174.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 183.

fuels this change.

In their writings, Cenkner and Apostolos-Cappadona also claim that the faculty of imagination in the process of creativity in Sri Aurobindo's thought is chief among all the others. They conclude that aspiration and surrender develop the artist's imagination, which is the supposed key to Sri Aurobindo's notion of spiritual growth. Cenkner writes, "Sri Aurobindo's ascent to the divine life would seem primarily to be the work of the aesthetic imagination."⁸ As we will see in the next three chapters, in most of Sri Aurobindo's written texts, the imagination is a basis for growth of the lower mind, but must be sublated by higher faculties if one would advance both spiritually and creatively.

Similarly, Apostolos-Cappadona claims that "the action of aspiration and surrender as the conscious and voluntary acceptance of the operation of imagination grounds the entire process: poetic, philosophic and yogic."⁹ She constructs a four-fold typology of imagination based on her reading of Sri Aurobindo's writings, *The Future Poetry* and *Letters on Poetry and Art*.

1. "*Discriminating imagination* perceives the individual image by separating form from the chaotic blur of a generalized state of light and colour."
2. "The *regulative imagination*...perceives form more clearly than discriminative imagination, accepts form as regulative, and operates within the confines of the form, except when a moment of insight occurs."
3. the *poetic imagination* is temporary and "perceives the particular and, aided by a moment of insight understands the universal being therein represented."
4. the *creative imagination*, she claims, "would appear to proceed from poetic imagination with its constitutive power of expression and its spiritual, heightened perception. However, the condition of creative imagination is perduring experience of existing, knowing, and creating in the universal, not the particular."¹⁰

Sri Aurobindo does mention the phrase "creative imagination" once in *The Future Poetry* and twice in *Letters on Poetry and Art*, but it is not well defined by him in either of these texts. Indeed, for Sri Aurobindo, imagination is not the main engine for creative growth, much less spiritual growth

⁸ Ibid., 180.

⁹ Diane Apostolos-Cappadona, "Poetry as Yoga: The Spiritual Ascent of Sri Aurobindo," *Horizons* 7, no. 2 (1980): 265.

¹⁰ Ibid., 268-9.

through a creative process. Apostolos-Cappadona places the imagination in the spiritual levels of consciousness, able to connect the lower self with the higher “creative Force” of the Divine Mother, the source of all creativity. She writes,

it is the imagination which integrates and unifies the activities of the creative Force and the poetic personality in the individual poet. ...At its highest moment, imagination brings about, within and through the poet, the wholistic view of the deepest and most real which issues from the depths of the poet's being and expresses itself in the symbolic world that poet reveals in his/her verse.¹¹

However, according to Sri Aurobindo, imagination, no matter what level of refinement, cannot bring about this holistic view of life nor unite the lower self with the higher Self since it is located entirely in the lower self. Above the body, vital, and sense mind (*manas*) of the human being is what traditional Hindu philosophies have called the *buddhi* (intelligence or thinking mind), a description that Sri Aurobindo adopts. These levels are all contained within the lower self, or personality. According to him, the *buddhi* is a highly developed faculty of intellection that most people have not yet fully mastered. It is “an intermediary between a much higher Truth-mind not now active in our possession [*Synthesis of Yoga*, 652]...; its powers of perception, imagination, reasoning and judgment correspond respectively to the higher faculties of revelation, inspiration, intuition and discrimination belonging to *vijñāna*.”¹² The *vijñāna* is the very highpoint of God's active consciousness, which Sri Aurobindo seems later to call the supermind, and it is the plane from which the Divine Mother showers her “revelation, inspiration, intuition, and discrimination” into the lower mind's powers of “perception, imagination, reasoning, and judgment,” respectively.¹³ When

¹¹ Ibid., 272.

¹² Sri Aurobindo, Glossary to the *Record of Yoga*, 39, <http://www.sriurobindoashram.org/research/glossary/RoyglosF.pdf>; accessed March 3, 2016. Hereafter “*The Glossary*.” The publishers of the *Record of Yoga* state that this text “is a diary of Sri Aurobindo's yoga between 1909 and 1927. He kept it fairly regularly from 1912 to 1920, and also wrote a few entries in 1909, 1911 and 1927.” *The Glossary*, Publisher's note (no page number).

¹³ Sri Aurobindo writes that *vijñāna* is “the knowledge of the One and the Many, by which the Many are seen in the terms of the One, in the infinite unifying Truth, Right, Vast of the divine existence.” Sri Aurobindo, *Synthesis of Yoga* (Pondicherry, SAAP, 1999), 414.

the supermind infuses the intellect, it becomes the intuitive mind or *vijñānabuddhi*. It is this faculty that does the work that Apostolos-Cappadona claims occurs in the imagination since it is a hybrid faculty between the lower and higher natures. The imagination is certainly involved in Sri Aurobindo's notion of artistic creativity, but its role is a recipient and servant to a much broader and higher, "superconscious" way of knowing, which is the source and master. Sri Aurobindo's fuller quotation about the "creative imagination" in *The Future Poetry* makes more sense with this psychology in mind:

for imagination is of many different kinds and inspiration touches the mind at different levels and breaks out through different media before it issues through the gates of creative imagination. What we mean by inspiration is that the impetus to poetic creation and utterance comes to us from a superconscious source above the ordinary mentality, so that what is written seems not to be the fabrication of the brain-mind, but something more sovereign breathed or poured in from above.¹⁴

It is clear that for Sri Aurobindo, the executive producer in making poetry is the "superconscious source," which breathes its light into the imagination and uses it like a tool to accomplish its goals. The imagination has many levels within the "brain-mind" that increasingly approach the higher level of "inspiration" depending on how much the brain-mind or *buddhi* is surrendered to that source. In another context, Sri Aurobindo writes that the "[i]magination is the power of conceiving things beyond the ordinary experience of life. ...It ultimately becomes 'inspiration' when it ascends higher."¹⁵ The brain-mind can potentially expand into a new nature of the intuitive mind (*vijñānabuddhi*) when surrendered to superconscious inspiration. Therefore, the linking power of the intuitive mind is the way in which divine creativity and the poetic personality are joined together in Sri Aurobindo's understanding, and not the imagination. We will develop this idea further in all the chapters that follow since intuition is one of the central human faculties of consciousness consistently mentioned in the Gurus's texts and in their work with members of the Ashram.

¹⁴ Sri Aurobindo, *The Future Poetry*, 183.

¹⁵ A.B. Purani, *Evening Talks with Sri Aurobindo* (Pondicherry: SAAP, 1970), 78-9.

II. BIOGRAPHICAL CONTEXTS

This dissertation will critically analyze and interpret the Mother's and Sri Aurobindo's cultural and aesthetic writings using a historical-critical methodology coupled with a visual culture approach in order to investigate the relationship between art and religion in their thought and practice. The historical-critical methodology will help to interpret the development of thought in the texts, while the visual culture approach will help to analyze a key architectural project within the Ashram built in the 1930s and 40s, and a pivotal relationship between the Mother and one of her students who painted oil paintings with the Mother from 1954-1972. My hermeneutics will be aided by a broad understanding of the biographies of each Guru since their understanding and expression of their spiritual and aesthetic goals developed and changed over their lives. I will here focus on some relevant facts in each biography that I will expand and substantiate in the chapters that follow that relate to their role as artist, spiritual aspirant, and then guru.¹⁶

1. Sri Aurobindo

I will allude to seven phases of Sri Aurobindo's life, and four of the Mother's life as we cover the texts and artwork under consideration in the chapters that follow (See Tables 1 and 2). Peter

¹⁶ See Peter Heehs, *The Lives of Sri Aurobindo* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008). Heeh's biography was written specifically for scholars, using academic standards of research and analysis. For biographies of Sri Aurobindo that were written in the genre of hagiography, see K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar, *Sri Aurobindo: A biography and a history*, 5th Edition (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Press, 2006); A. B. Purani *The Life of Sri Aurobindo* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Press, 1978); Nirodbaran, *Sri Aurobindo for All: A Biography* (Pondicherry: SAAP, 1990); and Satprem, *Sri Aurobindo or the Adventure of Consciousness*, trans. Luke Venet (New York: Institute for Evolutionary Research, 1984); Rishabhchand, *Sri Aurobindo, His Life Unique* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Press, 1981); Sri Aurobindo wrote an autobiography as a way to address what he saw as misunderstandings in other's biographies: *On Himself* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Press, 2000). For hagiographic biographies of the Mother, see K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar, *On the Mother: The Chronicle of a Manifestation and Ministry* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Press, 1978); Sujata Nahar, *Mother's chronicles*, 6 vols. (Paris: Institut de Recherches Évolutives, 1985-2002); Wilfried, *The Mother: A short biography* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Society, 1986); Georges Van Vrekhem, *The Mother: The Story of Her Life* (New Delhi: Rupa & Co., 2004). To date, there are no scholarly biographies of the Mother, though Heehs gives a brief summary of her life in his biography of Sri Aurobindo. See *The Lives of Sri Aurobindo*, 250-61 for a description of her early life up until her contact with Sri Aurobindo. The Mother never wrote an autobiography, though she did comment on many parts of her life that are scattered throughout her writings.

Table 1.
Stages of Sri Aurobindo's life

<i>Sri Aurobindo</i>		
1	<i>Student Years in England</i>	<i>1879-1893</i>
2	<i>Return to India and work and poetry in Baroda</i>	<i>1893-1906</i>
3	<i>Indian Nationalism and beginning to practice yoga</i>	<i>1906-08</i>
4	<i>Unintended results to the Yoga: <i>Lele</i> and the Silent Mind</i>	<i>1907</i>
5	<i>A New Integration: Alipur Jail</i>	<i>1908-9</i>
6	<i>Last Efforts in Nationalism</i>	<i>1909-10</i>
7	<i>Living in Pondicherry</i>	<i>1910-50</i>

Heehs' biography of Sri Aurobindo divides his life into five stages that express what he calls different lives: son, scholar, revolutionary, yogi and philosopher, and finally, guide. The life that is often overlooked by scholars is that of artist, and it could be said that it is the one life that unites all the others. Though the arts were never an end but a means for spiritual growth in his practice, art certainly was Sri Aurobindo's companion every step of the way until his death. The editor of Sri Aurobindo's *Collected Poems* writes, "Sri Aurobindo once wrote that he was 'a poet and a politician' first, and only afterwards a philosopher. One might add that he was a poet before he entered politics and a poet after he ceased to write about politics or philosophy."¹⁷ Besides *Savitri*, the epic poem that Sri Aurobindo worked on from 1916 until right before he died in 1950, he wrote over thirty books, most of them in a six-and-a-half-year period (1914-21), in the areas of yogic theory and practice, social, political, and cultural reflection, art and poetry.

Aurobindo Ghose was born in Bengal to parents who were Anglophiles, non-religious, and disparaged traditional Indian culture and religion, so he was sent with his brothers to England at age seven to receive a European education. He spent his youth studying Western Classics and literature in England at St. Paul's school in London and at Cambridge University (1879-1893). He claimed in

¹⁷ Sri Aurobindo, *Collected Poems* (Pondicherry: Sri Sri Aurobindo Ashram Press, 2009), 691.

these formative years, in the tradition of the English and Irish Romantics, that art was his religion. Right before and upon his return to colonial India, he adopted and developed a politically-minded interest in Hinduism and became influential in Indian revolutionary politics while working as a civil servant in administration and teaching (1893-1906). He thought of himself as a Hindu for twelve years, (1901-12), but before and after this period, he claimed no religion for himself or his Ashram.¹⁸ Settling in Bengal in 1906, he threw himself into the nationalist movement, writing political journalism, but also art criticism and theory, as well as poetry. Following this socially active period in his life, he immersed himself in Hindu theory and practice, developed his own *pūrṇa yoga* or “Integral Yoga,” and later established an ashram in 1926 with the Mother in the French territory of Pondicherry (1910-1950) following what he said was an inner command (*ādeśa*) of the divine while he was jailed for terrorist activity by the British (1909-10). Sri Aurobindo claimed to have powerful spiritual experiences that drew him away from social and political pursuits (1907-09), even as he taught and wrote about the importance of increasingly embracing the material realm in order to “divinize” it.

His and the Mother’s Integral Yoga is now a new religious movement though it was first influenced by certain elements of various Hindu traditions, like *Śaktism*, *Tantra*, *Sāṃkhya*, and the yoga of Patañjali, but especially *Vedānta* and the tripartite yoga in the *Bhagavad Gītā*.¹⁹ In his most mature thought, he makes an important and unique departure from all of these influences, however, claiming to start where they end. The approaches of many traditional Hindu practices are what Sri Aurobindo might call “ascendant,” since their goal is to ascend to the Spirit, to liberate one’s soul from matter (*mokṣa*), or to find liberation for the soul in matter (as a *jīvanmukti*). However, this is an

¹⁸ This claim is well documented in Peter Heehs, “Sri Aurobindo and Hinduism” *AntiMatters* 2, no. 2 (2008): 33-45.

¹⁹ For an excellent consideration of how Sri Aurobindo’s philosophy and spiritual practice relates to other Indian religious traditions: the *Upaniṣads*, *Vedānta*, Indian mystic empiricism, *śruti*, Yoga, Indian theism, *Vedānta* and the *RgVeda*, see Stephen Phillips, *Aurobindo’s Philosophy of Brahman* (Leiden: Brill, 1986), 54-88.

individual affair and still leaves the physical nature vulnerable to death, suffering, ignorance, and falsehood, in Sri Aurobindo's view; the very things he seeks to transform in establishing a perfect life on Earth. His Yoga, he claims, seeks to stabilize consciousness in the realms of the spirit and then in a second and more important "descendant" movement, stabilize the spirit's will and workings in matter, making it more perfectly capable of following the spirit's dictates in a habitual and normal fashion; ultimately conquering death, suffering, ignorance, and falsehood on this plane of life for all beings. In his view, this unusual aspiration to make mortal life immortal is not an imposition, but a fulfillment of material nature.²⁰ (See Appendix I for a table of his descendant spiritual understanding).

This unusual goal is literally a new human species living in a new creation that is neither spirit nor matter, but evolved out of the fullness of both realms. Sri Aurobindo says this new species would live "a perfect integration and consummation of spiritual nature and experience: it would also contain in itself...a total spiritualisation of mundane nature; our world-experience would be taken up in this step of our evolution and, by a transformation of its parts of divinity, a creative rejection of its imperfections and disguises, reach some divine truth and plenitude."²¹ Steven Phillips comments that Sri Aurobindo's "consummation of spiritual nature and experience" living in "some divine truth and plenitude" is made possible by an evolutionary nisus "or urge or material drive,

²⁰ See "The Two Negations, 1. The Materialist Denial" and "2. The Refusal of the Ascetic," in *The Life Divine*, 8-28. His *Synthesis of Yoga* was his first attempt to explain this departure from the traditional "triple path" of the yoga of knowledge, yoga of work, and yoga of love to his new "yoga of self-perfection." He later said his yoga of self-perfection was an effort "to apply the spiritual knowledge [of traditional spiritual mastery] utterly to the world and to the surface psychological and outer life and to effect its transformation." Sri Aurobindo, *On Himself* (Pondicherry: SAAP, 1972), 86.

²¹ Sri Aurobindo, *The Life Divine*, 1000. See the rest of the chapter, "The Gnostic Being" for a more defined picture of this theme: 999-1050.

[that] is the bottom side of Aurobindo's fresh concept of Brahman."²² *Brahman* is both spirit (the "top side") and matter (the "bottom side"), and it is Sri Aurobindo's understanding that all beings—because they are *Brahman* in their essence—are destined to make this journey from the bottom to the top, integrating both sides in a new way in what he called the "supramental being."

From a Vedāntic perspective, Sri Aurobindo's project is to explicitly manifest the *advaita* (non-dual) nature of *Brahman* within the *dvaita* (dual) nature of creation; universally establishing God's own experience on this plane of life. Śaṅkara, Rāmānuja, and Madhva are the three main exponents of traditional Vedāntic schools of the Medieval period, and they offer differing relationships of the *soul* to *Brahman* (non-dual, qualified non-dual, and dual, respectively).²³ Where they each discuss differently how this relationship is fulfilled before and after death in *mokṣa* for the individual, Sri Aurobindo's goal is both individual and communal. He is interested in the *body's* potentials for transformation in relationship to *Brahman*, transforming its very death as the final goal. He does not necessarily alter the traditional Vedāntic views of the soul's relationship to *Brahman* (he seems to try and integrate all three in *The Life Divine*), but his Yoga does try to completely alter the body's relationship to death in a way that these previous schools never imagined, thought possible, or even thought desirable. The value of *mokṣa* for the soul is then rendered provisional in his practice, the goal of which we might say is the *mokṣa* of the body. Both kinds of *mokṣa* are

²² Stephen Phillips, "Yogic *ekagrata* ["one-pointedness of concentration"]: The Analogical Key to Sri Aurobindo's Philosophy" (unpublished paper presented at the Fifth International Congress of Vedanta, Miami University, Ohio, August 1994). I am grateful to the author for sharing this text with me. In Sri Aurobindo's metaphysics, "involution" is *Brahman's* process of creation and maintenance of Creation, whereby *Brahman* "concentrates" His infinity behind a veil to make real the potentials of finite existence. "Evolution" is his way of describing three processes: 1. biological evolution, which leads to the human form, 2. reincarnation, which maximizes the potentials of mental learning, and 3. the spiritual path towards *Brahman* and union with Him in a total realization of identity and experience after biological evolution and reincarnation have completed their work. See R. C. Zaehner, *Evolution in Religion: A Study of Sri Aurobindo and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin* (Clarendon Press, Oxford University, 1971); Frank J. Korom, "The Evolutionary Thought of Aurobindo Ghose and Teilhard de Chardin," *Journal of South Asian Literature* 24, no. 1, (Winter, Spring 1989): 124-140; and C. MacKenzie Brown, "Colonial and Post-Colonial Elaborations of Avataric Evolutionism" *Zygon Journal of Religion and Science* 42, no. 3 (September 2007): 715-747.

²³ See Betty Stafford, "Dvaita, Advaita, and Viśiṣṭādvaita: Contrasting Views of Mokṣa," *Asian Philosophy* 20, no. 2 (July 2010): 215–224.

preparatory liberations and means for his final goal of what he calls a “new supramental creation.”

The Mother more explicitly describes this: in the future, because of the “supramental manifestation,” the human body will move away from the need for animal procreation, respiration, digestion, etc. so that internal and external organs will disappear to form what she called a “unsexed” form that is nourished and procreative in new ways. We will look more closely at this immortal, androgynous ideal in Chapter Six.

One could argue that there are examples of world-affirming spiritual practices even in India that claim similar goals. *Tantra* is a complex set of examples of a turn to matter and the body as the place for spiritual transformation, and the vow of the Bodhisattva in Mahayana Buddhism might be similar since this vow carries the aspiration to forsake personal salvation until all the Universe is saved.²⁴ I would suggest that these examples are prototypes for the descendant spiritual practice that the Mother and Sri Aurobindo tried to establish, since the body, the Earth and material nature are still left mortal in the soul’s final release in these world-affirming examples. The Gurus do not affirm the world as it is, but as it will be. The astonishing claim that they make is not only that their spiritual practice is different from previous ones in this unusual goal, but that the nature of all matter in the

²⁴ See Kees W. Bolle *The Presence of Religion: An Essay on Tantrism and Sri Aurobindo’s Philosophy* (New Delhi: Manohar Publications, 1971), and Michael Stoeber, “Tantra and Śaktism in the spirituality of Aurobindo Ghose,” *Studies in Religion* 38, 2 (2009): 293-321. Swami Kripalu (1913-1981) founded a kind of yoga for monks (separate from the one for householders) that he said would lead to an immortal body (*divya deha*, *siddhi deha*). His practice has its roots in Hathayoga and Tantric Śaivism. However, this practice seems to have been about magically changing one’s body to achieve immortality in an individual way, such that the rest of matter in creation is still left in its original nature, subject to death. See Joseph S. Alter, “Sri Yogendra: Magic, Modernity, and the Burden of the Middle-Class Yogi,” in *Gurus of Modern Yoga*, ed. Mark Singleton and Ellen Goldberg (New York City: Oxford University Press, 2014), 69-72. See also Ellen Goldberg, “Swami Kṛpālvānanda: The Man behind Kripalu Yoga” of the same volume. St. Francis of Assisi himself (not necessarily his followers) is also a European prototype of this kind of spirituality, in my view. The NRM of Meher Baba (1894-1969) and his spiritual path is a descendant spiritual practice, which he makes most explicit in his work with a spiritual school he founded in the USA called Sufism Reoriented. His goal of a “new humanity” in a new age of joy bears striking similarity to the goals and descriptions of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo. No scholarly work has been done on this spiritual school but the full account of its self-understanding can be found in the three part series of articles: Ira G. Deitrick and Henry S. Mindlin, “The Story of Meher Baba’s Charter for Sufism Reoriented: Parts I and II” and “Meher Baba’s Charter: Universal Principles of the Spiritual Path, A Blueprint for Meher Baba’s New Humanity,” *Glow International* (Summer, Fall and Winter 2009). See three links to the online edition: <http://www.sufismreoriented.org/meherbaba.html>; accessed March 3, 2016. The current Murshida (teacher or guide) of this order uses this word “descendant” to characterize its approach, which I borrow.

Table 2.
Stages of The Mother's Life

<i>The Mother</i>		
1	<i>Early Life and the Le Belle Époque</i>	1878-1901
2	<i>From Art to the Occult</i>	1901-1914
3	<i>Meeting and Working with Sri Aurobindo</i>	1914-1950
4	<i>Taking the Role as Sole Guru</i>	1950-1973

Universe itself is changed such that a new immortal human species is now possible in the future as never before in the evolving growth of the Universe. What is crucial for our purposes, however, is that this descendant spiritual practice makes care of one's body, the Earth—all material nature, a central focus for their Yoga, and the arts are a natural outcome of this focus.

2. *The Mother*

From an early age, the young Parisian girl Mirra Afassa was a gifted painter, musician, and spiritual seeker. She recalled that she often sat absorbed in meditation, while her non-religious parents regarded her with puzzlement and concern. She grew to become one of the few women to formally study the fine arts and make a career in Paris around the turn of the century, interacting with some of the top artists of the day: Matisse and Rodin, among others. Her first marriage was to an artist, Henri Morisset, another painter successfully working in Paris. They had a child, André. Eventually, her interests in spiritual growth started to outweigh her creative ones. Her marriage to Morisset dissolved around the same time. She then became friends with Paul Richard who shared her interests and they both sought spiritual council from a Cabalistic teacher and his wife, Max and Alma Théon, in Algeria. She learned to develop many occult powers during this time, which showed her the reality of the spiritual planes and convinced her it was her role to bring them to the Earth. Later, Paul Richard heard about Sri Aurobindo through a friend and met him while traveling in India. He returned to Paris and told Mirra about this interesting Yogi. They went to Pondicherry

only briefly in 1914 because of The Great War, and then returned in 1920 after the War. Mirra stayed permanently and become a part of Sri Aurobindo's nascent community, while Paul returned to Paris not wanting to surrender to the Yogi as a guru.²⁵ Mirra became invaluable to the community that was beginning to grow, and Sri Aurobindo collaborated with her to refine and expand the scope of the work of his Yoga. He asked her in 1926 to administer the daily tasks of the community with the maintenance of their campus, and to help the people who followed him. At this time Sri Aurobindo started calling her "The Mother" and the Ashram was officially founded. The Ashram grew from 25 in 1926 to about four hundred people in the 1940s. As mentioned in the Preface, it currently claims to have close to 1200 full-time members and 3000-4000 associate members who live near the Ashram in Pondicherry.

III. MODELS OF SPIRITUAL CONSORTS

The Mother and Sri Aurobindo's spirituality has connections to the tradition(s) of goddess worship or *Śāktism*, which has an ancient and varied history. According to N. Bhattacharya,

[*Śāktism*] was not a religion preached by any prophet or specially patronized by the royal class or nobility. Its origin was spontaneous which evolved out of the prehistoric Mother Goddess cult symbolizing the facts of primitive life, and its development was manifold—not through any particular channel—like a lot of streams, some big and some small, issuing from a single glacier, which was also one of the causes of its survival and success.²⁶

It was always an outsider religion to the established brahmanical traditions of India. It consistently attracted lower caste peoples and in later colonial contexts, subaltern groups. *Śāktism* in the colonial context is well noted for its artists and saints. Bankim Chandra Chatterji, who wrote the novel

Anandamathā (1882), is an example of an author that inspired countless disenfranchised Bengali

²⁵ We will examine this episode and her biography more closely in Chapter Four. It is not my intention to say that the Mother was a disciple of Sri Aurobindo since both the Gurus described each other as equals in spiritual status. It does seem, however, that Mirra became Sri Aurobindo's student at first, modeling for others how to be the kind of student she herself expected.

²⁶ Narendra Nath Bhattacharyya, *The History of the Śākta Religion* (Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1974), 165.

youth with the author's call to *Vande Mataram*—"I Bow to Thee, Mother (India)"—to sacrifice for the freedom movement. Sri Aurobindo acknowledged Chatterji as a teacher of political revolution in his days of politics. He said, "Of the new spirit which is leading the nation to resurgence and independence, Bankim Chandra Chatterji is the inspirer and the political Guru...His was the sweetest voice that ever spoke in prose."²⁷ Like many others, Sri Aurobindo also connected *Śāktism* to Indian Nationalism, equating India with the Divine Mother and making this the basis of his political freedom movement in Bengal.

Paradoxically, Sri Aurobindo later saw the Parisian Jewish woman, Mirra Alfassa, as a human embodiment of Mother India and the Divine Mother. This understanding and this relationship between these two Gurus might seem strange in the twenty-first century, but in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when the Indian national liberation movement started to gain momentum, there were many kinds of international couples that teamed up to negotiate in different ways British colonialism and the modernism and technological mastery that it brought. Kumari Jayawardena writes,

In the heyday of imperialism, some of the most renowned leaders (Vivekananda, Sri Aurobindo, Krishnamurti), leaders of national liberation movements (Gandhi, Nehru, Krishna Menon, Subhas Chandra Bose) and Communist pioneers of the region (M. N. Roy, V. Chattopadhyaya, S. A. Wickremasinghe, Pieter Keuneman)—along with numerous other prominent Indian and Sri Lankan figures in public life—had Western women as their advisors, soul-mates, companions or wives.²⁸

According to Jayawardena, there were no indigenous Hindu women in the early twentieth-century India that worked for the social liberation of women or other subaltern groups.²⁹ Many Western

²⁷ Quoted by Basanta Koomar Roy in Bankim Chandra Chatterji, *Anandamath*, trans. Basanta Koomar Roy (New Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 2008), 18.

²⁸ Kumari Jayawardena, *The White Woman's Other Burden: Western Women and South Asia During British Rule* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 6.

²⁹ Pandita Ramabai (1858-1922) was an exception, though she converted to Christianity, "blaming all the social evils affecting Hindu women on the Hindu family system." (Ibid., 176). She therefore did not have lasting or widespread influence within Hindu traditions, though she founded a mission that is still active in India. See <http://www.ramabaimuktimission.com/>; accessed March 3, 2016.

women, however, unwilling to remain subject themselves to European patriarchal structures began to take their brands of feminism with them to India and teamed up with Indian men who were only too glad to enlist their help for political and social liberation. They sometimes gained more prominence than their Indian counterparts, even acquiring the devotion of Indian peoples. Jayawardena notes three types of Western women living and working for social change in colonial India:

1. *Memsabibs* “(master’s women)—the wives of European men who served as bureaucrats, merchants, planters, or in the armed forces.”³⁰ They were Christian missionaries and colonial social reformers/civilizers of the “savage” Indian natives.
2. “Theosophists, Orientalists and Holy Mothers who also rejected the savagery hypothesis and wanted to Orientalize and ‘civilize’ the colonizers of the West. They perceived Asia as a model of an alternate society that was also the site of their ideal of womanhood.”³¹
3. “Socialist women who rejected Christianity and reformism as well as shakti, Kali, and local Gurus, and who wanted their Asian ‘sisters’ to free themselves politically from foreign rule, and socially from oppressive structures and traditional religious and cultural practice.”³²

Mirra Alfassa was of the second group, according to Jayawardena, comparable to Margaret Noble (Sister Nivedita) who was an important disciple of Vivekananda, and Madeleine Slade (Mira Behn), an important disciple of Gandhi. These three pairs made up some of the most revered spiritual couples in India in the early twentieth century.

These foreign women were not only spiritual figures, they also performed the role of organizer, manager, confidant, secretary and fund-raiser for the “great man.” For all their spirituality they were also Western “new women” and brought to their work daring and innovation on the one hand and a sense of order, efficiency and discipline on the other; they were educated and cultured and able to introduce dialogue and intellectual debate into their relationship with the Guru. But they also had a romantic view of India and of Hinduism, playing down social evils as aberrations from the ancient Vedic ideal society. And while asserting more equality and familiarity with the Gurus, they also idolized these men over whom they had a special “claim.”³³

³⁰ Ibid., 4.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid., 5.

³³ Ibid., 176.

Mirra, I would argue, was drawn to India and to Sri Aurobindo, not because of a need to critique her own culture or colonial domination, though she indeed shared some of these critiques, but because of very personal inward motivations to accomplish his spiritual goals, many of which she articulated and realized before she ever met him. It is hard to claim that she had a romantic view of India either. A current ashramite told me an anecdote that I have not been able to substantiate, but which has the ring of truth about the Mother's view of India: one of her students once asked her what this great spiritual nation of India needed to do to take its rightful place among the world, and she said to clean itself up.

Jayawardena also argues that these spiritual pairs held common themes in their spiritual visions.

That all religions, cults and folk beliefs were manifestations of the unity of the same Divine force, that each country had its own approach to the Divine, that the duty of the religious was not to concentrate on the next life but to work towards perfection in this life, that India had to shake off its lethargy and assert its own identity, were the common features in the religio-political messages of Vivekananda, Nivedita, Sri Aurobindo and Mirra Richard (the Mother) as well as of Gandhi and Mira Behn.³⁴

All of these women were reformists and outlived their Indian male partners, staying on to live out their days in India. They helped to create a new form of Indian culture, society, and polity in mixing their European/American worldviews and values with Indian ones. The Mother, for example, introduced European principles of education, sports, and art forms as ways to train her students in the Integral Yoga. The Mother and her relationship to Sri Aurobindo, however, is distinct among these other spiritual couples.

The model that most describes this couple is found in stories about the gods and goddesses, as well as the *Avatāras* and their consorts in Hindu scriptures and art. In these narratives, the goddess mediates the power of the god, or the consort supports the mission of the *Avatāra*. This divine relationship usually inspires *bhakti* or worship in their followers. Commenting on the nature

³⁴ Ibid.

of the relationship between the gods and goddesses, Rachel Fell McDermott writes: “In all cases, these mediator-goddesses are said to be *svakiya*, or married to their consorts, and even if they are soteriologically more significant than the male gods, the latter are more important ontologically.”³⁵ In a similar way, Sri Aurobindo has ontological priority to the Mother for their devotees, but the Mother has more soteriological significance since she is the one who mediates his otherwise hidden presence in the experience of their *bhaktas*. The Mother says, in a similar vein, “Without him, I exist not; without me, he is unmanifest.”³⁶

For the Mother and Sri Aurobindo, like many later Hindu traditions, starting in the Middle Ages, the divine masculine is the passive pole and the divine feminine the active pole of *Brahman*.³⁷ In Sri Aurobindo’s metaphysical system, we can see how he understood this relationship. *Brahman* puts forward the divine Self in each form of creation, the *Ātman*, who is the silent witness of His eternal and universal will carried out by the divine measurer, *Māyā*, a feminine figure.³⁸ Said in another way, the divine personality or spirit, the *Puruṣa* watches as *Prakṛti*, another feminine figure, creates and sustains all form from His unlimited possibilities. Still another way, the Lord of all, *Īśvara* puts forth His divine force, *Śakti*, the name *par excellence* of the goddess, to energize the universe. Sri Aurobindo integrates all of these language games in his book *The Life Divine*. He writes,

³⁵ Rachel Fell McDermott, “Goddess Worship: The Hindu Goddess,” *Encyclopedia of Religion* 6 (2005): 3607. *Svakiya* means “one’s own people,” but in this case “one’s own wife.”

³⁶ Quoted in Nirodbaran Chakravarti, “Divine Mother,” in *Twelve Years with Sri Aurobindo* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Press, 1988), 65.

³⁷ 1. *Brahma* or *brahman* (neuter noun) is the impersonal word for the Absolute, Supreme Divinity, Cosmic Soul of the Universe; 2. *brahmā* (masc. noun) is the personal God of creation (one of the trimurti: a. creator or Brahmā, b. preserver or Vishnu, and c. destroyer/transformer or Śiva); and 3. *brahman* is also a priest. The words all come from the root √*br̥h*, which has connotations of “growth,” “expansion,” “evolution,” “development,” “swelling of the spirit or soul.” See Sir Monier Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 2005), s.vv. “*brahman*,” “*brahma/a*” and “*br̥h*.” (I will abbreviate this as MMW from now on.)

³⁸ *Māyā* comes from the root *mā*, which means measuring or to measure. It brings with it a sense of creating by drawing an arbitrary line on a preexisting form to articulate new forms. Wendy Doniger gives the example of the creation of West Virginia from the landmass of Virginia to illustrate this root word. See Doniger’s lecture at <http://www.uctv.tv/search-details.aspx?showID=9344>; accessed March 3, 2016.

As there are three fundamental aspects in which we meet this Reality,— Self, Conscious Being or Spirit and God, the Divine Being, or to use the Indian terms, the absolute and omnipresent Reality, Brahman, manifest to us as Atman, Purusha, Ishwara,— so too its power of Consciousness appears to us in three aspects: it is the self-force of that consciousness conceptively [sic.] creative of all things, Maya; it is Prakriti, Nature or Force made dynamically executive, working out all things under the witnessing eye of the Conscious Being, the Self [*Ātman*] or Spirit [*Puruṣa*]; it is the conscious Power of the Divine Being [*Īśvara*], Shakti, which is both conceptively creative and dynamically executive of all the divine workings.³⁹

These word pairs: *Ātman/Māyā*, *Puruṣa/Prakṛti*, *Īśvara/Śakti*, originating from Vedāntic, Sāṃkhyaic and Yogic/Tantric schools respectively, express a composite understanding in Indian philosophy for the Mother and Sri Aurobindo.⁴⁰ Without the divine masculine, the divine feminine exists not; without her, he is unmanifest. As we will see in all the chapters that follow, in text, art, poetry, and material culture, Sri Aurobindo and the Mother thought of themselves as incarnating this metaphysical relationship. The spiritual friendship of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother is seen as a human correlate of these divine principles by most ashramites expressing itself in the silent and watchful guidance of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother's active creation, maintenance, and continual transformation of the life patterns of the Ashram. This is not to say that there is a point to point equation of the divine feminine with the woman (the Mother, in this case), and the divine masculine with a man (Sri Aurobindo, in this case). For the first six years of their work together, 1920-26, the Mother worked in the background while Sri Aurobindo guided the community, and for the last eleven years of her life (1962-73), the Mother went into strict seclusion.

Not only could we examine many pre-modern examples of India, both historically-based and more often in stories of sacred texts and art; there are other Indian couples from diverse religious traditions in the modern period who are worshipped and/or honored by their followers in

³⁹ Sri Aurobindo, "Brahman, Purusha, Ishvara, Maya, Prakriti, Shakti," in *The Life Divine*, 339-340.

⁴⁰ These word pairs are not equal to each other as they describe differentiations within *Brahman*, each providing separate functions but each having their source and unity in *Brahman*. See "Brahman, Purusha, Ishvara, Maya, Prakriti, Shakti" for a full account.

a similar way as the Mother and Sri Aurobindo.⁴¹ As we saw above, Jayawardena located the Mother in a class of Western women living and working for social change in colonial India that also contained Margaret Noble (Sister Nivedita), who was special to Vivekananda, and Madeleine Slade (Mira Behn), who was special to Gandhi. These relationships do not quite rise to the level of intensity of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo, however, since Gandhi did not think of himself as a guru and Vivekananda acted on behalf of his guru, Rāmākṛṣṇa Paramahansa. Rāmākṛṣṇa (1836–1886) and Śārāda Devī (1853–1920), however, are an important example to compare. Like the Mother, Śārāda was called Śrī Ma (Holy Mother) and worshipped with Rāmākṛṣṇa by their followers as manifestations of divinity in its masculine and feminine aspects. In the Hindu conventions of the time, they were officially wed when she was just a little girl, though they were “married virgins” as the marriage was never consummated. Śārāda became Rāmākṛṣṇa’s spiritual consort or partner. She became a model of devotion, service, and leadership as a woman, and “became the chief source of spiritual and emotional support for his disciples after his death, when they began to establish a spiritual order in his name.”⁴² She even guided Western disciples, one of the very first Indian women to do so.⁴³

The relationship of Upasni Maharaj (1870-1941) and Godavari Mataji (1914-1990) is another example of celibate spiritual consorts who are comparable to the Mother and Sri Aurobindo.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Another avenue of research that needs to be explored is a comparison of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo with Saints Clare and Francis of Assisi, which would further contextualize this couple in a larger context and further explain and define the notion of “spiritual consorts” that I am using to here. I began this study in my article “The Androgynous Visual Piety of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo and St. Clare and St. Francis of Assisi,” *The Journal of Hindu Christian Studies* 28 (November 2015): 11-32.

⁴² Neelima Shukla-Bhatt, “Śārāda Devī,” *Encyclopedia of Religion* 12 (2005): 8111.

⁴³ See Swami Nikhilananda, *Holy Mother: Being the Life of Sri Sarada Devi, Wife of Ramakrishna and Helpmate in Mission*. (New York: Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center Press, 1997).

⁴⁴ See Marvin Henry Harper, “The Saint Who Suffered: Sri Upasani Baba Maharaj,” chap. in *Gurus, Swamis and Avatars: Spiritual Masters and Their American Disciples*, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1972), and Godamastu, ed. *The Talks of SadGuru Upasani Baba Maharaj*, 4 vols, Reprint; [Sakuri: Shri Upasani Kanya Kumari Sthan, 1978 (1957)]. No critical work has been done on Upasni Maharaj or Godavari Mata that I am aware of.

Upasni was a student of Sai Baba of Shirdi, five kilometers away from his home in Sakori, Maharashtra. He was also one of five gurus to Meher Baba. In an unprecedented way, Upasni began a small ashram for young girls (not boys) to teach Sanskrit and the *Vedas*. Godavari Mata joined this ashram at ten years old and Upasni showed her favor from the very start. He is worshiped by his followers, but is reputed to have said of Godavari: “Do not bow to me, worship her, for she is the supreme Shakti and her very darshan will wash away the sins and impurities of men and women.”⁴⁵ Like the Mother, she became the guru of the Ashram after he passed away.

The relationship of Meher Baba (née Merwan Sheriar Irani, 1894-1969) and Mehera J. Irani (no relation, 1907-1989) of Meherabad near Ahmadnagar, Maharashtra is also noteworthy. Meher Baba was a Parsi and is worshipped by his followers as “the Avatar, the Ancient One, the Messiah, or the Prophet,” who comes every 700 to 1400 years to give creation “a spiritual push” towards union with God. He said that in previous advents, he was Zoroaster, *Rāmā*, *Kṛṣṇa*, Buddha, Jesus, and Mohammed, but in this incarnation, embodying them all. Followers also view him as the “*Kalki* (or “white horse”) *Avatāra*,” a Puranic term used to describe his being the *Avatāra* of a new, dawning *Sat Yuga* age. In 1953 he publicly proclaimed himself the “Highest of the High,” a more encompassing title for the incarnation of God.

Mehera is called “the beloved of the Beloved,” his chief female disciple, who plays the role that Meher Baba said *Sītā* played for *Rāmā*, *Rādhā* played for *Kṛṣṇa*, and Mary for Jesus.⁴⁶ He said of her: “She is my very breath, without which I cannot live,” and “Mehera loves Me as I should be loved.”⁴⁷ Mehera survived Meher Baba by 20 years and continued to be a source of inspiration and

⁴⁵ See http://www.beezone.com/Godavari/godavari_mataji.htm; accessed March 3, 2016. Taken from the book Mani Sahukar, *Sweetness and Light - Life & Teachings of Godavari Mataji* (Mumbai: Bharatiya Vidy Bhavan, 1966).

⁴⁶ See David Fenster, *Mehera-Meher: A Divine Romance* (Ahmednagare, India: Meher Nazar Publications, 2003), and Mehera J. Irani, *Mehera*, ed. Janet Judson (East Windsor, NJ: Beloved Books, 1989). No critical work has been done on Meher Baba or Mehera, though there is a wealth of primary sources written in English.

⁴⁷ Meher Baba, *Mehera*, ed. Janet Judson (East Windsor, NJ: Beloved Books, 1989), iii, x.

guidance to “Baba lovers,” both Asian and Western, in that time. She did not think of herself as a guru, however. This couple modeled seclusion and action in many varied ways. Especially towards the end of his life, Meher Baba often spent days, weeks, months, and sometimes years in concentrated seclusion. In other phases, he traveled extensively, spending many months in Europe, the United States, Australia, Northern Africa, and even China and Iran to attract followers or do other work. At other times, he traveled on foot or on bus around India for years contacting “*masts*” or “God-intoxicated” aspirants. When Meher Baba was alive, Mehera spent most of her years in strict seclusion, not being allowed to see any man or even any male animals except Meher Baba. Exactly one year before he died, January 31, 1968, he had her greet his male disciples for the first time, which gradually started the end of her seclusion from men.

Much more can be said about these couples and how they compare and contrast with the Mother and Sri Aurobindo. What is important for our purposes here is that in each of these examples, each person of the pair plays a role of spiritual consort, not marriage partner or romantic lover; each is worshipped or highly honored by their followers; and each participates in a pattern of Indian religious expression that is more common than critics may notice producing religious expression called *bhaktimārga*, “the path of devotion/worship/love,” directed to another human being.

In the above examples, the female of the pair is “the truest or purest disciple,” the one who, according to the male of the pair, loves the other consort in the fullest spiritual way and in fact moves beyond the status of disciple in some cases. The female consort also shares (*con*) in the male guru’s mission and ministry (*sortem*), becoming an indispensable part of his work. The female consort’s devotion, work, and love become a model of how to love the master for the other followers, as well. Nolini Gupta, a follower of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo spoke to this pattern through the example of his gurus:

The Mother came and installed Sri Aurobindo on his high pedestal of Master and Lord of Yoga. We had hitherto known him as dear friend and close companion, and although in our mind and heart he had the position of Guru, in our outward relations we seemed to behave as if he were just like one of ourselves. ...The Mother taught by her manner and speech, and showed us in actual practice, what was the meaning of disciple and master; she always practiced what she preached. She showed us, by not taking her seat in front of or on the same level as Sri Aurobindo, but by sitting on the ground, what it meant to be respectful to one's Master, what was real courtesy.⁴⁸

One can see in this description that the role of a guru not only models what it is to be a teacher, but also what it can mean to be a student or disciple. As the Mother and Sri Aurobindo demonstrated for their disciple Nolini, gurus that come in pairs can model this quite effectively for their students.

IV. WELCOMING OPPOSITION IN GROWTH

Generally speaking, when one reads ashramites' own accounts, it is clear that being a disciple of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo was usually filled with difficult lessons in life, and the Gurus helped their students to creatively deal with these to move forward towards their supramental goal. For those who came to the Ashram to receive their direction, hardships could not be avoided, but in fact were often intensified. These hardships were understood, by the Gurus and their students who came to adopt their perspective, to be the way that the consciousness could in fact expand and become more universalized. The descendant spiritual approach that they took seems in fact, to have demanded this welcoming perspective about opposition since they sought to descend into life to transform the very parts of it that would necessarily oppose transformation: death, suffering, ignorance, and falsehood. The Ashram was therefore built and maintained as a context for this dynamic of growth in consciousness through opposition of many kinds. The Mother took an active role in creating opportunities for this dynamic, as we will see in the later chapters, though Sri Aurobindo wrote letters to his students from his secluded state that served this purpose as well.

⁴⁸ Nolini Kanta Gupta, *Reminiscences* (Pondicherry: SAAP, 1969), 72.

In a more specific way, the arts and the creative process are a special means and context for this kind of intense work within the crucible of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram. The arts help the artist to both face oppositions with sincerity and resilience, and at the other end of this process, to unveil spiritual potentials that were not known until the art and creative process uncovered them for the disciple (sincerity and resilience being two of these initial potentials, it must be said). This spiritual growth is seen within a pattern of progress, “the joy of progress” in fact, since the Mother thinks that an “eternally perfect universe, eternally manifesting the eternal perfection, would lack the joy of progress.”⁴⁹ This advance is fueled, in their view, by opposition: “opposition and contraries are a stimulus to progress,” the Mother comments.⁵⁰ This process of growth “is the quickest and most effective means to bring creation out of its inertia and lead it towards its fulfilment.”⁵¹

To highlight its distinctiveness, we can compare this dynamic of growth through opposition in the Ashram to one who worked very hard in his life to elevate the value of the arts in Indian education during India’s struggle for independence from the British Empire. Devi Prasad (1921-2011), a gifted artist and teacher, peace and arts advocate, writes in his book *Arts: The Basis of Education* that he had a painful experience in Indian primary school, as the British used corporal punishment to motivate learning. Prasad writes that “[t]here was nothing in the school that could create in us an interest in any subject or activity.”⁵² He says that in spite of this he found a way to grow as an artist outside of school by watching local carpenters, collecting tools, and working on creative projects at home. Later, as an adolescent, in 1938, he discovered the very different way that the school children of Mahatma Gandhi’s Ashram of Sevagram were taught. It was a miracle for him because they were both learning and happy at the same time, owing to a freedom of expression

⁴⁹ The Mother, *On Thoughts and Aphorisms* (Pondicherry: SAAP, 2001), 164.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 165.

⁵¹ Ibid., 166.

⁵² Devi Prasad, *Art: The Basis of Education* (New Delhi: National Book Trust, 2001), ixx.

and a lack of fear of making mistakes. They were learning in a way that was not unlike his experience with the carpenters. He writes, “I realized that if during my childhood I had not the opportunity to ‘meddle’ with the tools and the raw materials of the craftsmen who renovated our house, I would not have developed the taste for ‘making things’! Without this experience would I have understood children’s nature, as I think I did in later life, I often wonder!”⁵³ Prasad goes on to describe his knowledge of children’s nature and the foundational ways to use the arts to develop it.

Using the Mother and Sri Aurobindo’s principle of opposition for growth, I wonder, without Prasad’s hardships, without his negative experience of British colonial education, would he have taken the responsibility for his own education as he did, to learn and to create in another way? Would he have taken the time and energy to learn from the carpenters at home? Would he have been as moved as he was by the children in Gandhi’s Ashram, all of whom stood out in such contrast to his own childhood learning? Would he have recognized the contrast, in other words? Would he have been motivated, therefore, to build a broad-based vision for children’s education based on the centrality of the arts without his experience of education that marginalized them? What I think is salient about this anecdote is a larger question that lurks behind these smaller ones: what is the role of opposition in the process of human maturation?

These questions and implications are crucial to consider when discussing education, growth and development in the personalities of children, and they become even more important when considering the growth and development of people with well-formed personalities who find themselves obsessed with another kind of learning: spiritual growth and the desire for God, at least in the Integral Yoga as the two Gurus lived it. To be clear, in highlighting the value of Prasad’s experience of opposition, I am not implicitly advocating for early nineteenth- and twentieth-century British colonial pedagogy in order for children to learn the value of the arts in the way that Prasad

⁵³ Ibid., xx.

did. Nor would have the two Gurus from Pondicherry. His experience and work are a real sacrifice that made gains in education that must now be safeguarded, not repeated. I am, however, interested in focusing on the mature ways in which one can face opposition in order to grow and progress, in order to tease out more carefully the (unexamined) ways that Prasad and others like him dealt with opposition for the purposes of growth in the arts and in life. Just as the behavior of art-making is often overlooked as a necessary component in the growth of human nature, the role of facing opposition as the Gurus understood it can be overlooked as a basic and necessary element of growth in any learning.

This dissertation is written as a kind of investigation of these broad oversights and concerns. How is art a human requirement for growth, and what is the role of opposition in this growth? The scholarship of Robert Wuthnow tackles this from a certain perspective, but in a glancing way as he studies how artists are becoming the spiritual vanguard of contemporary American culture. What is interesting for my purposes is that he interviewed many kinds of artists working in many different media in the later part of the twentieth century and found that many, if not most, have been “compelled to search for spiritual answers because the very foundations of their lives were shaken by illnesses, broken relationships, dysfunctional families, and other traumatic experiences.”⁵⁴ It is not clear to him that these experiences are necessarily the fuel for their growth as artists, however. Discipline is the most important element, as he sees it, to the creative process. The artists’ spiritual search and their “creativity may be nurtured by hardship, but being able to pursue their art over a period of years requires discipline.”⁵⁵ What is clear to him is that art provides the means for these artists to reconstruct their broken identities through the use of storytelling or symbol-making in a way that integrates the fragmented pieces of their lives. He writes that “[n]ew narratives about

⁵⁴ Robert Wuthnow, *Creative Spirituality: The Way of the Artist* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001), 75. My emphasis.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

oneself and about one's experiences provide tissue with which to weave an identity, and perhaps even to connect that identity with an understanding of God."⁵⁶ This weaving and this connection, however, presupposes fragmentation and disconnection, oppositions that brought these people to the arts in the first place. The arts are a way to constructively deal in a disciplined way, with the oppositions in their lives. It is therefore not just discipline that is useful for growth, but the kind of discipline that one uses to creatively handle opposition. Therefore, opposition coupled with a creative discipline has a crucial part to play in the growth of one's personal identity, I would suggest.

As we will see in the following chapters, hardship and opposition in one's life is not only a potential spur to creativity, and creativity a potential discipline to (re)construct a broken identity related to God in the context of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram; opposition is also consciously welcomed as a way to grow in deeper intimacy with one's own identity and with divinity, even after that connection is securely made between them. Opposition fuels growth not only for psycho-social learning, which is the kind of lesson that Prasad unknowingly experienced as a young person, and Wuthnow's artists learned in coming to the arts, but it fuels what the Gurus considered spiritual learning in the Sri Aurobindo Ashram.

As we will see in Chapter One, psychological growth, as the Mother and Sri Aurobindo understood it, is the necessary process of integrating and healing the fractured parts of one's personality to make it strong and capable for a meaningful role and purpose in the world. Spiritual growth for them is another process with a separate purpose, which is meant to dissolve the boundaries of that healthy ego when ready, in order to allow a new and broader kind of consciousness of the higher self in the Divine. Their Yoga supports the later process and not necessarily the former, since they may be at cross-purposes, though this is kind of a tangled dynamic as the two processes often overlap. We will see this difficult dynamic in Chapters Five and Six, which

⁵⁶ Ibid., 76.

will focus on the Mother's work with specific ashramites involved in creative projects as they were trying to become more mature adults, and at the same time, trying to gain higher consciousness of the divine.

Paradoxically, all this growth is fueled by what Sri Aurobindo provocatively calls "suffering, failure, and retardation." He writes, "When thou art able to see how necessary is suffering to final delight, failure to utter effectiveness and retardation to the last rapidity, then thou mayst begin to understand something, however faintly and dimly, of God's workings."⁵⁷ The Mother also acknowledges this opposition in her own experience of growth and in her work with her students. She calls it "the force of Consciousness exerting a PRESSURE like this (*crushing gesture*). And the Pressure keeps increasing."⁵⁸ "Whatever isn't receptive feels crushed," she says, "but all that is receptive on the contrary feels a sort of...extraordinary expansion."⁵⁹ Whereas other modern yoga traditions use specific ritual techniques to reach their (ascendant) spiritual goals, like *mantras*, breathing rituals, and bodily postures, among many other things, the Integral Yoga lays these to the side or at least subordinates them to the primary method. The aspirant of this spiritual practice seeks to welcome "opposition and contraries" as requirements to their progress, which often came in the form of working with personalities that one would rather not, engaging in tasks in which one has no expertise, or receiving stern scoldings or deep acts of kindnesses by the Mother at particularly fragile moments that destabilize one's orientation in the Universe and sense of identity. My hypothesis is that this "force of Consciousness" and its increasing pressure against the consciousness of the ashramite is crucial not only to understanding what they mean by growth and how it is achieved in their Yoga, but to understanding the ways in which the arts aid this pressure. In the following chapters, we will see how the two Gurus use the arts to both help themselves and their

⁵⁷ Sri Aurobindo, *Essays Divine and Human* (Pondicherry: ASSP, 1997), 438.

⁵⁸ The Mother, *The Mother's Agenda XI* (Paris: Institut de Recherches Évolutives, 1981), January 17, 1970.

⁵⁹ The Mother, *The Mother's Agenda, XIII*, May 6, 1972.

sādhaks (spiritual students) to grow in their spiritual practice (*sādhana*), to welcome opposition and contraries, and to help them express what the goal of this growth is, “the new creation.”

The Mother and Sri Aurobindo’s view is distinct from Devi Prasad’s ideals for growth and education, mainly in terms of how opposition is valued. Prasad expresses a more commonly shared view that rejects or protests the role of opposition or hardship. The Mother, on the other hand, writes that hidden in the particular opposition that one is personally dealing with is the opposite accomplishment that one will gain if one resolves to welcome its presence and use yogic discipline to transform it. Firstly, one is to recognize, in her view, that no matter the hardship, it is an expression of one’s own limitation: otherwise the hardship would never have surfaced. One of her students, Mrityunjoy, describes this difficult dynamic in a specific way:

One of my stumbling-blocks was that I reacted violently when people blamed me without proper grounds. At times I would ask the Mother why she paid heed to such and such false rumors, why I should be the victim of such charges, even though I had done nothing of the kind! Her answer to me was that it did not matter whether I did or did not do some such things in that particular instance; what mattered was that previously I had proved myself capable of them, and their reports about that. ... So long as I had not raised myself to a higher level of consciousness and lived there constantly, such occasions would continue to be there. Only by a complete change of consciousness, and thus living ordinary human reactions, could the atmosphere around me vibrate differently, and people would then be convinced and not try to find fault with me. And that is the task of long years of arduous tapasya. Until then, people would be justified to complain and my business was not [to] react but to be indifferent outwardly, while trying to find inwardly how certain apparently refined movements in me were really out of tune with my changed consciousness. And thus people’s complaints would be more a help than a hindrance.”⁶⁰

This seems to be the method of the Integral Yoga. The idea is that if one can recognize such hardships in this way with this yogic perspective of the Mother, as Mrityunjoy comes to here, one can work towards a solution within that would affect in very practical ways one’s relationships with others. For the Mother, the solution is always found within the difficulty, the opposition itself. She writes,

⁶⁰ Mrityunjoy, “A Look Behind,” in *Breath of Grace*, ed. M.P. Pandit (Pondicherry: Dipti Publications, 1973), 77.

The nature of your difficulty indicates the nature of the victory you will gain, the victory you will exemplify in Yoga....Face to face with the defect, the difficulty, you say, "Oh, I am like that! How awful it is!" But you ought to see the truth of the situation. Say to yourself, "My difficulty shows me clearly what I have ultimately to represent. To reach the absolute negation of it, the quality at the other pole—this is my mission."⁶¹

For the Gurus, the natural oppositions that come one's way in the practice of their *sādhana* are all that are needed to true the course of human development that eventually leads to the new creation—not correct belief, correct ritual, or spiritual exercises. One way to talk about the Mother's role, in the case of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, is that she sought to create opportunities or projects that allowed these occasions for disharmony and ugliness to surface in spontaneous ways and to give as much support for the *sādhaks* to handle them as maturely as possible. The Mother envisions the Sri Aurobindo Ashram as "a little world," where these oppositions and the attempts to fight them for the purposes of growth can happen, and material wealth is acquired and used for this purpose.

The Mother says of the Ashram:

I always used to tell myself that if ever I could do it, I would try to create a little world—oh! quite a small one, but still... a small world where people would be able to live without having to be preoccupied with food and lodging and clothing and the imperative necessities of life, so as to see whether all the energies freed by this certainty of a secure material living would turn spontaneously towards the divine life and the inner realisation.⁶²

The Mother and Sri Aurobindo did not seek to create a community with external oppositions like rich and poor, materially impotent and powerful, or educated and uneducated in order to elevate the one at the expense of the other.⁶³ In their view, the Integral Yoga is not a practice for healthy psychological adjustment or social justice causes based on any views of right and wrong, maladjusted or well adjusted, good or bad, just or unjust. Their ideal is that both virtuous or

⁶¹ The Mother, from "Difficulties in Yoga," in *Questions and Answers, 1929-31* (Pondicherry: SAAP, 2003), 143.

⁶² The Mother, *Questions and Answers, 1956*, (Pondicherry: SAAP, 2004), 160-1.

⁶³ When one joins the Ashram, one gives all of their wealth to the Mother and then she provided for all future needs as she saw fit. The Ashram Trust has this role now.

vicious human qualities are potentially dissolved into a higher form of being human, a being of “the new creation.” When they were alive, they welcomed and even encouraged strong and very fully developed personalities of every (irritating and sweet) kind who all shared one thing in common: they were all spontaneously obsessed with spiritual growth in the descendant approach that Sri Aurobindo taught and modeled, and they all possessed a native desire to surrender their lives, fortunes, time, and energy to him through the Mother.⁶⁴ The two Gurus did not want personalities that sought to be “just,” “good,” or “right” as this might be understood by any definition, no matter how wise. The *sādhaks* that made their way to the French colonial town on the Bay of Bengal where not just world-weary, disillusioned by social injustices, they were also self-weary, tired of trying to use their own limited consciousness to illuminate the problems of the ego and the world, which eluded most solutions that they could apply. They came to the Mother and Sri Aurobindo to help because in them each *sādhak* recognized guides that could take their hand and be led through the opportunities for growth that awaited each in a very individual and personal way.

If the Mother’s and Sri Aurobindo’s Integral Yoga is a developmental process of growth down into the darkness of one’s subconsciousness, a process that welcomes, in a natural way, the continual battle with darkness, opposition, disharmony, or ugliness, how does one deal with the contraries that come into one’s life? Does one battle them with the same kind of weapons that are within the opposition itself? Or does one use a different arsenal? In the final chapters that follow, I will focus on the ways in which the Gurus and their *sādhaks* used the arts and the creative process, first as a way to expose the hiding places of the lower self and its discords, and second, as one of their contexts to battle the forces, both internal and external to unveil what is beautiful, harmonious, and light from within what is ugly, discordant, and dark. Paradoxically, in the eyes of these two

⁶⁴ By using the past tense, I do not mean to imply that the current population of ashramites at the Sri Aurobindo Ashram do not possess these central qualities. Far from it. I was impressed by the courageous ways many of the people that I met demonstrated these qualities in very ordinary and silent ways when I lived among them for a brief time in 2012-13.

Gurus, the road to internal and external unity that art as yoga helps to pave is one that is filled with intense conflict, tremendous pressure, and formidable opposition when undertaken in the way that they describe. I discovered in my research into this spiritual practice that beauty is not for the faint hearted and weak. Achievements of its expression in art are hard-won offerings of selfless service to one's own higher self, to others, and to the divine.

V. OUTLINE

It is not easy to see the principle of growth through opposition in Sri Aurobindo's early writings about aesthetics, though there is some inchoate evidence. He writes the first set of essays we will examine in Chapter One before the establishment of his Ashram and before he met the Mother. The second set, discussed in Chapter Two, he writes after meeting the Mother, but these essays still have more in common with the previous writings than with his mature thought. Chapters One and Two of this dissertation are therefore devoted to these early writings, which have a particular purpose: they focus on his advocacy of traditional Indian and Hindu culture in a British colonial context, and they honor an ascendant spiritual practice as a balancing force to what he saw as the materialistic culture of the British. From his later perspective, he might say that this colonial system is the opposition that stimulated the growth of Indian consciousness to awake to its own national heritage and future potentials (what he called the Indian *dharma*) in a modern context. In 1909, he writes,

We shall review European civilisation entirely from the standpoint of Indian thought and knowledge and seek to throw off from us the dominating stamp of the Occident; what we have to take from the West we shall take as Indians. And the [Indian] *dharma* once discovered we shall strive our utmost not only to profess but to live, in our individual actions, in our social life, in our political endeavours.”⁶⁵

⁶⁵ Sri Aurobindo, *Karmayogin* (Pondicherry: SAAP, 1997), 27.

The Indian *dharma* is Sri Aurobindo's notion of India's own ability to follow its own "law of being," its own particular "spiritual health, energy, and greatness" without losing itself in aping another nation's *dharma*.⁶⁶ What will be important to establish in these first two chapters is that Sri Aurobindo's essays written during the time of the British Empire and before the founding of his Ashram give us a language that developed into his mature aesthetic theory after the founding of the Ashram with the Mother. The language of intuition and the supermind from these early texts is the most relevant. These ideas and some others help to uncover and explain the dynamic of opposition in growth found in later texts, behavior, and artworks completed under the Mother's guidance that we will also study.

Specifically in Chapter One, we will look at Sri Aurobindo's six-part series of essays entitled "The National Value of Art" in the volume *Early Cultural Writings*. This series focuses on the ways that art can be used to educate citizens for potential participation in the nation of India, and further, for spiritual growth that would be a foundation for world unity. By contextualizing these essays with his understanding of human psychology, we will be able to see how the arts interact with different levels of human experience as he understood them: the aesthetic, the moral, and the spiritual.

In Chapter Two we will examine essays that he wrote specifically dealing with ancient and medieval Indian art and architecture in the volume *The Renaissance in India and Other Essays on Indian Culture*. These polemical writings elevate traditional (ascendant) Indian sacred art and architecture while also seeking to expose the limitations of traditional European culture as it had developed in that colonial context. If one can view Indian sacred art with the faculty of the intuition, he claims, then one will be able to enter into the way of seeing that the Indian artist experienced in making it. This is the center of his hermeneutics of sacred art at this time.

In Chapter Three, I will examine many of his articles that later became the book *The Future*

⁶⁶ Ibid., 26.

Poetry. These essays were written after the arrival of the Mother, and represent his transition from strictly Hindu thought to what became his descendant, non-sectarian vision for culture and spiritual practice. This aesthetic and spiritual vision combines both the spiritual mastery he valued in “that wider Hinduism which is not a dogma” with the cultural and poetic mastery that he valued in certain traditions of English literature and poetry.⁶⁷ This combination leads to what he thinks is a future poetry that expresses “the descent of the supramental which is not known to any religion” or culture.⁶⁸ We can see the influence of the Mother and the explicit expression of the principle that “opposition is a stimulus to progress” in how he tried to create his own version of descendant poetry in his epic poem *Savitri*, which I will examine as the culminating part of this chapter.

In Chapter Four I will narrate more of the Mother’s biography as this relates to the arts, and describe her role as a guru, and in particular, her way of guiding her artists in the Ashram. I will argue that the Mother is the living embodiment of the intuition for her disciples, so her role is both an exterior and interior one in the imaginations of her students. Her thoughts about the creative process and its practical relationship to spiritual growth will be the focus, which takes Sri Aurobindo’s aesthetic theory from *The Future Poetry* into the realm of visual art. I examine these ideas of the Mother found in her volume *On Education* and in another book compiled by the Ashram Archives entitled *The Mother: Paintings and Drawings*. I will also relate this research with the Mother’s use of flowers, which communicates her understanding of beauty and growth in consciousness.

Chapter Five will be devoted to an ethnographic study that I conducted in late 2012-early 2013 in the Sri Aurobindo Ashram. This study examines the construction and use of the Modernist Golconde Dormitory, which the Mother and Sri Aurobindo commissioned in the 1930s as a place to house their more serious students. The principle that opposition fuels growth is explicitly

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Undated letter, published in *Bulletin of Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education* 53 (February 2001): 72.

demonstrated in this project. This chapter will use some important elements of Lindsay Jones' hermeneutical methodology for sacred architecture, and draw from unpublished journals of the Golconde construction supervisor and structural engineer who worked closely on this project together and with the Mother. Their journals were written to the Mother for comment on an almost daily basis during the construction phase, giving an interesting view of how she works with the principle of opposition.

Chapter Six will explore what I consider to be the culminating aesthetic ideal of the Integral Yoga in paint, which applies to all art forms in the Ashram, I would suggest. To explain this ideal, I will focus on two painters within the Ashram who helped the Mother to accomplish her own yoga, an aim of which was to create a “future painting” and a “future artist” cut from the mold of a descendant spiritual practice. I will use articles from the Ashram journal *Mother India*, which published a series called “Painting as Sadhana” in 2006-7 to examine the way art was used as a means for spiritual growth for the first artist under consideration, Krishnalal Bhatt. I will next critically examine the Mother's important painting collaboration with Savita “Huta” Hindocha, relying on Huta's published journals entitled *A Story of A Soul*. The visual culture of these artists will also be a focus of this chapter as I compare their creative work and describe the aesthetic ideal based on the supramental new creation.

For Chapters Five and Six, the Golconde Dormitory, the paintings, and visual culture of these ashramites will be treated on their own terms—as artistic communications of spiritual aesthetics authored by the Mother and Sri Aurobindo in relationship to their disciples. As such they deserve to be considered as important records of behavior that visual culture theorist David Morgan calls “visual piety.” This visual evidence embodies a certain kind of “sacred gaze” which is how this group of people constructed a social world of meaning.⁶⁹ As I hope to prove by the end of this

⁶⁹ See the Preface, xvii-xix.

study, the sacred gaze that is characteristic of the ultimate goal of the Integral Yoga is what I call descendant and non-sectarian.

Chapter Seven will review the dissertation by highlighting four interrelated themes: 1) the specific ways that the Mother and Sri Aurobindo worked together to achieve their spiritual mission as spiritual consorts; 2) the role of the mind in their Yoga and creative process; 3) the principle of opposition for growth to practice descendant spirituality; and 4) the quality and value of beauty in the writings and creative experience of the Gurus.

Chapter One

Sri Aurobindo On Art, Education, and Political Hinduism

I. INTRODUCTION

The first text we will consider is taken from a compilation of articles, essays, letters, and manuscripts on culture, religion, and the arts, entitled *Early Cultural Writings* that Sri Aurobindo wrote between 1890-1920. The focus of this chapter will be on the small group of articles in this collection that bear directly on his early view of the visual arts and crafts, which were written from November-December 1909 in his journal *Karmayogin*, entitled “The National Value of Art,” parts I-VI. These were written during the fifth stage of Sri Aurobindo’s life that I listed in the Introduction, “*A New Integration: Alipur Jail*,” right after he was released from prison for his nationalist movement activities.¹ Before we enter into his thought at this time period, it is fruitful to understand some historical and biographical contexts that will serve to situate these six articles.

1. Late Nineteenth-Century, Early Twentieth-Century European Art Historical Context(s)

The period roughly between 1350-1860 was a time of experimenting with mimetic art and visual culture.² It was a time when the very notion of “art” was first constructed as something

¹ See p. 8.

² See Appendix II: “Types of Relationships between Art and Religion,” p. 389. In order to understand the many ways that art and religion can be related, I have written a brief typology that heuristically describes five different relationships that contextualize my examination: 1. *Cosmic Visual Imagery*, which expresses a kind of unconscious unity of humanity, creation, and Ultimate Reality in service to social cohesion through a totemic use of art; 2. *Devotional Visual Imagery*, which expresses a kind of separation of human consciousness from the Earth, but still a unity with tribe or community and serves as devotion to God(s) and social identity; 3. *Mimetic Art*, which expresses a separation of the individual from both the Earth and the community, as well as religion, and serves the rational mind and individuality; 4. *Modern Art*, which expresses a turn to the subject and its own sense of authority in the psyche and intellect, eschewing religious and state authorities and ends up serving the elite classes; 5. *Post-Modern (Post) Art*, which expresses a turn to the socially constructed nature of language and imagery seeking to destabilize inherited notions of beauty, social structure, and meaning, and it ends up serving democratic systems of investment in social, cultural, and economic capital.

distinct from craft or manual labor. Art was predicated on the goal to imitate the physical world as conceived by the senses in increasingly realistic ways in the tradition of Vasari and his book *The Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*.³

From our contemporary vantage, we can see that “Vasari was writing a history of a norm” not necessarily a history of art.⁴ Art history as a proto-academic discipline was born at this time, and it was accomplished in a normative fashion: artworks that were worthy of historical note faithfully imitate physical appearances to celebrate and even surpass the heroic ideals of antiquity. In painting, for example, the narrative of art history was told as one leading up to the perfection of human skill to capture a record of human three-dimensional visual perception on a two-dimensional plane.

The concept of “art” did not gain full maturity until later in the epoch when it was given philosophical articulation after Baumgarten’s eighteenth-century coinage of the term “aesthetics,” or knowledge given by perception of the senses to the individual.⁵ This philosophy blossomed into speculation about art as such, leading to the birth of art criticism and the aesthetic experience of beauty apart from its relationship to the context, the *nomos*, and the people it may have served. As a result, “art” become a luxury of the wealthy and therefore, not universally available. The end of this period was right before the Impressionists in the late nineteenth century started to “blur” reality with their loose and painterly brush strokes, or one can say, started to focus on something new in reality: one’s personal, internal *feeling* about the subject matter held in the idiosyncratic way the paint

³ Notice that his title is not *The Lives of the Most Excellent Artists*. At the time of Vasari, this concept is still yet to be consciously created. Also, Renaissance visual artists did not invent mimetic art, but rediscovered it in the classic Roman marbles that were then being excavated, as noted in the Appendix II. Mimesis is found in the late ancient Greek culture when *theoria* (a spiritual/artistic practice where a timeless link is made between the imagery and the eternal cosmos) is supplanted by mimesis. One can see this kind of mimetic work with Greek artists like Polygnotus and Nicius (painters that imitated nature), and Praxiteles and Lysippos (sculptors that imitated nature).

⁴ Hans Belting, *The End of the History of Art?*, trans. Christopher S. Wood (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 8.

⁵ Alexander Baumgarten, *Reflections on Poetry*, trans. Karl Aschenbrenner and William B. Holther (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1954), 78.

was applied and the way subject matter was treated. The time in which Sri Aurobindo found himself was this complex time of hybridism between mimetic ideals and a new birth of the Modernist turn to the subject. In this and the next two chapters, we will see how he drew on and yet distinguished himself from both the classic mimetic and Modernist movements.

Most scholars place the beginning of the Modern period of art in Europe, in the late nineteenth century, some claiming that it begins with Manet's 1860's work or van Gogh's of the same decade.⁶ Just as Kant ushered in the turn to the subject in philosophy, these painters did so in art. In Modernist philosophy, the emphasis was no longer on objects or concepts of perception, but on the subject who perceived. In art practice as well, the focus increasingly became the medium of the artwork itself and the subject who created, not objects in the world. This creative approach threatened mimetic traditions.

2. *Early Twentieth Century British Context(s)*

Colonial England was one of the chief contexts for the crisis and potentials of Modernism, as those in this period began to question and critique the earlier Victorian period that tried to maintain mimetic ideas. The mimetic ideal was useful to England's psychological dominance of the Indian sense of identity. Partha Mitter defines the British norm as "mimetic art seen through

⁶ See Hans Belting argues for Manet, *The End of the History of Art?*. Arthur Danto argues for Van Gogh, *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997). For another interpretation of when Modernism begins, see T.J. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 15-54. Clark, a Marxist theorist, believes that it begins with Jean-Louis David and his painting *Death of Marat*, which expresses the political shifts of consciousness in the French Revolution.

Victorian eyes, which added two further conditions: a lofty moral purpose and the propensity of progress.”⁷

Compared to Victorian salon art, however, ancient and medieval Indian art seemed crude to the enlightenment formed sensibilities of most British intellectuals and upper class. In their view, Indian art was barbarous, backward, and primitive.⁸ It lacked the scientific advancement of their Modern age. Mitter writes, “There was a general tendency to confuse artistic quality with technical advances, a reflection of the dominance of science and technology in Victorian Britain. Scientific thinking had undoubtedly contributed dramatically to the study of art, but it had the effect of placing technological criteria on a pedestal. Judged in this way, Indian art fared rather poorly.”⁹ Educated Indian nationalists were in a awkward position because they also prized these Modernist scientific ideals, yet sought to somehow find value in their own heritage. Influential figures like Swami Vivekananda, Rabindranath Tagore, and his nephew, Balendranath Tagore, who was a gifted art theorist, are examples as they were ambivalent to the Western values of colonial art. As Indian artists began to absorb the training and values of Western art practice in British formed Indian art schools, British critics usually judged their products as mediocre copies at best, bad imitations by an inferior race, at worst.

⁷ Partha Mitter, *Arts and Nationalism in Colonial India 1850-1922: Occidental Orientations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 242. An alternative perspective and practice of art at this time was England’s Arts and Crafts Movement, which valued arts, crafts, and values of indigenous peoples. They valued objects made by hand with traditional methods of craft in folk styles. They also valued an integral approach to the arts such that art, craft, design, and architecture worked together to form a unity of cultural expression. Art historian John Ruskin and artist and poet William Morris were important figures in this movement.

⁸ The cultural construct of the “primitive” is a complex issue. There were both Western and Indian thinkers and artists at this time who sought to combat the force of Western modern, scientific culture with what they perceived as the “real” culture of the “rural Indian primitive.” Gandhi in a political way and Rabindranath Tagore in a cultural way are important figures for this construct in India, while the artists Kandinsky, Mondrian, and Malevich are cultural examples in the West who critiqued Western rationality through abstract art. Though Indians and Westerners each had differing goals for making this construct of the primitive, they shared a desire to counteract Western capitalist industrialism and the naturalist academic art that held its values with the ideals of folk art. See Mitter, “The Indian Discourse of Primitivism,” in *The Triumph of Modernism: India’s artists and the avant-garde 1922-1947* (London: Reaktion Books, 2007), 29-122.

⁹ Mitter, *Arts and Nationalism in Colonial India 1850-1922: Occidental Orientations*, 223.

However, British taste was not unaffected by their colonized subjects. Mitter notes: “How ironic, in a period full of unintended ironies, that the appreciation of Indian art by the Indian elite was kindled by European teachers.”¹⁰

3. Context(s) of Sri Aurobindo in India in the Early Twentieth Century

England, since 1850, sought to legislate European taste at home and in its subject nations in order to civilize the world into British ways of feeling, thinking, and behaving. This attitude was highlighted in an 1854 dispatch of the East India Company: “None can have a stronger claim on our attention than... Education. It is one of our sacred duties to be the means... of conferring upon the natives of India those vast moral and material blessings which flow from the general diffusion of useful knowledge, and which India may, under Providence, derive from her connection with England.”¹¹ In direct response to this program of “useful knowledge” and the artistic institutions that were structured by it in India, Sri Aurobindo wrote essays on Indian culture, “The National Value of Art.” From these articles and others, we can see that he shares the English value of education, but not all of its means and goals. He was among many Bengali elite who advocated a cultural nationalism that sought to find their own identity as a way to negotiate Britain’s colonization and industrialism. At the time, he tied this identity to his interpretation of Hinduism.

The revolt of Indian cultural nationalism against the British at this time was complex and Partha Mitter argues that there were two kinds of movements that broadly characterized it. One was a cultural nationalist movement, led by both Indians and English sympathizers like E.B. Havell, the father of Indian art history. Mitter dates the beginning of the National Art Movement in Bengal at about 1896 with the friendship and intimate collaboration of Havell and the renowned painter,

¹⁰ Ibid., 224.

¹¹ Education Despatch of the East India Company, 19 July 1854. Taken from Partha Mitter, *Arts and Nationalism in Colonial India 1850-1922: Occidental Orientations*, 29.

Abanindranath Tagore, nephew to Rabindranath Tagore.¹² This duo sought to restore Indian artistic forms through art schools and galleries in the face of Victorian forms, not just to establish Indian artists who mastered Western methods and practices. The cultural nationalist movement in general relied on a revised history of India, constructing an ahistorical and unified Hindu identity that could compete with the hegemonic British identity of the same ahistorical character. Other Indians favored this selective and not entirely self-conscious construction of history. Scholar Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, Sister Nivedita of the Ramakrishna Mission, and Japanese scholar and art curator Kakuzo Tensu Okakura, were also instrumental in this movement, creating what they saw as a “pan-Asian” movement. Cultural nationalism and pan-Asianism turned the weaknesses of Asian material progress “into a virtue...for it enabled them to resist the evils of technological progress.”¹³ In a real sense they equalized art with craft, even elevating craft above European notions of fine art.

The second movement of Indian cultural nationalism was made up of political activists, who wanted to use various means to physically vanquish the British, but were still keen to retain Western technologies, culture, and values of scientific progress. The early Bengali revolutionaries and later the movement started by Gandhi are salient examples. It would be fair to say that Sri Aurobindo fits some characteristics of both the cultural national movements and the political revolutionary *svadeshi* (independence) movements. He is, in fact, one of the early architects of the Bengali political *svadeshi* cause.

When Sri Aurobindo penned his essays on “The National Value of Art” in 1909, he had just been released from jail and was in the last part of his revolutionary phase (1906-10).¹⁴ Sri Aurobindo was incarcerated from May 1908-May 1909, accused of participating in the bombing of some female

¹² See Mitter, *Arts and Nationalism in Colonial India 1850-1922: Occidental Orientations*, 279-306 and Debashish Banerji, *The Alternate Nation of Abanindranath Tagore* (London: Sage Publications, 2010).

¹³ Mitter, *Arts and Nationalism in Colonial India 1850-1922: Occidental Orientations*, 244.

¹⁴ See Peter Heehs, *The Lives of Sri Aurobindo*, 101-216.

British nationals who were mistook for British Magistrates. He was acquitted, but not before he had the second of the four spiritual realizations he wrote about in his biography. While in jail, it was through his own effort in practicing the yoga(s) of the *Bhagavad Gītā* and meditating according to what he read in the *Upaniṣads* that led to this realization. The *Upaniṣads*, especially the early ones (800-200 BCE), as Sri Aurobindo understands it, were a record of spiritual realization, written by “true seers,” not just theological philosophers.¹⁵

His first spiritual realization was in 1907 in meditation with his guru, Viṣṇu Baskar Lele. It was an experience of what he called *nirvana*, a merging into the Silent Absolute with no awareness of the personality and no awareness of the world in relationship to that Supreme Self. This was not the result that Sri Aurobindo expected or wanted as he was keen to use spiritual energies to stay in the world to engage in political revolution. Nor was this the one that Lele wanted for him, as Lele was a dualist *bhakta*, or lover of God, who viewed the Divine Beloved as always “other” than the lover. In 1932 Sri Aurobindo recalls, “In three days—really in one—my mind became full of an eternal silence—it is still there.”¹⁶ His own description is worth reading as it relates to the ways he writes about the function of art in his essays we are about to consider.

From that moment, in principle, the mental being in me became a free Intelligence, a universal Mind, not limited to the narrow circle of personal thought as a labourer in a thought factory, but a receiver of knowledge from all the hundred realms of being and free to choose what it willed in this vast sight-empire and thought empire. I mention this only to emphasise that the possibilities of the mental being are not limited and that it can be the free Witness and Master in its own house. It is not to say that everybody can do it in the way I did it and with the same rapidity of the decisive moment (for, of course, the latter fullest developments of this new untrammelled mental power took time, many years) but a progressive freedom and

¹⁵ Though some scholars like Paul Deussen question that these texts are records of mystical experience, the goal of spiritual experience plays a central role in these texts, as Steven Phillips has described. See Paul Deussen, *The Philosophy of the Upanishads*, trans. A.S Geden, 1906 (New York: Dover, 1966). See also Phillips, *The Philosophy of Brahman*, 57-61. The *Upaniṣads* also clearly articulate philosophical ideas and values, not just spiritual experience, even in this early period, as Phillips shows.

¹⁶ Sri Aurobindo, *On Himself* (Pondicherry: SAAP, 2000), 82-3.

mastery of one's mind is perfectly within the possibilities of anyone who has the faith and the will to undertake it.¹⁷

“A progressive freedom and mastery of one's mind” will be the keynote to art's value in his estimation, as we will see below.

His second spiritual experience in jail was a pendulum swing in the opposite direction. Sri Aurobindo encountered the personal God in the form of *Śyāmasundara* (“the Dark and Beautiful One”) or *Kṛṣṇa*, such that Sri Aurobindo experienced the *Avatāra* as fully present in all things and in his own being. The jail and its filthy and ugly condition, the menacing guards, the unfriendly courtroom and all in it were *Kṛṣṇa* to his waking spiritual eye: “...it was Sri Krishna who sat there, it was my Lover and Friend who sat there and smiled. ‘Now do you fear?’ He said, ‘I am in all men and I overrule their actions and their words. My protection is still with you and you shall not fear.’”¹⁸

Vivekananda also played a brief role as guru in Sri Aurobindo's experience in jail. The Swami's voice came to him, and “spoke only on a special and limited but very important field of spiritual experience and it ceased as soon as it had finished saying all that it had to say on that subject.”¹⁹ This “limited field” he later said is the intuitive mind, which exists above the sense mind and intellect.²⁰ This teaching opened Sri Aurobindo's understanding of differing levels of divine life, leading to what he later called the supermind. Especially after his jail experience, Sri Aurobindo writes and speaks about an inner core, an eternal dharma or *sanātana dharma*, that lies at the heart of all religion and any seeking for truth.²¹ He identified Hinduism with this *sanātana dharma*, for a brief

¹⁷ Ibid., 84.

¹⁸ Sri Aurobindo, *Karmayogin*, (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Press, 1997), 7.

¹⁹ Sri Aurobindo, *On Himself* (Pondicherry: SAAP, 1972), 68.

²⁰ See A.B. Purani, *The Life of Sri Aurobindo* (Pondicherry, SAAP, 1978), 209.

²¹ The word *dharma* is notoriously difficult to define. In this context it comes close to what Westerners mean by “religion.” Sri Aurobindo defines *dharma* as “literally that which one lays hold of and which holds things together, the law, the norm, the rule of nature, action and life.” *Essays on the Gita* (Pondicherry: SAAP, 1997), 25.

amount of time in his life (1901-12), to reorient this religion towards this inner core for his contemporaries.²² This meant for him, at this time at least, being a political Hindu, worshipping the land and nation of India as a divine manifestation of the Divine Mother, and working for her growth and glory.

When he was released from jail in May 1909, he found the Indian political situation in ruins. The Moderates and the Extremists of the Indian National Congress were in great conflict, and the British passed many repressive laws and imprisoned other Indian revolutionary leaders—Bal Gangadhar Tilak being one of the most important. Many Bengalis were looking to Sri Aurobindo for guidance and, with his new spiritual experience and vision, he tried to provide a clear force of leadership advocating for the Extremist position, walking a fine line of inspiring a sense of Indian unity and identity without drawing more negative attention to himself and risking imprisonment once again. He decided to begin a fresh “weekly newspaper, in which he would discuss not only ‘national religion’ but also literature, philosophy, art and other subjects.”²³ This became the journal *Karmayogin* (lasting from June 1909-February 1910). It was less vitriolic than his earlier journal, *Bande Mantaram* (lasting from August 1906-May 1908), which got him into trouble with the British officials in 1908. His vision for India in this new journal is that it is destined to be free, and to be free for the material, moral, and spiritual elevation of the entire world. For him, this means a marriage of both practical and spiritual tasks, awakening the *karmayogin* (one who practices *karmayoga*, or the path of selfless service) in all Indians. “The National Value of Art” is a series of essays that seeks to place the value of the arts within this vision of *karmayoga*. The value of art is in its potential to be a new expression of *sanātana dharma* (eternal dharma).

²² Sri Aurobindo’s explicit connection to Hinduism only lasted twelve years of his 78 years. For him, Hinduism was just as provisional as any religion compared to what he said he experienced with Lele and in jail. See Peter Heehs, “Sri Aurobindo and Hinduism,” *AntiMatters* 2 No. 2 (2008): 34-45.

²³ Heehs, *The Lives of Sri Aurobindo*, 186.

II. THE NATIONAL VALUE OF ART

1. Introduction

Sri Aurobindo wrote this set of essays on art after an essay entitled “The Brain of India,” which was written in October-November 1909, and before another set of essays entitled “A System of National Education,” which were written in early January 1910. These sets of essays focus on the important issue of education, responding to British colonization of the Indian mind. Ashis Nandy notes that

Colonialism colonizes minds in addition to bodies and it releases forces within the colonized societies to alter their cultural priorities once and for all. In the process it helps to generalize the concept of the modern West from a geographical and temporary entity to a psychological category. The West is now everywhere, within the West and outside; in the structures and in minds.²⁴

It is out of a pedagogical aim and process for a new Indian identity and way of life that Sri Aurobindo roots the role and nature of the arts. He asks, what is it that a teacher teaches and what are the faculties of cognition that she tries to teach? An understanding of these faculties and pedagogical processes are key to understanding his view of the arts and their ability to aid individual and national growth in freedom, unity, and equality. For him, art participates in educating the human faculties, and when they are fully developed, it can prepare human consciousness for the more difficult spiritual lessons using broader human faculties.

There are, according to Sri Aurobindo, two levels of the human being, broadly conceived as the lower and the higher nature. In these essays, he begins with how to educate the lower nature, specifically the mind or “inner instrument” of the lower nature with an eye to opening it up to the higher nature. This is the great difference that Sri Aurobindo sees between his and the British system of education. The British system educates the lower nature only, and does so in a way that kept it

²⁴ Ashis Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self Under Colonialism* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983), vii.

ignorant of the higher and even ignorant of the faculties that bridge to the higher, except in unusual cases.

Sri Aurobindo employs the view of the human based on his interpretation of *Vedānta*, which divides the human lower nature into three sheaths (*koṣa*), or levels that interpenetrate one another like a gradient of colored garments. The outer and lower form of the human being is a mental-vital-physical gradient of living veils. The inner and higher form is made up of a spiritual gradient of more refined veils mixed with increasingly purer divine force and light. In the outer form is the gross or physical sheath, the *anna*, which is made up of the cumulated learning of prehuman evolution. *Anna* literally means “food.” The expression of all material desire and fear is contained within this level: “To eat or be eaten.” Within this is the vital sheath of energy, or *prāṇa*, which is the “breath” or “breath of life” that organizes matter on the one side and supports inchoate mental activity on the other. Further within this activity is the rudimentary mental sheath, the *manas*, which is the psychological center that bases its knowing on cutting the unity of life into separate and distinct parts based on its reception of the senses’ limited information. The *anna-prāṇa-manas* is cumulatively called the *aparārdha*, the “not highest place or region” of the being. Within this tripartite level, are the spiritual levels of the human person, the *parārdha*, literally, the “highest place or region” of one’s being. In Sri Aurobindo’s system, this hemisphere is the world of *saccidānanda*, the experience of God’s being-consciousness-bliss. The *vijñāna* or supermind links the two regions.

As he sees it, the problem of human growth into a divine life is that the lower hemisphere is knotted up into a kind of mixed confusion as it contacts the higher hemisphere. This knotted condition opposes the possibility of the lower from knowing the higher and the higher from transforming the lower. Many years later, he states it this way:

The knot of the two, the higher and the lower hemisphere, [*parārdha* and the *aparārdha*] is where mind and Supermind meet with a veil between them. The rending of the veil is the condition of the divine life in humanity; for by that rending, by the illumining descent of the higher into the nature of the lower being and the forceful

ascent of the lower being into the nature of the higher, mind can recover its divine light in the all-comprehending Supermind, the soul realise its divine self in the all-possessing all-blissful Ananda, life repossess its divine power in the play of omnipotent Conscious-Force and Matter open to its divine liberty as a form of the divine Existence.²⁵

Loosening the knot and rending the veil is the most forceful and difficult process of life and is in fact life's purpose, according to Sri Aurobindo. His goal is to live a "life divine," here on Earth, not in heaven or in *mokṣa* (which he later defined as "release from existence in the world").²⁶ For him, this goal cannot happen by accommodating the lower hemisphere and its needs, desires, and emotions, but by using them as a preparation for a spiritual processes of transformation. As Sri Aurobindo conceives it, the arts can dissolve the boundaries that define a well-formed lower nature, helping to guide the resulting chaos into a new structure, the divine life of the *parārdha*, silently lived on Earth.

With his view of reincarnation, this process of growth is not possible in one lifetime, but the soul needs to gather energy from all of the forms of creation by *being* all of them.²⁷ For Sri Aurobindo, all growth is developmental and progressive, whether it is material or spiritual growth. The soul, or what he later calls the "psychic being" is what gathers this growth and moves from life to life. The *aparārdha*, or lower self is first formed through the cycles of lifetimes that a soul experiences in all the forms of creation. As he understands it, the reason for biological evolution is to produce the human form, which is a kind of template for limited, sectarian consciousness to become unlimited and universal. In the human form, therefore, enfolded in all it sheaths, are the biological forms of all creation in consciousness-form. Each human being is a complete universe with a goal to perfect its consciousness. This is first initiated through the many lifetimes of human reincarnational learning that build and strengthen the lower self and its power. When the soul has

²⁵ Sri Aurobindo, "The Sevenfold Chord of Being," *The Life Divine*, 278-79.

²⁶ Sri Aurobindo, *The Glossary*, 113.

²⁷ See Appendix I, p. 383.

built up enough energy through these many lifetimes, a new orientation spontaneously occurs where the soul no longer seeks to build separate forms of knowledge, power, and happiness as a separate ego, but naturally seeks to unite all these forms within, (progressively rending the veil between the higher and lower natures) leading to a conscious unity with all creation and with God. He says this eventually culminates in a realization of the human being as God, where the perfection of the divine personality is fully lived in the human form, uniting matter and spirit.

He describes multilayers of the *antahkarana* or “inner instrument” that abide in the lower nature. (See Table 3). The effective teacher, according to Sri Aurobindo, seeks to nourish all of these levels of the student in a developmental manner. The *citta* is the foundation of the inner instrument and comprises “the storehouse of memory.”²⁸ It is passive or potentially remembered memory of past lives and forms. The active memory, which acts upon this “storehouse” by the *manas* and higher faculties, are what Sri Aurobindo argues must be perfected, for they mostly grope at first for information in the *citta* without stable success. This seems comparable to Plato’s notion in the *Phaedo* of growth and learning: one learns by recollection of unconscious knowledge, made conscious through dialogue with a capable teacher.²⁹ Sri Aurobindo writes:

Nothing can be taught to the mind which is not already concealed as potential knowledge in the unfolding soul of the creature. So also all perfection of which the outer man is capable, is only a realising of the eternal perfection of the Spirit within him. We know the Divine and become the Divine, because we are That already in

²⁸ “The Powers of the Mind,” *Early Cultural Writings* (Pondicherry: SAAP, 2003), 386. From this point forward, I will place the page number in parenthesis after each quotation.

²⁹ See *Phaedo* 73-76. See also *Meno* 82b-85b for an illustration of this way of learning. Like Sri Aurobindo, there seems to be in Plato a comparable reliance on the understanding of reincarnation for this knowledge that is not gained but really *regained* from past lives and ultimately from the soul’s being one with the divine who is omniscient. For instance, Socrates suggests to Meno, in trying to find a definition of virtue: “Thus the soul, since it is immortal and has been born many times, and has seen all things both here and in the other world, has learned everything that is. So we need not be surprised if it can recall the knowledge of virtue or anything else which, as we see it once possessed. All nature is akin, and the soul has learned everything, so that when a man has recalled a single piece of knowledge—*learned* it, in ordinary language—there is no reason why he should not find out all the rest, if he keeps a stout heart and does not grow weary of the search, for seeking and learning are in fact nothing but recollection.” *Meno* 81d, Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns, eds. “Meno,” in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, trans. W. K. C. Guthrie (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 364.

Table 3.

My understanding of Sri Aurobindo's human psychology according to *The Glossary of the Record of Yoga*.

9. <i>Brahman</i>	<i>God's experience of saccidānanda</i>	The <i>parārdha</i> (the higher region of the self)
8. <i>Vijñāna</i> (supermind)		The graded LINK between the higher and the lower
7. <i>Jñāna</i> (genius)		
6. <i>Vijñānabuddhi</i> (intuitive mind)		
5. <i>Buddhi</i> (reasoning mind) = a. The Right Hand ("Master") b. The Left Hand ("Servant")	The "inner instrument" or <i>antahkaraṇa</i>	The <i>aparārdha</i> (the lower region of the self)
4. <i>Manas</i> (sense mind)		
3. <i>Prāṇa</i> (life)		
2. <i>Anna</i> (matter)		
1. <i>Citta</i> (the storehouse of memory)		

our secret nature. All teaching is a revealing, all becoming is an unfolding. Self-attainment is the secret; self knowledge and an increasing consciousness are the means and the process.³⁰

Like a midwife, the teacher engages the student in order to birth ideas or memories from the "storehouse" or "womb" of memory from the student, helping the student discover what she already knew, but was yet not consciousness. The pedagogical process is one of raising these ideas and memories from the depths of the waters of unconscious, into the light of the consciousness, above the waterline, through the increasingly stronger faculties of knowledge that can stabilize the active memory. One could say, I think, that Sri Aurobindo's idea of spiritual perfection—a much

³⁰ Sri Aurobindo, *Synthesis of Yoga*, (Pondicherry: SAAP, 1999), 54.

later process—would be achieved when the whole of the *citta* moved above the waterline.

Above the unformed *citta*, is the *manas*, what he calls the “sixth sense” that gathers up all the other five senses into thought-sensations and mental impressions. It is a very limited mental activity that is bound by the senses of the body, the desires, and emotions of the vital. Training the senses to see, hear, touch, smell, and taste with mature perception and alignment with the *manas* is the foundation of any learning for Sri Aurobindo. He writes: “It is therefore the first business of the educationist to develop in the child the right use of the six senses, to see that they are not stunted or injured by disuse, but trained by the child himself under the teacher’s direction to that perfect accuracy and keen subtle sensitiveness of which they are capable (386-87).”

The *buddhi*, which is the next layer, is comprised of two parts, “the right and left hand.” His description of the *buddhi* has a lot in common with what brain scientists know about the operations of the right and left hemispheres of the cerebrum.³¹ Iain McGilchrist notes that the right side of the brain is a source for broad and vigilant knowing that is embodied and open, that seeks to make connections that make a living picture of reality. The left side, on the other hand, is focused and narrow, dividing reality into parts to catch and capture details in a way that makes a mechanical view of reality. The left he calls a rational side and the right is the intuitive side. Sri Aurobindo describes the *buddhi* in a similar vein, that the right-hand functions of the *buddhi* are contemplative, creative, and imaginative, and are fostered by broad observation. The left-hand functions of the *buddhi* are critical, reasoning, and discriminative and are fostered by scientific and manual training.

For both Sri Aurobindo and McGilchrist, the right side is naturally the master of the left if the brain would be used for purposes of mature growth. In fact, McGilchrist claims that if the left

³¹ See Iain McGilchrist, *The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World* (Cambridge: Yale University Press, 2009). For a video of McGilchrist discussing these topics see: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SbUHxC4wiWk> and <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dFs9WO2B8uI> which used animation to help explain his theories; accessed March 3, 2016. I am grateful to Dr. Charles Jones for this reference.

side of the brain leads the right, potential disaster could follow. The left hemisphere fulfills its role only when it serves the right; when the critical and analytic functions of the left are subordinated to the synthetic, creative, and comprehensive directives of the right hemisphere. This is analogous to Sri Aurobindo's view of the *buddhi*. For him, when this kind of harmonious mental activity is achieved, when the left hand serves the right hand of the *buddhi*, the intellect proper is born, the true instrument of thought. It is when the left, the critical and analytic part tries to direct the right that thought diminishes into a slavery of the lower nature with its forceful but small will-to-power. Working in the proper way, "[b]oth [hands] are essential to the completeness of the human reason. These important functions of the machine have all to be raised to their highest and finest working-power, if the education of the child is not to be imperfect and one-sided (387)."

When the *buddhi* becomes enlightened from above, Sri Aurobindo calls it the *vijñānabuddhi*, which he defines as

the intuitive mind, intermediate between intellectual reason (*mānasa buddhi*) and pure *vijñāna*, a faculty consisting of *vijñāna* "working in mind under the conditions and in the forms of mind," which "by its intuitions, its inspirations, its swift revelatory vision, its luminous insight and discrimination can do the work of the reason with a higher power, a swifter action, a greater and spontaneous certitude."³²

Before we touch on the *vijñāna*, it is helpful to understand that Sri Aurobindo notes another faculty, the *jñāna*. In his essay "The Powers of the Mind," he described *jñāna* as "genius." He also called this the "power of direct and divine knowledge...independent of the intellect/senses" in the diary of his own experience of growth in yoga.³³ Genius is comprised of "sovereign *discernment*, *intuitive perception* of truth, plenary *inspiration* of speech, direct vision of knowledge to an extent often amounting to *revelation*, making a man a prophet of truth" (387-88, my emphasis). Above *jñāna* is the *vijñāna* proper, which may be what he meant later by "supermind," though he never makes this

³² *The Glossary*, 206.

³³ *Ibid.*, 83.

explicit (See Table 3 above).³⁴ Having these layers in mind going forward will be very helpful in understanding these essays.

2. “The National Value of Art,” Part I

In Sri Aurobindo’s essay “The National Value of Art” Part I, he locates art’s value, like the value of all human endeavor, at a pivot between material and spiritual goals, an understanding from which he never really departs in all his later writings. His notion of art includes decorative craft objects, traditional visual art, architecture, literature, dance, drama, music, and poetry. For him, the arts have the capacity to pull consciousness up through the lessons of material life, and also the ability to inspire consciousness to embrace the lessons of the spiritual life. They can also be coopted for other purposes. As Sri Aurobindo reads his contemporary context—the Western colonial context that gives a “scientific” value to art—pulling the arts down to the material level. This expresses his idea that when the “left hand” of the *buddhi* usurps the right, it creates a confused and diminished maturity in the intelligence. Therefore, in this twisted state, the Western view emphasizes the “usefulness” of art for material purposes over the potentials of beauty in art for more human and spiritual purposes.

As Sri Aurobindo understands it, the ancient institution of slavery, the medieval feudal

³⁴ This understanding of *vijñāna* contrasts the Buddhist definition of “consciousness or thought faculty,” or the definition in both Sanskrit Epics of “worldly or profane knowledge.” Sri Aurobindo’s meaning may be related to the Vedic usage but to a much higher degree: “the act of distinguishing or discerning, understanding, comprehending, recognizing, intelligence, knowledge.” See *MMW*, s.v. “*vijñāna*.” The prefix *vi* can be used with verbs or nouns to give a sense of division or it can be used to give a sense of intensity. Sri Aurobindo does the latter with the word *jñāna*. He defined the *vijñāna* as “‘the large embracing consciousness . . . which takes into itself all truth and idea and object of knowledge and sees them at once in their essence, totality and parts or aspects,’ . . . a mode of awareness that is ‘the original, spontaneous, true and complete view’ of existence and ‘of which mind has only a shadow in the highest operations of the comprehensive intellect’; the faculty or plane of consciousness above *buddhi* or intellect, also called **ideality, gnosia** . . . the psychological principle or degree of consciousness that is the basis of *maharloka*, the ‘World of the Vastness’ that links the worlds of the transcendent existence, consciousness and bliss of *saccidānanda* to the lower *triloka* of mind, life and matter, being itself usually considered the lowest plane of the *parārdha* or higher hemisphere of existence. *Vijñāna* is ‘the knowledge of the One and the Many, by which the Many are seen in the terms of the One, in the infinite unifying Truth, Right, Vast [*satyam ṛtam bṛhat*] of the divine existence.’” *The Glossary*. Later in his thought the “Overmind” is the word he uses to describe the plane of knowing that divides the upper from the lower hemispheres.

system, and the modern version of industrial labor maintains this context of material mastery with the misuse of art and beauty. The value of beauty over use in this context is impossible, he seems to imply. Therefore, the arts are reduced to a luxury and inevitably associated with the powerful and wealthy, useful for the amplification of personal identities and influence. Beauty therefore, is reserved for the rich and out of reach of the poor. In his context, however, Sri Aurobindo notes that people are beginning to demand the rights and quality of life that had historically been reserved for the higher classes. He writes, “Political, social and economic liberty and equality, two things difficult to harmonise, must now be conceded to all men and harmonised as well as the present development of humanity will allow (435).”

How then can the poor and marginalized fulfill this aspiration for political and social liberty and equality? It requires, in his view, a development of the mind in a more comprehensive appreciation of beauty. To see the value of beauty, he thinks that human beings need to learn to master and live as both individuals and in community from a deeper center of knowing than the *manas* (sense thought). The Hindu philosophies of yoga and *Sāṃkhya* define the *manas* as the seat of emotions, the source of like and dislike, which processes data from the senses strengthening one's preferences.³⁵ It can be thought of as the emotional “heart” as opposed to the spiritual heart, the region of libidinal psychological processes. It is a faculty, in its lowest form that belongs to some higher animals no less than to humans and it is, according to Sri Aurobindo, the best that humanity has been able to perfect *en masse*. “The majority of mankind do not think, they have only thought-sensations; a large minority think confusedly, mixing up desires, predilections, passions, prejudgments, old associations and prejudices with pure and disinterested thought (436).” In the Yogi's view, clarity of thought, stable insight, and powerful intellectual ability are impossible to

³⁵ See *MMW*, s.v. “*manas*”: “the faculty or instrument through which thoughts enter or by which objects of sense affect the soul; in this sense *manas* is always regarded as distinct from *atman* and *purusha*, ‘spirit or soul’ and belonging only to the body, like which it is - except in the *Nyaya* [Hindu philosophy of logic] - considered perishable.”

maintain in any stable way in a person dominated by *manas* because it is motivated by the desires and needs of the physical and vital levels.

Sri Aurobindo writes that “the *buddhi*, or thought proper, which, when perfected, is independent of the desires, the claims of the body and the interference of the emotions. But only a minority of men have developed this organ, much less perfected it (435).” Those who possess a purified intellect are unique and mature human beings, called yogins in India or, as Sri Aurobindo calls them, “true” “aristocrats”—the “best rulers” (*aristos* + *kratia*) of themselves and others. In his view, they provide the promise of genuinely humane social structures and cultural forms that seek, not the exploitation of the many by the leading few, but the fulfillment of all according to their natures and temperament. It is under the leadership of these kinds of “aristocrats” that the arts can flourish and perform their roles in expressing beauty and educating the lower mind and opening it up to the higher self for all people.

3. Part II

In Part II, Sri Aurobindo further explores the two sides of the *buddhi*—the “left hand” that is critical, rational, and discriminative, and the “right hand,” which is creative, contemplative, and imaginative—to flesh out the misuse and devaluing of art in his time. For him, both activities of the *buddhi* are needed for human flourishing—to “broaden the base of human culture or enlarge the bounds of science (438).” He observes that because those in higher classes are typically motivated by the *manas*, art and poetry are regarded as mere physical luxuries, useful for the amplification of lower satisfactions. However, Sri Aurobindo notes that art was not always viewed this way. There were times in the past, he claims, when art was used to purify the *manas* and elevate it into the *buddhi*, a kind of *bildungsroman* of the mind. Art had, in past epochs, lifted humanity “up through the heart and imagination to the state of the intellectual man,” from his predominately animal nature to an

inchoate human nature (439).

Sri Aurobindo illustrates this claim, considering both Tantric and classic Greek aesthetics. He notes that in these systems, there is firstly, art for the sake of aesthetics, secondly, art for the sake of moral education, and finally art for the sake of (ascendant) spirituality. In his view, one cannot skip to the spiritual use without mastering the first two uses. The highest spiritual use of art is reached only after a purification of the *citta*, the “basic consciousness” or “storehouse of memory,” is realized in the lower two uses of art. This purification is what he thinks Aristotle means by *katharsis*, which was the function of tragic dramas. Sri Aurobindo calls *katharsis* “the ancient Greek Tantrics,” which involves a “purification of the *citta* or mass of established ideas, feelings and actional habits in a man either by *samyama*, rejection, or *bhoga*, satisfaction, or by both (439).”

In describing Aristotle’s use of *katharsis*, J. A. Oesterle writes, “By artistic tension and release, the emotions receive an orderly subjection to reason as shaped by artistic form. Nevertheless, catharsis remains basically instrumental in art; it is ordered to the proper end of art—*contemplation* and the ensuing delight we find in such contemplation.”³⁶ Aristotle’s understanding is one of aesthetic drama become ascetic ritual with an ascendant spiritual goal of achieving contemplation; a contemplation unhindered by unconscious or conscious emotional disturbances. This Greek understanding is comparable to a yoga that controls the lower nature by a rejection (*samyama*) of the working of one’s unmastered *citta*, and/or a Tantric practice that sublimates the lower nature by ritually satisfying (*bhoga*) the desire nature, participating vicariously in the lower

³⁶ J. A. Oesterle, “Poetics (Aristotelian),” *New Catholic Encyclopedia* 11 (2003): 433.

thoughts, feeling, and behavior of a character in a drama.³⁷

Sri Aurobindo claims that the Aristotelian notion of *katharsis* is the Tantric process of *cittaśuddhi*, or purification (*śuddhi*) of the *citta*. *Cittaśuddhi* is an important concept in the thought of Sri Aurobindo. It is the act of progressively transforming the passive memory of the *citta*, which is a subconscious and even unconscious state of unresolved, unmastered, and impure feelings, into an active memory, which is a more conscious and purged state. It has to do with untying the knotted condition of the lower self as a preparation for the rending of the veil between the the lower self and the True Self. Art for the sake of aesthetics and morality are crucial means for this purification, this loosening of the knotted thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that twist human experience into falsehood and ignorance. Along the way, as this purgation is increasingly achieved, there is a potential for developing the higher faculties of knowing. The *buddhi* is, therefore, developed in this process and exercised by the audience during the performance of a tragedy, for example. Since it is an unmastered part of the self, the safety of the artistic form allows one to experience experiments in mastery in a safe environment of emotional experience and consequence where failure is allowed and even expected.

This human developmental process is not limited to drama, of course, as Aristotle mentions music in his *Poetics*. Sri Aurobindo also notices the application of *katharsis/cittaśuddhi* in all the arts. He writes, “Aristotle was speaking of the purification of feelings, passions and emotions in the heart through imaginative treatment in poetry but the truth the idea contained is of much wider application and constitutes the justification of the aesthetic side of art. It purifies by beauty

³⁷ This is related to Patañjali’s definition of yoga in the *Yogasūtras* 1.2 is योगश्चित्तवृत्तिनिरोधः, *Yogaś cittaṃvṛtti nirodhaḥ*, “The undeveloped state of the *citta* is matured by yoga.” I translate this in terms of growth as I think this is what is meant by *vṛtti*, which refers to the “natural,” undeveloped, or unconscious “basic” state of the *citta*. The words “matured” or “developed,” however, carry a gloss of *nirodha* that seems closer to what Sri Aurobindo may have meant in his reflections about how art can be a yogic development of the *citta*. The action of *nirodha* normally has a pejorative connotation: meaning “suppression” or “imprisoned,” but also “checked,” or “restrained.” Therefore, it would become something more mechanical, something I do not think Patañjali intended: “Yoga suppresses or imprisons the ‘natural state’ or ‘behavior’ of the *citta*.” In this light, we might also translate Patañjali’s *sūtra* as “Yogic art increasingly brings the unconscious state of the *citta* into fuller awareness of itself.”

(439-40).” In all the arts, this is a paradoxical association of beauty with the tragic, the painful, and the ugly. In Sri Aurobindo’s understanding, beauty is an attribute of *ānanda*, or bliss, which is the Vedāntic heart of his aesthetic philosophy.

For who could live or breathe
if there were not this delight [*ānanda*] of existence
as the ether in which we dwell?

From Delight all these beings are born,
by Delight they exist and grow,
to Delight they return.³⁸

Sri Aurobindo associates beauty, then, with tragedy in so far as beauty can purify and transform it into delight. Since beauty comes from bliss or *ānanda*, in his view, it is the means of awakening the will to let go of past addiction and its pleasures, which is characterized by impurities of the heart, and to try an enjoyment of purer, broader pleasures that increasingly approach the experience of *ānanda*. At its highest, *ānanda* leads one from *avidyā*, from a knowledge of the many that is really “not-knowledge” (*a-vidyā*), to *vidyā*, knowledge of the One, the silent unity of the noisy many, where delight in beauty is felt at the heart of both the ugly and the pretty, the pain and pleasure, the bitter and sweet of life.

In Sri Aurobindo’s notion of art for the sake of aesthetics—art is made for the sake of pleasing the senses—*ānanda* first tutors the aesthetic sense, culturing the preferences in thought, feeling, and behavior for what is kind over what is brutal, by presenting these qualities as more attractive. He writes, “[the aesthetic sense’s] great use was to discipline the savage animal instincts of the body, the vital instincts and the lower feelings in the heart. Its disadvantage to progress is that it tends to trammel the play both of the higher feelings of the heart and the workings of originality in thought (440-41).” He seems to say that this disadvantage attains because the *katharsis/cittaśuddhi* of this level of art’s function is merely topical and therefore, unstable. Art for the sake of aesthetics

³⁸ *Taittirya Upaniṣad* II. 7; III. 6, as quoted by Sri Aurobindo in *The Life Divine* (Pondicherry: SAAP, 2006) 98.

gives one's mental activity a good polish, so that on the outside, the *manas* may seem mature and whole. It seems like it has become the *buddhi*. However, it has only learned to project this maturity in ways that are satisfying and proper to others, but is actually still divided against itself. This self-deception leads to academicism, what he says is “an attachment to form, to exterior uniformity, to precedent, to dead authority (441).”

Sri Aurobindo therefore cautions that the aesthetic use of art is merely a provisional one that must give way to art that serves higher principles of life. He writes: “The art of life must be understood in more magnificent terms and must subordinate its more formal elements to the service of the master civilisers, Love and Thought (441).” Here we encounter Sri Aurobindo's notion of art for the sake of morality.

4. Part III

Part III addresses art's ability to aid human consciousness and the participation of love in this process. For the Yogi, not only does art contribute to the formation of virtuous citizens through aesthetic beauty, *viz.*, it tutors the outer expression of refined thought, feeling, and action, but it educates the inner moral sense as well. Sri Aurobindo observes that modern Europeans and Indians “do not ordinarily recognise how largely [their] sense of virtue is a sense of the beautiful in conduct and [their] sense of sin a sense of ugliness and deformity in conduct (442).” He points out that for the British, this ethic is an inheritance of ancient Greek thought, which classifies ethical behavior according to aesthetic qualities of beauty, *kalon*.³⁹ However, he argues that Greek culture “never got beyond the aesthetic stage of morality (443).” This ethic is a collective expression of an unstable morality, attached to outer forms of conventional social virtue that seem beautiful to others but do not fully originate from the inner will and intelligence—the *buddhi*. It is a morality that behaves from

³⁹ Note the notion of “call” or vocation in *kalon*, in beauty. It might be said that beauty calls one to respond with the entire life, to live it differently once one has had a personal and deep taste of its reality.

an exterior motive instead of an interior one.

For Sri Aurobindo, ancient Greek theory and ethical practice of beauty are deficient, not only in this kind of outer attachment to form, but a deficiency also in love. For him, such limitations impoverish a vision of beauty by excluding the divine principles of love and delight, which are also necessary for human growth. The ideal of fullness or perfection is held in the trinity of beauty, love, and delight, and this trinity is personified in the form of the *Avatāra*. Here we see the influence of his jail-encounter with the personal God as *Kṛṣṇa*, which he experienced only months before writing these articles. He writes: “God as beauty, Srikrishna in Brindavan, Shyamasundara, is not only Beauty, He is also Love, and without perfect love there cannot be perfect beauty, and without perfect beauty there cannot be perfect delight (443).” In an earlier speech, reproduced in the journal *Karmayogin*, we have more of a comprehensive view of his understanding of the *Avatāra* and his role for the future of India and the world.

When the Avatar comes, we like to believe that he will be not only the religious guide, but the political leader, the great educationist, the regenerator of society, the captain of cooperative industry, with the soul of the poet, scholar and artist. He will be in short the summary and grand type of the future Indian nation which is rising to reshape and lead the world.⁴⁰

Nothing that is human is left behind in this view, nothing that is “Indian” and maybe nothing that is “European,” it would seem, since the *Avatāra* embodies for Sri Aurobindo the fullness that is humanly possible at a given moment in time. The God-Man is not just a spiritual example but a material one.

Either knowingly or unknowingly, Sri Aurobindo’s thoughts about the *Avatāra* seem to implicate his Western colonizers for forgetting their own Christian tradition of beauty, beauty that is grounded in the form, *forma* of the Christ in medieval theology.⁴¹ In the religious language of his

⁴⁰ Sri Aurobindo, “The Past and the Future,” *Karmayogin* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Press, 1997), 249.

⁴¹ *Forma* is also Latin for “beauty,” in the sense of holding a fine or lovely shape. *English-Latin Dictionary*, ed. William Smith and Theophilus Hall (New York: American Book Company, 1871), 71.

own Indian context, the *Avatāra Kṛṣṇa*, the God-Man, holds the ideal of moral behavior that is worthy of human motivation because he is supremely beautiful, but also comes close to humans because he is unbounded love. His radiance, we could say, like that of Jesus, pulls human consciousness out of conventionality because he gives the *manas* motive enough to detach from its senses, desires, and emotions, and to attach to the ever-fresh delight, beauty, and love he embodies and expresses. The descent of the God-Man, the vision of his beauty and the deep feelings of delight awaken the progressive transformation of an animal-man into a divine man in his lovers.⁴²

Sri Aurobindo notes that the imperfection of ancient Greek notions of beauty in morality became a cause for revolt in European ethics, leading to another kind of attachment, to “an unlovely asceticism” motivated by a Christian neo-platonic ideal of the Good, *bonum/agathon*. By revolt he means the Protestant Reformation, its aftermath, and legacy. He mentions that the Puritan ideal of asceticism is this kind of revolt from the ancient Greek notion of art for the sake of aesthetic formalism. As he understands it, Europe’s sense of ethics is a struggle to resolve this tension between a Greek notion of beauty and a Protestant notion of the good. At their extremes, they exclude each other. However, he thinks this is a problem. Beauty without goodness is not spiritually beautiful, and goodness without beauty is not spiritually good. For him, the “object of existence is

⁴² Sri Aurobindo’s view about the role of the *Avatāra* is later developed in 1916-18 with “The Possibility and Purpose of Avatarhood” and “The Process of Avatarhood,” in *Essays on the Gita* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Press, 2003) 145-67. “[The *Avatāra*] is the manifestation from above of that which we have to develop from below; it is the descent of God into that divine birth of the human being into which we mortal creatures must climb; it is the attracting divine example given by God to man in the very type and form and perfected model of our human existence,” *Essays on the Gita*, 157. In about the same time period, sometime between 1914-21, Sri Aurobindo wrote: “The Messiah or Avatar is nothing but this, the divine Seer-Will descending upon the human consciousness to reveal to it the divine meaning behind our half-blind action and to give along with the vision the exalted will that is faithful and performs and the ideal force that executes according to the vision.” *Essays in Philosophy and Yoga* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Press, 1998), 118.

Though Sri Aurobindo was not familiar with Christian theology, his view echoes Maximus the Confessor defense of icons based on the beauty of the Christ: “O mystery, more mysterious than all the rest: God himself, out of love, became man . . . without any change in him, he took on the weakness of our human nature, in order to bring salvation to man, and to give himself to us men as ideal image [*hypostasis*] of virtue and as a living icon of love and good will toward God and neighbor, an icon that has the power to elicit in us the dutiful response.” As quoted by Christoph Schönborn, *God’s Human Face: The Christ-Icon*, trans. Luthar Krauth (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994), 129.

not the practice of virtue for its own sake but *ānanda*, delight, and progress consists not in rejecting beauty and delight, but in rising from the lower to the higher, the less complete to the more complete beauty and delight (444).” For him, the *Avatāra*, who is the source from above awakens the force of life and growth from below, reconciling ancient Greek notions of beauty and post-Reformation Christian goodness, Greek aesthetic morality and unlovely asceticism of the Puritan. Art makes up for the deficiencies of these two extremes when it finds its grounding again in the God-Man. In this way art can purify the *manas*, awaken the *buddhi*, and then develop deeper spiritual faculties. For Sri Aurobindo, this is the foundation of a nation lead by genuinely noble aristocrats.

5. Part IV

Part IV is a brief essay that compares poetry, visual art, and music—what are sometimes called “the Sister Arts”—in their differing abilities to civilize members of a nation by purifying the emotions in diverse ways.⁴³ This comparison is reminiscent of G. E. Lessing’s essay, *Laocoön*, which makes provocative distinctions between visual art and poetry.⁴⁴ For Lessing, depicting a painful emotion in visual art risks an expression of physical ugliness that potentially offends his ideal of beauty grounded in mimesis. Since visual art is more vivid than poetry, Lessing argues, it should be more restrained in its expression of suffering. Poetry, on the other hand, can capture a more rounded expression of pain and suffering without fear of giving offense since words dilute the overall effect through narrative descriptions that, we might say, “spread” the ugliness out in time, keeping it within the putative refined vision of the imagination, not the cruder vision of the eyes.

Lessing chooses the theme of Laocoön, the Trojan priest in Virgil’s *Aeneid*, to explore this

⁴³ This term has a long history. See Jean H. Hagstrum, *The Sister Arts: The Tradition of Literary Pictorialism and English Poetry from Dryden to Gray* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975).

⁴⁴ See Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Laocoön: An Essay upon the Limits of Painting and Poetry*, trans. Ellen Frothingham (1766) (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1877).

comparison of visual art and poetry, since this theme of literature was also made into a famous ancient Roman marble sculpture. According to the poem, Laocoön and his two sons are attacked and killed by serpents, which Apollo sent to punish the priest for warning the Trojans of a Greek sneak attack—a wooden horse filled with soldiers. Virgil vividly describes Laocoön roaring like a “wounded bull” as the serpents mortally strike him. The ancient Roman sculptor carved Laocoön into a kind of silent struggle against his death with a stoic sigh so that his face holds a kind of emotional restraint (See Figure 1.1). For Lessing, the ancient sculptor

was striving to attain the greatest beauty under the given conditions of bodily pain. Pain, in its disfiguring extreme, was not compatible with beauty, and must therefore be softened. Screams must be reduced to sighs, not because screams would betray weakness, but because they would deform the countenance to a repulsive degree. Imagine Laocoön’s mouth open, and judge. Let him scream and see. It was before, a figure to inspire compassion in its beauty and suffering. Now it is ugly, abhorrent, and we gladly avert our eyes from a painful spectacle, destitute of the beauty which alone could turn our pain into the sweet feeling of pity for the suffering object.⁴⁵

Seen with the eyes of the eighteenth-century *manas* that is seeking for greater maturity in the *buddhi*, such brazen themes of suffering and death are revolting and incompatible with beauty. For Sri Aurobindo, however, art does not need to be constrained by the norm of physical mimesis of something stimulating to the eye, since beauty for him is hidden within both pain and pleasure, the ugly and the pretty. In his aesthetics, and specifically in his understanding of art for the sake of morality tutored by the *buddhi*, one can imagine Laocoön screaming in pain, mouth open, and yet inspiring compassion not aversion. Would it be possible then, to create a truly horrific scene of death and suffering that also expresses a delight and beauty that silently holds this pain and ugliness in a wider embrace?⁴⁶ I think this is the standard to which the Yogi points, and what distinguishes his view from Lessing. I think he might view Lessing’s Enlightenment notion of beauty as a socially

⁴⁵ Ibid., 13.

⁴⁶ Images of crucifixions come to mind. Matthias Grünewald’s Isemheim altarpiece (1512-1516) is an important example that would have offended Lessing’s sensibility of beauty but affirmed Sri Aurobindo’s.



Figure 1.1: Hagesander, Polydorus and Athenadorus, *Laocoön*, 1st century BCE, Vatican Museums. Artstor.

constructed view of what is pleasing to the *manas* and not to the higher centers of knowing.

However, like Lessing, Sri Aurobindo notes that visual art functions in a limited moment of time, capturing form in space, while poetry captures narrative in time. Therefore, each creative form aids the purification of the heart, the *cittaśuddhi*, in different ways. He claims that poetry “*raises* the emotions and gives each its separate delight,” while visual art “*stills* the emotions and teaches them the delight of a restrained and limited satisfaction;” and music “*deepens* the emotions and harmonizes them with each other (447-48, my emphasis).” There is no implicit hierarchy in these different methods of catharsis, it seems to me. Choosing when to “raise,” “still,” or “deepen” emotion would seem to depend on the individual’s character and specific needs. Sri Aurobindo’s goal is an expanded experience of being human and *all* the arts play a role in the heart’s expansion. He writes,

Between them, music, art, and poetry are a perfect education for the soul; they make

and keep its movements purified, self-controlled, deep and harmonious. These, therefore, are agents which cannot profitably be neglected by humanity on its onward march or degraded to the mere satisfaction of sensuous pleasure which will disintegrate rather than build the character. They are, when properly used, great educating, edifying and civilizing forces (448).

One could say that in Sri Aurobindo's view, poetry works by way of the Tantric notion of *bhoga*, "satisfaction," giving the hearer a way into a particular movement of an emotion in time, feeling it, exploring it from beginning, middle, and end. The poem can elevate the emotion in its entirety so that the consciousness can take delight in tasting (*rasa*) its many-sided dimensions. Visual art, by a kind of *samyama* or "renunciation," captures a form that is just a moment of an emotion's dynamism, not the whole of its life. The visual art form allows the viewer to meditate in an intense way on one instant, feeling "the delight of a restricted and limited satisfaction." Sri Aurobindo admits that sometimes poetry and visual art use the same means of dealing with the emotions, but visual art "is fixed, still, it expresses only a given moment, a given point in space and cannot move freely through time and region (447)." Since music "deepens the emotions" in his view, it seems that it could be viewed as a combination of renunciation that prepares the consciousness to experience deeper satisfaction or *bhoga*. I can see that music can inspire one to let go of a lower feeling, to fall into a deeper more satisfying one that is a harmonization of many competing emotions. In Sri Aurobindo's view, however, all the arts help to purify the emotions by helping to keep consciousness detached from them, even as they are fully involved.

In relationship to this exploration in the life of emotion and the arts, Sri Aurobindo briefly addresses traditional Indian aesthetics, which is founded on the notion of *rasa*, the essence or "taste" of things in experience. He mentions *rasa* in the previous essay as well, saying "Our life is largely made up of the eight *rasas* (444)." In this fourth essay he writes that purification of the heart through poetry and the arts happens through "the detached and disinterested enjoyment of the eight

rasas or forms of emotional aestheticism which make up life, unalloyed by the disturbance of the lower self-regarding passions (447).”

Rasa has a long history in Indian aesthetics, which is textually traced back to the *Nāṭya Śāstra* (“the science of dance”), attributed to Bharata (dates vary from 200 BCE-200 CE) and later amplified by the commentaries of Abhinavagupta (950-1020).⁴⁷ In some Hindu systems, art has a prescribed function: it is a means to position a person to begin a spiritual path. The spiritual path ends in the achievement of *mokṣa*, liberation from the world of forms on the Earth and the cycle of rebirth in those forms. Awakening the tastes of aesthetic pleasure (*rasa*) in the lower senses in a disinterested way is a bridge that connects one’s sleeping consciousness to the inner spiritual senses that are built to feel waking delight in the higher realms of divinity.

How does one make this great movement from attached desire to a detached contact? Sri Aurobindo does not say here. He merely holds out the ideal, but later writes in the *Essays on the Gītā* that the method can be found in the teachings of *Kṛṣṇa*:

It is not an external asceticism, the physical renunciation of the objects of sense that I am teaching, suggests Krishna immediately to avoid a misunderstanding which is likely at once to arise. Not the renunciation of the Sankhyas or the austerities of the rigid ascetic with his fasts, his maceration of the body, his attempt to abstain even from food; that is not the self-discipline or the abstinence which I mean, for I speak of an inner withdrawal, a renunciation of desire.⁴⁸

For Sri Aurobindo, an exterior kind of *śamya* leads to an “unlovely asceticism,” like the iconoclastic Christian reformers mentioned above. He seems to say that an outer renunciation is easy

⁴⁷ See *MMW*, s.v. “*rasa*.” “(in rhet.) the taste or character of a work, the feeling or sentiment prevailing in it (from 8 to 10 *rasas* are generally enumerated, *viṣṇu*, *śṛṅgāra*, love; *vīra*, heroism; *bibhatsa*, disgust; *raudra*, anger or fury; *bhāṣya*, mirth; *bhayaṇaka*, terror; *karma*, pity; *adbhuta*, wonder; *śānta*, tranquility or contentment; *vātsalya*, paternal fondness; the last or last two are sometimes omitted; cf. under *bhava*).” Sri Aurobindo defines *rasa*: “Sap or essence of a thing and its taste; the delight in things.” *Dictionary of Sri Aurobindo’s Yoga*, M.P. Pandit, ed. (Twin Lakes, WI: Lotus Light Publications, 1992), 212. Also see I. A. Gupteshwar, *I.A. Richards and Indian Theory of Rasa* (New Delhi: Sarup and Sons, 1994), 1-40 and Ananda Coomarswamy, *The Dance of Śiva: Essays on Indian Art and Culture* (New York: Dover Publications, 1985), 30-45; and Michele Voss Roberts, *Tastes of the Divine: Hindu and Christian Theologies of Emotion* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014).

⁴⁸ *Essays on the Gītā*, 99.

enough to accomplish with hammer or fire, but the *inner* withdrawal of attachment to the “delight in things” would be the real difficulty. The outer renunciation tragically “retains the pleasure of the sense in the object, the *rasa*, the liking and disliking,—for *rasa* has two sides; the soul must, on the contrary, be capable of enduring the physical contact without suffering inwardly this sensuous reaction.”⁴⁹ The more difficult goal, he argues, is to root out of the heart the desire for the *rasa* and/or the fear of not obtaining it. Dissolution of the object cannot achieve this goal, nor even the cessation of using the object, but the *nirṛtti* or stilling the *mānasa buddhi* itself.

But how is this desireless contact with objects, this unsensuous use of the senses possible? It is possible, *param dṛṣṭvā*, by the vision of the supreme,—*param*, the Soul, the Puruṣa,—and by living in the Yoga, in union or oneness of the whole subjective being with that, through the Yoga of the intelligence; for the one Soul is calm, satisfied in its own delight, and that delight free from duality can take, once we see this supreme thing in us and fix the mind and will on that, the place of the sensuous object-ridden pleasures and repulsions of the mind. This is the true way of liberation.⁵⁰

Sri Aurobindo’s interpretation of the *Bhagavad Gītā* is that a higher desire roots out a lower one. In this interpretation, taking delight in the “vision of the Supreme” within one’s own being naturally replaces and enlarges the delight that the *manas* takes in its vision of objects. This is a substitution of desires (of the desires in *rasa* for the desire of *param dṛṣṭvā*), but also of faculties. It is an exchange of liking or disliking finite things in the world for an enjoyment of the *Puruṣa* or “Soul” that dwells in all finite things, likable or not. Secondly, it is also a progressive conversion of the *manas* into the *buddhi*, then into the *vijñānabuddhi*, and deeper still into faculties with more direct seeing of the divine. Such transformation of vision and objects through art is the subject of his next two essays.

6. Part V

In this fifth essay, Sri Aurobindo explores what he means by art for the sake of spiritual

⁴⁹ Ibid., 99-100.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 100.

growth. First he refines his notion of art for the sake of morality, which raises

images in the mind which it has to understand not by analysis, but by self-identification with other minds; it is a powerful stimulator of sympathetic insight. Art is subtle and delicate, and it makes the mind also in its movements subtle and delicate. It is suggestive, and the intellect habituated to the appreciation of art is quick to catch suggestions, mastering not only, as the scientific mind does, that which is positive and on the surface, but that which leads to ever fresh widening and subtilising of knowledge and opens a door into the deeper secrets of inner nature where the positive instruments of science cannot take the depth or measure (449).

The arts first provide a catharsis or *cittaśuddhi*, which help to transform the *manas* into the *buddhi*.

They can then refine the *buddhi* through empathy, or what Sri Aurobindo calls the “self-identification with other minds.” The point of all art forms, in service to the higher faculty of the *buddhi* and the sake of morality, he seems to argue, is the self-identification with other minds or “sympathetic insight.” This kind of training, both as an artist and as a viewer or connoisseur of art, widens and makes human knowing more subtle. For him, this is different than scientific learning, which shines a focused flashlight or searchlight on separate parts of reality; artistic learning shines a broader light that can hold a view of how the parts relate in larger patterns of human meaning. Both lights are essential to the maturation of the intellect or *buddhi*. He seems to say that empathy helps to maintain the refinement of the intelligence so that the right hand of the *buddhi* is master of the left; the broad artistic light guides the focused scientific searchlight.

In terms of what he means by “sympathetic insight,” I think of the work of John S. Dunne. He coined the phrases of “passing over” and “coming back” to describe his experience of empathy. In Dunne’s view, one can “pass over” to the standpoint of the other, to feel with their heart and see with their eyes, temporarily becoming the other, inhabiting their way of being in the world for a time. In the equal and opposite process of “coming back” to one’s own way of seeing and feeling, one can bring back what was learned as the other, enriching, expanding, and deepening the potentials of one’s own experience.⁵¹ Such a process is an education in empathy; to lessons in com-

⁵¹ John Dunne, CSC, *The Way of All the Earth: Experiments in Truth and Religion* (Notre Dame, IN: UND Press, 1972), i.

passion—“feeling with” the other. If art is treated only as a luxury, the mind misses this opportunity and therefore wastes “itself on the trivial, gaudy, sensuous, cheap or vulgar instead of helping man upward by its powerful aid in the evocation of what is best and highest in intellect as well as in character, emotion and the aesthetic enjoyment and regulation of life and manners (450).” In this view of Sri Aurobindo, the arts hold a powerful force of human life and potential for compassion.

I suppose one could say that the human being who lives in the faculty of the mature *buddhi* has a free mind, a strong mind that can express or enjoy the life and dynamism of human experience and consciousness. With mastery in this faculty, one would be ready for the more taxing spiritual lessons that Sri Aurobindo argues can stabilize maturity for both an individual and a nation. By spiritual, Sri Aurobindo does not mean “religious,” if what is meant is a sectarian form of Hinduism; he means something non-sectarian and universal. He recognizes that spiritual aspiration had centered itself in specific religions of the past, which produced glorious art. However, “[s]pirituality is a wider thing than formal religion and it is in the service of spirituality that Art reaches its highest self-expression (450).”

As I read him, this kind of spiritual art would not negate the other uses of art that he explores: the aesthetic and the moral. In his view, these uses seem to be satisfied and raised into a higher level, expressing “the deeper not obvious reality of things, the joy of God in the world and its beauty and desirableness and the manifestation of divine force and energy in phenomenal creation (450).” However, according to him (and his limited exposure), the best of European art has not been able to accomplish this spiritual task. India, on the other hand, is singular in its achievement for the Yogi, consistently holding the spiritual value over the material. As he sees it, European cultures seek material goals that ultimately prevent art from fulfilling spiritual purposes. One could easily argue with him on this point.

However, it seems important to see this line of reasoning as mainly a way to boost the spirits

of his Indian readers during their time of colonial domination, as well as to scold the British colonizers. Peter Heehs rightly observes that Sri Aurobindo is no mere Indian essentialist or exceptionalist, for he voiced a prophetic vision for an oppressed people, “dominated by an arrogant foreign imperialism... denounced by a [British] colonizer who made no effort to understand it.”⁵² Sri Aurobindo actually meets his colonizers half-way when he writes that “Asia’s future development will unite these two streams [of Indian and European art] in one deep and grandiose flood of artistic self-expression perfecting the aesthetic evolution of humanity (451).” Like the mature functioning of the *buddhi*, when the right hand is master of the left hand, he seems to say that “if Art is to reach towards the highest, the Indian tendency must dominate” the European as these were expressed in his day (451).

Sri Aurobindo is making too facile a claim to identify India with the imagination (the right hand of the *buddhi*), and Britain with the rational judgment (the left hand).⁵³ Nevertheless, he may have agreed even at this time in his life, that it is not only India that is ultimately capable of spiritual art, nor the only culture in great need of it. Nor are Indians immune to prizing the material over the spiritual. All human beings are in need and capable of the ideal use of art, spiritual artistic expression, which he describes as being able to “suggest the strength and virile unconquerable force of the divine Nature in man and in the outside world, its energy, its calm, its powerful inspiration, its august enthusiasm, its wildness, greatness, attractiveness, to breathe that into man’s soul and gradually mould the finite into the image of the Infinite (452).”

Part VI

⁵² Heehs, *The Lives of Sri Aurobindo*, 189.

⁵³ Iain McGilchrist makes a similar claim in his examination of Western culture using research on the right and left hemispheres of the brain, saying that in our culture, “the balance has swung too far—towards the Apollonian left hemisphere [as opposed to the Dionysian right], which now appears to believe that it can do anything, make anything, on its own.” *The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World* (Cambridge: Yale University Press, 2009), 6313 of 17484 in Kindle edition.

The final essay that Sri Aurobindo writes on the national value of art summarizes and relates his previous arguments and insights to reinforce his point that India needs to wake up to its own *dharmā* or law of being. He looks at his current situation of Edwardian India and sees cause for alarm. India, seduced by the ostentatious display of wealth and material optimism of Great Britain, and its concomitant artistic values, is cutting itself off from its own treasures of knowledge, culture, and art, the things that insure individual and collective growth and development as Indians. The British opposition to native Indian self-expression and maturity is, in his mind, an opportunity for Indians to seek national unity. The arts and its ability to develop the psychological feeling for this national unity is vitally part of his political program for Indian independence. The value of art is not just for artists, he argues, but for the education of all its citizens.

He contends that the road to mastering the spiritual use of art is first paved with learning to appreciate the beauty of all forms, of so-called high and low art, of all visual and material culture, as we would call it today. It is necessary, therefore, for the Indian to habituate consciousness to prefer the fine to the crude, the noble to the vulgar, the beautiful to the ugly, no matter where this might be found, in traditional places of fine art or in daily life. He writes: “A nation surrounded daily by the beautiful, noble, fine and harmonious becomes that which it is habituated to contemplate and realises the fullness of the expanding Spirit in itself (453).” For him, an artistic ideal that grows authentically from the people of India may use forms and values of the English and Europe, but must be rooted in its own ideal of the beauty, truth, and goodness of its own people. It cannot be an external ideal. To find it, he maintains, it must be re-birthed from within. Instead of seeking a scientific art that tries to mimic the physical appearance of life, Sri Aurobindo thinks that India has at her fingertips the creative processes grounded in aesthetic, moral, and spiritual vision that can see the ways all outer forms relate in humanly meaningful contexts to nourish a new Indian identity. He seems to argue that this education would not be the production of “knowledge stones,” knowledge

of mere fact and data once decried by Nietzsche in his own national call for better education, but would be a national education that produced growth in the mind and openness in that mind to the higher self and its vast visions where knowledge would be winged, strong, and free.⁵⁴ He writes,

A free and active imaging of form and hue within oneself, a free and self-trained hand reproducing with instinctive success not the form and measurement of things seen outside, for that is a smaller capacity easily mastered, but the inward vision of the relation and truth of things, an eye quick to note and distinguish, sensitive to design and to harmony in colour, these are the faculties that have to be evoked, and the formal and mechanical English method is useless for this purpose (454).

With this inward gaze that sees the unity and wholeness of life, he calls for an Indian national ideal in art, awoken by a genuinely national system of education so that India may be “lifted again to the high level of the ancient culture—and higher (454).”

This notion of a “higher” culture than India’s past Golden Ages is what might distinguish Sri Aurobindo’s thought from his Bengali contemporaries. He does not want to simply repeat the past: to fight Modernism with a more conscious version of pre-modern India; to fight England with an imagined sense of India’s glorious past. However, he does not define this higher culture here as he will in his social and political works, though it is clear that he does not reject either India’s past nor Britain’s present as long as they contribute to the purification of the minds, lives, and behaviors of its members; to the extent that they possess tools also to rend the veil that separates the lower nature from the higher nature. He writes,

We have to learn and use the democratic principle and methods of Europe, in order that hereafter we may build up something more suited to our past and to the future of humanity. We have to throw away the individualism and materialism and keep the democracy. We have to solve for the human race the problem of harmonising and spiritualizing its impulses towards liberty, equality and fraternity. In order that we may fulfill our mission we must be masters in our own home. It is out of no hostility to the English people, no race hatred that we seek absolute autonomy, but because it is the first condition of our developing our national self and realising our destiny.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ See Frederick Nietzsche, *The Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*, trans. Peter Preuss (1874) (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1980).

⁵⁵ Sri Aurobindo, “The Past and the Future,” *Karmayoga*, 248.

For him and his context, Sri Aurobindo feels that India is the only nation with the tools to rend the veil that separates the lower from the higher nature. At least it is the only nation that can do it for itself. The higher culture he seeks means that India needs to go even further than this, to not stop at establishing the life of consciousness in the spirit, but to use the force of spirit to transform India's past and the British present—to create the pattern for a new future. The arts, he argues, help human consciousness in the past and present, in purifying the senses, desires, and emotions, the elevation of the sense mind into the intellect and the maturation of the intellect into spiritual faculties of vision. The future growth will need the arts as well, he contends, to establish a new unity that will be lived here on Earth, not merely achieved in *mokṣa*, not only conquered in heaven.

III. CONCLUSION

Sri Aurobindo's essays of "The National Value of Art" were written in a context of cultural crisis, a crisis that was a bridge between two kinds of relationships of art and religion that were vying for relevance at the time. We might call them "Secular Mimetic Art" and "Non-religious Modern Art," which I describe in my Appendix II. The Renaissance aesthetic ideals of mimetic art that had crystalized in Victorian England were under threat by a growing Modernist constellation of ideals that grew up in European nations and their colonial cultural centers. Many of these movements of Modernism turned to depictions of the subjective experience of the individual intellect and the psyche and away from depicting objects in the world as experienced by the senses. Modernism thumbed its nose at the mimetic ideals of traditional European art, craft, and architecture, which overly stabilized the meaning and purpose of the arts, art criticism, and art history, all of which seemed to separate art from life and from the lower classes, in many of these artist's view.

Sri Aurobindo finds himself in a unique position in this crisis. He shares a guarded appreciation for artistic excellence that mimetic European art exemplifies, but is weary of its potentially negative influence on the Indian mind and heart. The British colonizers use their value of mimetic art to psychologically dominate their foreign subjects to devalue their premodern traditions and to promote modern industrial progress. To the extent that Modern movements in the West protest this use of art, he also shares their project. For example, the Arts and Craft Movement in England and the USA might be an example that he would have appreciated to some degree. However, this movement, like many of the cultural national movements in India that revolted against the British, took a nostalgic, quixotic, and ahistorical view of indigenous identities and folk traditions, which Sri Aurobindo does not share. Further, he does not want to look to the Indian past in order to repeat it, wholly rejecting the culture of the West, but wants to find cultural nourishment that leads to healthy self affirmation and motivation to grow in maturity as both a modern and spiritual nation. We do not have a clear picture yet how he distinguishes himself from the broader influence of Modernist art and culture. Though we can arguably connect some of his values to those of the Arts and Craft Movement, it is considered both anti-modern and Modern in being against modern industrialism and yet avant guard and a protest against middle-class or elite taste, which is what we would associate with the Modernist movements that began and continued in Paris. The Arts and Craft Movement also lost its former relevance after 1910 and became yet another style among others in the decorative arts in the USA and Europe, while movements like Post Impressionism gained more impact.⁵⁶ However, we will see in the next two chapters how he negotiates the European notion of cultural excellence in the mimetic tradition and the Modernist

⁵⁶ See Alan Crawford, ed. *By Hammer and Hand: The Arts and Crafts Movement in Birmingham* (Birmingham, England: Birmingham City Council Department of Leisure & Co, 1984). "If the Arts and Crafts Movement is seen in its own time and context, and not just as part of the story of Modernism, it appears as a deeply Romantic movement with its roots in the 19th century, a movement that belongs as much to the history of anti-Modernism as of Modernism." Alan Crawford, "Arts and Crafts Movement," *Grove Art Online. Oxford Art Online*, Oxford University Press; <http://www.oxfordartonline.com.proxycu.wrlc.org/subscriber/article/grove/art/T004452>; accessed March 3, 2016.

challenge as this takes shape in the first five decades of the twentieth century. At this point in his life, however, when he is seeking independence from the British Empire, the Victorian hegemonic culture, Modernism, and the Indian cultural national movements all have uses, but also limitations, for his aesthetic theory and program to provide a basis for Indian education.

Sri Aurobindo's essays on art's value to the Indian nation express his understanding of art's ability to educate one to become aesthetically, morally, and spiritually conscious. This education trains India's citizens to be full participants in the civic life of the country. For him, the arts can educate, edify, and civilize, that is, purify (*śuddhi*) the lower human faculties and awaken the higher spiritual ones that have the capacity to bring individuals and even the global community to a living experience of divinity. The keynote of this approach to spirituality is its ascendant quality. There is no goal yet explicitly formulated to divinize matter as he will later emphasize in a descendant approach. The ascendant approach that he advocates here is a check against the influence of what he sees as the overly rational, industrial, and inhuman culture of the British. In Sri Aurobindo's view, unlike the British culture and its understanding of education, Indian cultural heritage is uniquely suited to cover all levels of growth, from the physical, emotional, rational, and spiritual. One might say that this process of growth through the arts is his vision of India's *bildungsroman*, its "coming of age" of the human mind and human consciousness; the gradual, yet forceful, purification (*śuddhi*) and then transformation of the "storehouse of memory," the *citta*, into ever more conscious faculties that work in increasingly harmonious fashion.

For Sri Aurobindo, beauty and love are the keys to this growth in human maturity. Beauty is what wakes the soul to delight and is supremely embodied in *Kṛṣṇa*, the "Dark and Beautiful One." Owing to Sri Aurobindo's spiritual experience in jail in 1909, he says that the *Avatāra* or God-Man, embodies the ideal of all human behavior, and so is worthy of imitation. He is supremely beautiful and comes close to humans because he is unbounded love. The descent of the God-Man, the vision

of his beauty and the deep feelings of love that he awakens lead to *Ānanda*, guiding the progressive transformation of an animal-man into a divine man, as well as a barbarous nation into a truly civilized one. Art at its best expresses dimensions of the beauty and love of the God-Man and contributes to the divine life in the individual and the nation. This view of the national value of art is one that affirms the world and its potential for transformation. For Sri Aurobindo's context, this affirmation implies that the arts have the ability to unify India and to motivate its citizens to throw off the binds of colonialism.

In the next chapter, we will look at some articles that Sri Aurobindo wrote that focus on specific examples of classic Indian sacred art in order to show his fellow countrymen and women just how important, unique, and spiritual their artistic heritage is, and further, how to best interpret this heritage so that the knowledge and experience that is held in these art forms can take his country and the world beyond the age of reason (*mānasa buddhi*) into a new age of intuition (*vijñānabuddhi*), which will be more addressed in the following chapter, Chapter Three.

Chapter Two

Sri Aurobindo On Intuition and Indian Sacred Art

I. INTRODUCTION

Sri Aurobindo's articles on "The National Value of Art" were written after his *Kṛṣṇa* experience in jail (1908-09), when he reordered his priorities, according to Robert Minor. "No longer [was] ... his immediate priority the raising of India *in order for the sanātana dharma* to be raised up. Now, the *sanātana dharma* is to be promoted in order to raise up India."¹ After this encounter with *Kṛṣṇa*, Sri Aurobindo placed his spiritual concerns ahead of his political ones, so that the political revolution that he sought would be accomplished with spiritual force. He began two new journals at this point to communicate this new vision, *Karmayogin* in English and a Bengali journal entitled *Dharma*. The method to achieve this spiritual goal was explicitly related to the *Bhagavad Gītā* and its teachings of *jñāna*, *karma*, and *bhakti* yoga. His Vedāntic and Shakta vision was now complexified by a Vaishnava motivation as well. Based on his spiritual experience in jail, Sri Aurobindo's new view of behavior in the world was to combine all three of these yogas of the *Gītā* into an integrated praxis. This integration, as he sees it, is more valuable and effective than political activity that seeks social justice based on what the *manas* or *buddhi* could understand as just. The yogic action based in higher centers of knowledge could not only achieve social justice, but more importantly, it could accomplish *brahmatejas*.² He defined *brahmatejas* in 1909 as "the force and energy of thought and action arising from communion with or self surrender to that within us which rules the world. ... It

¹ Robert Minor, *The Perfect and the Good* (Columbia, MO: South Asia Books, 1978), 77.

² Literally this means the "glory or luster supposed to surround a Brahman [priest]" and/or "the power and glory of Brahman [the Supreme Godhead]." *MMW*, s.v. "*brahmatejas*."

works from within, it works in the power of God, it works with superhuman energy. The re-awakening of that force in three hundred millions of men by the means which our past has placed in our hands, that is our object.”³ In Minor’s words, it is “the glory and luster or personal power that is supposed to surround a brahman by the work he has done. The concept was borrowed by Aurobindo to refer to the personal power that is found to be effective... as he works for the [divine] Mother.”⁴ *Bramatejas* was for the young Sri Aurobindo, the embodiment of the *sanātana dharma* put into political and cultural form.

The next set of essays that we will analyze are entitled “Indian Art,” in which Sri Aurobindo interprets specific examples of Indian glory, its national heritage in architecture, sculpture, and painting. These writings are part of his later journal *Arya* (1914-21), written after his political endeavors and from his new home in the French colonial town of Pondicherry in the Tamil Nadu region. At this point in his life, his identification with Hinduism had ceased, and the language of *sanātana dharma* and *brahmatejas* had faded away, even as he still advocated for Indian religion and culture. For him, ancient and medieval Indian art express high forms of culture and civilization, proving what India would be capable of achieving without the oppression of the British Empire. He is not only interested in Indian cultural objects as such, but also their interpretation. His hermeneutics is based on the faculty of intuition, not the rational intellect (*mānasa buddhi*) and its imagination. To explore this “intuitional hermeneutics,” I will compare it with aspects of Lindsay Jones’s hermeneutical approach to sacred art and architecture. What Jones and Sri Aurobindo seem to have in common is the value they give to the *experience* of sacred art and architecture. For them, this experience is embodied, not just cognitive, and it has the potential to lead the viewer through

³ Sri Aurobindo, *Karmayogin*, 21.

⁴ Minor, *The Perfect and the Good*, 63.

processes of growth and transformation. Their goal for this growth is a broader and more inclusive vision of the world that might lead to a more inclusive treatment of the world.

Both thinkers note that this hermeneutical process is fraught with potential pitfalls. The most dangerous is that one may be tempted to value one's own limited cultural heritage as normative in the interpretation. Sri Aurobindo found this pitfall in the hermeneutics of many European scholars of his day who examined Indian classic art and architecture, and also found it within himself when interpreting European art. In these articles, however, Sri Aurobindo seeks to demonstrate his intuitional method to combat any provinciality of thought and behavior.

In this chapter, I will also try to explain what the Yogi means by what I am calling an “ascendant” spiritual approach in the use of sacred art. This art invites the viewer to ascend with one's *citta* (basic consciousness) to the realm of the spirit, leaving the realm of matter behind. In Sri Aurobindo's perspective, this ascendant approach is valuable, not only to balance an overly materialistic worldview which he thought the British embodied, but also as an important basis and also a clear contrast to what he will later develop with the Mother in their Integral Yoga: a “descendant” spiritual practice and aesthesis. I will explore Sri Aurobindo's descendant approach and its influence on art next chapter.

1. Mirra Comes to Work with Sri Aurobindo (1914-20)

These articles were written in a period in Sri Aurobindo's life that was arguably the most important time for the foundation of his Yoga, thought, and poetry. Mirra Afassa, then Mirra Richard, came to meet him in 1914 with her second husband Paul Richard. Paul first went to India to meet with Sri Aurobindo in 1910 “on a mission of political campaigning on behalf of his friend Paul Bluysen. He was anxious to meet a yogi. ...[and through mutual acquaintances] Richard and

Aurobindo met twice, and held long conversations.”⁵ Paul was convinced that he had met the most important man in his life, someone who held the key to a future age of great spiritual potential. In order to bring Mirra to meet Sri Aurobindo and to run for the Pondicherry seat himself in the French parliamentary body called the Chamber of Deputies, Paul and Mirra planned a trip to India in 1914. Paul ran against Paul Bluysen and lost. The couple stayed, however, and started a discussion group called “The New Idea” and a journal in English and French. Sri Aurobindo agreed to contribute to the journal. With Mirra’s editing and translation skills, and Paul’s and Sri Aurobindo’s skills in journalistic writing, they designed a plan. They named the journal *Arya*. This Sanskrit word was chosen for its ancient significance of “honorable,” “respectable,” or “noble” in a context before the Nazis perverted its meaning. As Heehs notes, the “Aryan was a person who ‘accepted a particular type of self-culture, of inward and outward practice, of identity, of aspiration.’”⁶ As they continued to plan, Sri Aurobindo was quite conscious of starting a group, at least in some respects, “like the Theosophical Society which will support & popularize the Knowledge & writings which express it.”⁷ The prospectus for the journal included four genres of writing: philosophy, translations and commentaries, comparative religion, and methods in spiritual practice. They worked long hours together and became intimately a part of each other’s lives. Heehs writes,

Aurobindo had developed a great regard for the couple. They were...“rare examples of European Yogins who have not been led astray by Theosophical and other aberrations.” Though he had reservations about parts of Paul’s philosophy, he considered him “not only a personal friend” but also “a brother in the Yoga.” As for

⁵ K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar, *Sri Aurobindo: A biography and a history* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Press, 2006), 380.

⁶ Heehs, *The Lives of Sri Aurobindo*, 256.

⁷ Sri Aurobindo, *Record of Yoga* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Press, 2001), 508.

Mirra, she seemed to have a capacity for spiritual surrender that rivaled that of the great Indian *bhaktas* or devotees.⁸

World War I interrupted this fruitful exchange and work. In January 1915, Paul was ordered by his government to join the French reserves, and so they left in February. Mirra was heartbroken and felt in utter darkness according to her later remembrances. She recalled that it even seemed Sri Aurobindo wished her to leave. Her longing for the spiritual life and growth that she experienced with him exploded owing to this separation and subjective experience of rejection. Sri Aurobindo did not record any feelings positive or negative about their leaving in his diaries. Heehs mentions that there was a hiatus in his *Record of Yoga* after they left and then it picked up again three days later in the same manner he wrote the previous ten months.

For the next six and half years, Sri Aurobindo continued to write for *Arya*, completing his most important works in prose. Meanwhile, Paul was declared unfit for service in the reserves for medical reasons and started to look for a job that would take the couple closer to India. The National Union for the Export of French Products in Japan offered him a position. They stayed in Japan until 1920.

II. BACKGROUND AND OVERALL ARGUMENT OF THE ARTICLES

Sri Aurobindo wrote the next set of articles about Indian art right before Mirra returned to Pondicherry for good on April 24, 1920, during the first decade of his work as a Yogi. In fact, by the

⁸ Heehs, 258. Sri Aurobindo's view about the Theosophical Society bears upon a complicated issue of defining religion generally and particularly, what kind of religion the Theosophical Society is in his mind, and what kind of religion his own spiritual practice is attempting to be. The Yogi is very concerned that his own practice will fall into what he called "conventionalism," or the "error of all 'Churches,'" which is the tendency to lose contact with the founder's spirit after he dies, and become a group defined by rigid ethical codes, theological doctrines, and rituals. Sri Aurobindo views the Theosophical Society as a form of conventionalism. For the Yogi's own view about religion, see Sri Aurobindo, "Religion as the Law of Life" in *The Human Cycle* (Pondicherry, SAAP, 1997), 173-81. For a study of how Sri Aurobindo related to religions in his own personal life and how this term developed in his thought, see Peter Heehs, "The Error of All 'Churches': Religion and Spirituality in Communities Founded or 'Inspired' by Sri Aurobindo," chap. in *Gurus and Their Followers*, ed. Antony Copley (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000), 209-23; and Peter Heehs, "Sri Aurobindo and Hinduism" *AntiMatters* 2. 2 (2008): 33-45.

time he wrote them, he had already written the articles that later became the basis for nearly all of his most important works, including *The Life Divine* (articles first written first between August 1914-January 1919), and *The Synthesis of Yoga* (articles first written between August 1914-January 1921), as well as his commentaries on the *Vedas*, the *Upaniṣads*, and the *Gītā* (articles first written between 1909-20, inclusive) and his social and political works, *The Human Cycle*, *The Ideal of Human Unity*, and *War and Self-Determination* (articles first written 1916-20, inclusive). He was also about five years into writing his epic poem *Savitri* (1916-50).

The articles we are going to examine now were written from January to April 1920, entitled “Indian Art,” numbered 1-4. They were originally written as the last set of thirty-two articles on Indian culture entitled *The Defense of Indian Culture*.⁹ Heehs writes that “*The Defense of Indian Culture* is a polemic from start to finish.”¹⁰ As with all these later cultural writings in Pondicherry, Sri Aurobindo is on the defensive. He writes, “But we are concerned not only with the critical estimation of our art by Europe, but much more nearly with the evil effect of the earlier depreciation on the Indian mind which has been for a long time side-tracked off its true road by a foreign, an anglicized education and, as a result, vulgarised and falsified by the loss of its own true centre.”¹¹ In Sri Aurobindo’s view, William Archer (1856-1924) is one such “foreign and anglicized” influence on the Indian mind, and is the main foil for his *Defense*, responding directly to Archer’s book *India and the Future*. Archer was a Scottish drama critic and journalist who wrote this book on Indian life in 1917, which admired the political aspirations of India but soundly disparaged its

⁹ This group of articles was first published under the title *The Foundations of Indian Culture* in 1953, and later revised and published as *The Renaissance and Other Essays on Indian Culture* in 1997.

¹⁰ Heehs, *Lives*, 296.

¹¹ Sri Aurobindo, *The Renaissance and Other Essays on Indian Culture* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Press, 1997), 285. (Hereafter I will note the page numbers in parenthesis after each quotation for this text).

cultural and social achievements.¹² He visited India in the summer of 1912, so he at least saw this country in person for a few weeks, but with unsympathetic eyes. In this book, Archer was deeply distressed by the glorification of Indian culture by E. B. Havell and A.K. Coomaraswamy and set out to confute what he considered to be their excesses. Seen in this light, Sri Aurobindo's strident tone in his articles, his dualistic view of India and Europe and of the East and the West, and his privileging of the former over the later, seems natural to the prevailing negative Orientalism or Anglicism that Archer expressed.

Thomas Berry lists four plausible motivations behind the Yogi's thirty-two articles on art and culture for *Arya*. Not only is Sri Aurobindo resentful of the British Empire and needs to vent this feeling (his first motivation), but he also has "the feeling the people of India themselves were losing confidence in their own heritage" and he wants to buoy that confidence; his second motivation.¹³ Therefore his third motivation is to awaken his fellow countrymen and women to a past glory that would inspire their own renaissance. Further, Berry writes, "Still a fourth motivation in writing these essays was the need to identify for the entire world the special role of India in the larger pattern of man's evolutionary development."¹⁴ This fourth motivation accounts for the fact that Sri Aurobindo writes in English to engage the British elite. Sri Aurobindo is writing to those in power, not as an academic, but as a prophet in the tradition of the Hebrew prophets, Mencius, Augustine, or Marx. He is not seeking to provide a "balanced" view of the British Empire and its culture, but is "communicating a message, not writing a history; he is guiding a transformation process, not

¹² William Archer, *India and the Future* (London: Hutchinson and Co., 1917). See especially the chapter "Art and Culture," pp. 178-239.

¹³ Thomas Berry, "The Foundations of Indian Culture: Its Contemporary Significance," *Six Pillars: Introduction to the Major works of Sri Aurobindo*, ed. Robert A. McDermott (Chambersburg, PA: Wilson Books, 1974), 38.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 39.

adjusting to some institutional change.”¹⁵ Seen from Berry’s perspective, the focus of these writings is not to list a set of data, but to provide a methodology that interprets the data of Indian culture to inspire self-appreciation and a new cultural resurgence that will awaken a spiritual evolution of humanity. Sri Aurobindo asks in these articles, “what inner reality are [the art, culture, and history of India] expressing, what is the cosmic-divine presence felt there, what governing role do they exercise over the historical process itself?”¹⁶

Sri Aurobindo states that the Indian art history and criticism of E. B. Havell and Ananda K. Coomaraswamy are a good beginning, but “a more general and searching consideration of first principles is called for in any complete view of the essential motives of Indian culture (255).” In seeking an answer to these questions, Sri Aurobindo demonizes the culture of Europe and rather simplistically compares “the bright side of [his] own culture with the less bright or even the dark side of the other.”¹⁷ He homogenizes European art as sensuous and naturalistic, and Indian art as spiritual and expressive of the soul, and “we wonder if he knew anything at all about Cimabue, Giotto, Fra Angelico, or El Greco or if he really looked at any of the great religious art of an earlier [European] period.”¹⁸ We will see this kind of expedient comparison in his essays on Indian Art since Sri Aurobindo is “defending a cause, a cause that [was] imperiled by the West, which for the moment at least [became] the dragon to be slain.”¹⁹

Even so, these essays on art are more nuanced than others in his series of articles on culture and history, and they are not as biased compared to the writings of William Archer. One is

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid., 40.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid., 40-41.

¹⁹ Ibid., 41.

impressed that Sri Aurobindo even seems to meet Archer's ignorant and prejudiced criticisms halfway. In characterizing Sri Aurobindo's text on art and architecture, Heehs writes, "But after the inevitable comparison of Indian and Western artistic motives, Aurobindo at last forgot his 'rationalistic critic' [Archer] and the *Defense* rose to a higher level. The chapters of Indian architecture, painting and sculpture were insightful and richly detailed. Even better were those on Indian literature."²⁰ With these articles, as I hope to show, Sri Aurobindo seems to advance the

²⁰ Heehs, *Lives*, 296.

conversation of classic Indian art and culture beyond the dualistic thinking of either dismissive Europeans, or quixotic Hindu nationalists.²¹

III. INDIAN ART-1 [INTUITIONAL HERMENEUTICS]

In all four essays we are about to consider, Sri Aurobindo demonstrates his own form of interpretation of Indian classic sacred art and architecture based on faculties other than the intellect

²¹ It is important to point out that Sri Aurobindo would not have equated Archer's negative Orientalism with that of the early Orientalists, those European scholars from William Jones onwards (from the late eighteenth century), who valued the credo that "to rule effectively, one must love India; to love India, one must communicate with her people; to communicate with her people, one must acquire her languages." David Kopf, *British Orientalism and the Bengali Renaissance: The Dynamics of Indian Modernization 1773-1835* (Berkeley: UC Press, 1969), 95. Starting in the 1830s, this early Orientalism was defeated by later generations of British who sought to anglicize and Christianize Indians and do away with any valuation of traditional Indian culture. This later group of the nineteenth century is sometimes called the Anglicists, to distinguish them from the early Orientalists. Archer was clearly part of the Anglicist tradition.

For Edward Said and those who follow his tradition of cultural theory, "Orientalism refers to those particular discourses that in conceptualizing the Orient, render it susceptible to control and management." Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion: Post Colonial Theory, India and the Mystic East* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 82. For Said and others, they do not distinguish between the early Orientalism and the later Anglicism that battled Indian nationalism. They argue that no matter what kind of wellbeing they sought to bring India, Orientalists always contributed to some form of wider control and negative influence. They charge this of Indians themselves, who adopted Orientalist perspectives. Cultural theorist Richard King is another example in this school, who argues that "Orientalist presuppositions about the 'spirituality' of India, etc. were used by reformers such as Rammohan Roy, Dayānanda Saraswati, Swāmi Vivekānanda and Mohandas K. Gandhi in the development of an anti-colonial Hindu nationalism." (Ibid., 86). For King, these presuppositions are problematic for being ahistorical and potentially unrealistic.

For historian David Kopf the phenomenon of Orientalism is more complicated. He argues that it should be dated between 1784-1835, and should not be confused with the later phenomenon of Anglicism. Anglicism sought to educate Asians in the science and culture of the West while avoiding anything to do with their native heritage. The Anglicists thought that the earlier Orientalists' attempt to revive ancient Indian cultural heritages that express a "golden age" was impossible since India had always been in the "dark ages." Early Orientalism, on the other hand, honored Indian heritage as possessing a golden age and that to research, teach, and contribute to the life of this heritage was the first order of business. Without getting into the complexity of the debates, Richard King aligns himself with Edward Said's critique in the classic text *Orientalism* and even extends it, while David Kopf nuances the impact of this phenomenon, distinguishing it from Anglicism, and makes the case that it was not a wholly negative force in the lives of Asians, specifically Indians. Kopf argues in fact, that it gave it a new lease on cultural life in India, leading to the Bengali Renaissance. See Richard King's treatment of this debate in "Orientalism an Indian religions," in *Orientalism and Religion: Post Colonial Theory, India and the Mystic East*, 82-95, and David Kopf's critique of Said in "European Enlightenment, Hindu Renaissance and the Enrichment of the Human Spirit: A History of Historical Writings on British Orientalism," in *Orientalism, Evangelicalism and the Military Cantonment in Early Nineteenth-Century India*, ed. Nancy G. Cassels (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1991), 19-54, and Kopf's historical work on this complex time in *British Orientalism and the Bengali Renaissance: The Dynamics of Indian Modernization 1773-1835*, cited above. Sri Aurobindo would agree with Kopf, I suggest, for he viewed the impact of the British Empire as both a force of opposition for Indian growth and for introducing other potentially positive cultural, social, and political forms that could be used for the common good of India in an Indian way.

and the imagination. I would call it an intuitional hermeneutics. In this first article on Indian Art, Sri Aurobindo focuses on defining intuitional hermeneutics generally. In the following three articles, he examines the value of specific Indian art forms and how to apply his hermeneutics for each: architecture, sculpture, and painting. I will summarize and bring out key elements of each article in light of his hermeneutics and current theories for interpreting sacred art and architecture, especially the work of Lindsay Jones.

1. Comparing Indian to European Creations and Interpretations of Sacred Art

As Berry writes, “hermeneutics might be considered to be the principle concern for Aurobindo throughout this entire book on the foundations of Indian culture.”²² Further, we can say that Sri Aurobindo was motivated by the ethnocentric criticism of William Archer as a form of opposition to fuel the growth of knowledge in his own heritage in order for a more refined and accurate interpretation of that heritage. The Yogi writes that “by the appreciation excited by an opposing view, [the Indian mind] will be better able to understand itself and especially to seize what is essential in Indian art” and to shed what it is not, so that a new cultural affirmation might be achieved (261). He argues that not just anyone can reach this understanding—or put more correctly—not any human faculty of knowing can produce the necessary “creative insight, the technical competence and the seeing critical eye” to reach the “spirit, aim, essential motive from which a type of artistic creation starts (261).” Instead of the lower sense mind or *manas*, or even the intellect or *buddhi*, Sri Aurobindo claims that the intuitive mind (*vijñānabuddhi*) is the faculty that makes the most accurate interpretation of Indian sacred art and architecture, for this is the faculty that first inspired their creation in his view.

The Yogi’s hermeneutics might seem controversial in light of current critical art theory,

²² Thomas Berry, “The Foundations of Indian Culture: Its Contemporary Significance,” 48.

which does not seek to find the “essence” of things, let alone to find it *in* an art object. Nor does current theory necessarily reckon the use of faculties of knowing that are different or “above” the intellect and its imagination. Contrary to this, Sri Aurobindo writes, “Once we understand the *essential* things, enter into the characteristic way and spirit, are able to interpret the form and execution from that inner centre, we can then see how it looks in the light of other standpoints, in the light of the comparative mind. A comparative criticism has its use, but the *essential* understanding must precede it if it is to have any real value (261, my emphasis).” Beginning with an intellectual comparison before an empathetic understanding of what is being compared, he seems to say, leads to valueless interpretations. Given what we know from the last chapter, I think that for Sri Aurobindo, finding the “inner center” of an art form to gain an “essential understanding” would be accomplished by the intuition, the *vijñānabuddhi*, yet a “comparative criticism” is best done by the left hand of the *buddhi*, with its critical, reasoning, and discriminative functions tempered and led by the right hand. The key to this effort seems to be that both the right and left hands of the *buddhi* would serve the *vijñānabuddhi* and not vice versa to be effective and to avoid pejorative cultural comparisons. What this says about Sri Aurobindo’s intuitional hermeneutics generally, I would say, is that he is not so much interested in the art or architectural object per se, but in an experience of these, of deepening the experience of them through higher centers of knowing.

In this first essay, although Sri Aurobindo makes some questionable comparisons between the sacred art by Tintoretto with classic Indian sacred art, he also makes some nuanced observations that reveal his complex hermeneutical perspective. He notes that Tintoretto’s paintings of Adam and Eve and Saint George and the Dragon possess a forceful power of color and design, expressing a mature imagination capable of rendering believable action and realistic forms (See Figures 2.1 and 2.2). For him, however, there is no great significance “below the surface” because his (Indian) expectations are not fulfilled by the treatment of the subject matter.



Figure 2.1. Jacopo Tintoretto, *Temptation of Adam and Eve*, ca. 1550, Gallerie dell'Accademia di Venezia, Venice, Italy. Artstor.

He recognizes that the ideals of mimetic art are fulfilled in these works, but not the ideals of the very subject matter that is depicted, according to his understanding of the themes in the paintings. For him, Adam is merely muscular and Eve only sensuous, but they do not possess characteristics that evoke the feeling of the “father and mother of the race (263).” The dragon in the painting of *Saint George and the Dragon* does not impress him as being “a creative embodiment of monstrous evil (263).” One could argue, as I look at the image of the painting, that evil is depicted in scale to God’s grace and greater power, as embodied by George. Happily, he recognizes the limitation of his own cultural standpoint, which has different demands. He writes, “What is really the matter is that I come to this art with a previous demand for a kind of vision, imagination, emotion, significance which it cannot give me (263).”²³

Lindsay Jones’s scholarship is helpful in analyzing Sri Aurobindo’s perspective. According to Jones, sacred art and architecture can be transformative or “productive” as he calls it, in four ways: 1.

²³ Ibid.



Figure 2.2. Jacopo Tintoretto, *Saint George and the Dragon*, ca. 1560, National Gallery, London, England. Artstor.

ontologically/existentially productive, which scholars like Heidegger and Gadamer describe as bringing about a change of being that can happen in the presence of sacred art and architecture; 2.

psychologically productive, which is described in Jones's reading of scholars like Durkheim, Freud, Marx, and Foucault, as what Jones calls "transintellectual" experiences that are un- or subconscious transformations in the presence of sacred art and architecture; 3. *religiously/spiritually productive*, which figures like Abbot Suger emphasize in the ways art and architecture can take one out of the material

world and into the heavenly or transcendent world; and lastly, 4. *pedagogically productive*, which is about a more mundane experience of transformation where the art/architecture communicates data via the media of the forms from designer to audience.²⁴ This way engages only the mind, as it is a way merely to communicate data from one intellect to another. In practice, these four ways may work together or separately, Jones observes. In Sri Aurobindo's articles on Indian art, he is chiefly interested in the third way, how art and architecture can be religiously/spiritually transformative, and he possesses an expectation that sacred art *should* operate in a particularly spiritual way that is Indian.²⁵ Therefore, from the perspective of Jones's typology, we might say that Sri Aurobindo is arguing that European art is rarely religiously/spiritually productive in his experience, but more often pedagogically productive.

However, Sri Aurobindo seems to struggle to understand the culturally conditioned nature of his own view of European and Indian sacred art.

But the cause of my failure [to appreciate European sacred art] is there, that I am seeking for something which was not meant in the spirit of this art and which I ought not to expect from its characteristic creation. And if I had steeped myself in this Renaissance [*sic*] mind as in the original Hellenic spirit, I could have added something to my inner experience and acquired a more catholic and universal aesthesis (264).

We need to note that Sri Aurobindo seems to be a bit coy here as he mastered both Greek and Latin and was quite familiar with these culture's myths and histories before he knew anything of Indian classic art and architecture. His mind was quite steeped in intellectual histories from both hemispheres of the globe by this time in his life. He seems to have made note of his "failure" because it is the same failure that Archer demonstrates in his interpretation of Indian art; however,

²⁴ Lindsay Jones, *The Hermeneutics of Sacred Architecture, Volume One/Monumental Occasions: Reflections on the Eventfulness of Religious Architecture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 93-99.

²⁵ All four of these kinds of productivity in the experience of sacred art and architecture I would place in my typology in Appendix II as Devotional Art, which is a kind of art that serves to help one join one's consciousness with divinity, further stabilize social cohesion, and separate more consciously from one's connection to nature.

like many scholars of his time, Archer is unaware of using his particular cultural worldview as a putatively normative one. (For defensibly political reasons, Sri Aurobindo is doing the same, of course). Archer also comes to Indian art with an expectation that sacred art “should” be judged according to the values of mimesis, and when this standard is not achieved, as in Indian art, the art should be regarded as unworthy of consideration. Sri Aurobindo’s response to Archer is to imply that had Archer empathetically steeped himself in this “Indian mind,” he too could have added something to his “inner experience and acquired a more catholic and universal aesthesis.” We might call “universal aesthesis” a more *inclusive* aesthesis or worldview.

Sri Aurobindo furthers his inquiry and asks what is “the difference in the spirit and method of artistic creation which has given rise to the mutual incomprehension” between a person like Archer and himself (266)? The difference is between the two different mental translations of something more central and universal, what he calls an “act of the intuition” or “a direct intuition of some truth of life or being, some significant form of that truth, some development of it in the mind of man (266).” For Sri Aurobindo, the hermeneutical divergence lies in the “intellectual idea” or the “splendid imagination” of each culture, which are products of the “reasoning intellect” (*mānasa buddhi*) that will always cut the intuition up into fragments or dilute the intuitive vision, but do it in a culturally constructed way. The divergence of interpretation between any two cultures is found “in the object and field of the intuitive vision, in the method of working out the sight or suggestion in the part taken in the rendering by the external form and technique, in the whole way of the rendering to the human mind, even in the centre of our being to which the work appeals (266).” Therefore, an artist working in a tradition that is beholden to the Italian Renaissance, for example, would “naturally” start from an intuition of external nature or life, an idea or image from the intellect guiding the senses, while an artist working from an ancient Indian tradition would “naturally” try to see “first in his spiritual being the truth he must express and to

create its form in his intuitive mind (267-8).” This later kind of art making would not lead to mimetic expression but something more stylized, perhaps; however, both begin with an intuitional vision. The European is an intuition that goes outward to the world, while the Indian is an intuition that goes inward and up in consciousness. Both are valuable, it would seem, in Sri Aurobindo’s view, though he seems to rank the Indian over the European in these articles, which seems just as problematic as Archer doing the opposite.

What is clear, beyond the fact that Sri Aurobindo, as an Indian, prefers Indian art, and Archer, as a European, prefers European art, is that the intuition is key for any creative expression. This idea is a development of his thought from *Karmayogin* and “The National Value of Art” where he writes about the *vijñānabuddhi* or the intuitive mind, which is positioned between the mind and supermind (*vijñāna*). He defines the *vijñānabuddhi* in his *Record on Yoga* as: “a faculty consisting of *vijñāna* ‘working in mind under the conditions and in the forms of mind’, which ‘by its intuitions, its inspirations, its swift revelatory vision, its luminous insight and discrimination can do the work of the reason with a higher power, a swifter action, a greater and spontaneous certitude.”²⁶ For a correct interpretation of Indian sacred art to take place, the use of the reasoning intellect (*mānasa buddhi*) and its rational processes, including the use of the imagination, must be sublimated into the *vijñānabuddhi*, for this is the faculty, Sri Aurobindo argues, that the Indian artist used to create the art in the first place. “It is an intuitive and spiritual art and must be seen with the intuitive and spiritual eye (269).” In his view, then, to interpret an artwork that was created by an artist motivated by the

²⁶ The Glossary, 205. Also see “Vijnana or Gnosis” in *The Synthesis of Yoga* (Pondicherry: SAAP, 1999), 475-87 for a more detailed description of the *vijñāna* in Sri Aurobindo’s yogic system. See also his *Isha Upanishad* (Pondicherry: SAAP, 2003), 71, where he writes, “this Vijnana is intuitional or rather gnostic Idea, not intellectual conception. The difference is that intellectual conception not only tends towards form, but determines itself in the form of the idea and once determined distinguishes itself sharply from other conceptions. But pure intuitional or gnostic Idea sees itself in the Being as well as in the Becoming. It is one with the existence which throws out the form as a symbol of itself and it therefore carries with it always the knowledge of the Truth behind the form. It is in its nature self-consciousness of the being and power of the One, aware always of its totality, starting therefore from the totality of all existence and perceiving directly its contents. Its nature is *dr̥ṣṭi*, seeing, not conceiving. *It is the vision at once of the essence and the image.*” (My emphasis).

intuition without using the same faculty of the intuition, would always lead to misunderstanding.

2. *Sri Aurobindo in Light of Lindsay Jones*

Sri Aurobindo's intuitional hermeneutics has resonance with Lindsay Jones's effort of interpreting sacred architecture, which "shifts the emphasis away from the interpretation of architectural edifices as such and toward the interpretation of the *experience* of architecture."²⁷ Jones makes a robust contemporary articulation of how to interpret sacred architecture (which he notes is also applicable to sacred art). He writes, "the interpretation of sacred architecture, as I conceive of it, is an exercise in hermeneutical reflection upon a set of circumstances that are themselves exercises in hermeneutical reflection."²⁸ The use of the imagination in studying specific examples is the key faculty to Jones's hermeneutical exploration. Meaning and the "essence" of any cultural object are fugitive phenomena in his view. Following the tradition of Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and the synchronic approach of reader-response criticism, Jones seeks to problematize the idea that meaning can be isolated in the art/architecture object, offering instead a thesis that meaning is most accurately found in the "ritual-architectural event," that is, in the relationship of human beings who are willing participants in ritual acts that take place in the architecture that contains these experiences. His idea bears quoting in full:

From a hermeneutical frame, it is not buildings but the human experience or apprehension of buildings that holds our attention. Or, to put it one more way: from this perspective, the locus of meaning resides neither in the building itself (a physical object) nor in the mind of the beholder (a human subject), but rather in the negotiation or interactive relation that subsumes both building and beholder—in *the ritual-architectural event* in which buildings and human participants alike are involved. Meaning is not a condition or quality of the building, of the thing itself; meaning arises from situations. The meaning of a building, then, must always be a meaning

²⁷ Lindsay Jones, *The Hermeneutics of Sacred Architecture*, 48. His emphasis.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 37.

for some specific one at some specific time in some specific place.²⁹

I would suggest that Sri Aurobindo is not saying something entirely different than Jones, though they may differ in their appraisal of the possibility of “essences” in art, and which faculty is best suited to interpret meaning in art and architecture. Both, however, describe meaning in a personal and embodied way.

In summary of this article, although Sri Aurobindo unjustly connects Indian art only with the *viññānabuddhi* (intuitive mind) and European art only with the *mānasa buddhi* (the reasoning intellect and its imagination), it is helpful to note the possibility of either faculty in his nuanced hermeneutical method to interpret the meanings of art and architecture, and that such possibilities are within all human beings, but also culturally expressed, leading to different forms and expectations of art and aesthetic theory. In the next three articles, Sri Aurobindo makes use of this nuance to a greater degree by discussing classic forms of Indian sacred architecture, sculpture, and painting to buoy his Indian fellows and challenge his European colonizers.

IV. INDIAN ART-2 [ARCHITECTURE]

Much of this article is devoted to exposing the fallacies of Archer’s criticism of Indian architecture. It is not clear if Archer critiques Indian architecture by considering reproductions of it from his home in England or on his trip to India in 1912, but he writes that such buildings owed any success they may have had to the influence of Mughal Islam. He writes, “I am no ardent admirer of Islam, but the glory of its architecture—much of it due to princes of more than doubtful orthodoxy—is a patent, palpable fact, which proves what India can do when it awakes from the hallucinations of *yoga* and the multitudinous nightmares of its indigenous cults.”³⁰ He therefore

²⁹ Ibid., 41.

³⁰ Archer, *India and the Future*, 229.

summarily dismisses all of Indian architecture that is Hindu or Buddhist as being “marvels of massive construction...But of unity, clarity, nobility of design they show no trace.”³¹ Sri Aurobindo responds, “This observation seems to my judgment sufficiently contradictory, since I do not understand how there can be a marvel of construction, whether light or massive, without any unity, ... or a mighty impressiveness without any greatness or nobility whatever, even allowing this to be a Titanic and not an Olympian nobleness (274).”

These criticisms lead Sri Aurobindo to speak about a cultural way of seeing that generally characterizes the West and how it opposes an Indian way of seeing, especially if expressed in the immature way that Archer demonstrates. This conflict of cultural “sacred gazes,” in the language of visual culture of religion, is the real culprit for problems of interpretation.³² Sri Aurobindo understands that Western culture nurtures a sacred gaze that is *outwardly* turned, for it “is arrested and attracted by the form, lingers on it and cannot get away from its charm, loves it for its own beauty...[, and] it might be said that for this mind form creates the spirit, the spirit depends for its existence and for everything it has to say on the form (270).” This gaze therefore produces, like Archer’s, an “orthodox style of [art] criticism” that dwells “scrutinizingly on technique, on form, on the obvious story of the form (271).”

David Morgan would most likely agree with Sri Aurobindo’s description as constitutive of the inheritance of Western way of seeing, as it was formed in the European experience of seeing other’s cultural artifacts in a museum, which tutors, in a phrase reminiscent of Kant, a “disinterested

³¹ Ibid., 224.

³² See David Morgan, *The Sacred Gaze: Religious Visual Culture in Theory and Practice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 260. See the Preface for my application of this methodology to the visual culture Sri Aurobindo Ashram. The current conflict within the Ashram and wider global community is also a conflict of sacred gazes competing for relevance within the Integral Yoga.

gaze” that ties aesthetic excellence to external formal qualities.³³ Morgan writes, “By presenting the object without context or historical reference, freed from any indication of ritual use, images... are obviously conducive to the playful roaming of the disinterested gaze. The organization of the art museum vitally requires this.”³⁴ Educated in museums and libraries, Archer’s way of seeing causes him to shoot an unsympathetic glare on Indian architecture and the Indian religion it expresses, motivated also by his version of Christian and anglicized sensibilities. We can see this combination of Archer’s disinterested gaze and Christian glare in his own writing when he first encounters a Hindu *gopuram* or gateway tower on a temple in India, which are filled with statues that are to his eye “monstrous.” He opines,

I had seen fragments of such monstrosity before, in museums such as that of Mexico City, where are preserved the relics of extinct barbarisms. But to come face to face with it on so enormous a scale—not fragmentary, not under a glass case, but towering under the open sky, an adjunct to a living cult, a “going concern”—this was an experience which positively took my breath away.³⁵

He is surprised that there “are thousands of Europeans in India itself who know nothing of the wonder and the horror of these great temples of the South.”³⁶ For Archer, the horror is that these architectural and sculptural artifacts are being used by people today in a living visual piety, unlike those of the ancient Aztecs, who had gone extinct in Mexico City. The context and use is what activates the architecture to mean something in a visceral way, to make its eventfulness real for

³³ Morgan is relying on Kant’s notion of “disinterested pleasure” in his *Critique of Judgment*, which became a standard in Enlightenment aesthetic experience and theory, whereby one’s emotional/bodily, subjective/personal experience of an artwork was subordinated to what Kant thought of as more rational, and therefore objective and universal experience lodged in the intellect. The so-called higher pleasure of the intellect is “disinterested,” whereas the pleasures of the body and its senses and the emotions are seen as unreliable, base, and more selfish; in other words, “interested.”

³⁴ David Morgan, “Art, Material Culture, and Lived Religion,” *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and the Arts*, ed. Franck Burch Brown (NYC: Oxford University Press, 2014), 494. This article is a very helpful introduction to different ways of seeing that can be studied in visual and material culture of religion across culture.

³⁵ Archer, 34.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

Archer as a potential player in the game the architecture invites him to play. He, of course, is a spoilsport, in the words of Gadamer. He is only comfortable playing an interpretive game in the context of a museum that decontextualizes and anesthetizes the sculpture and architecture, using it to remind the viewer that these, indeed, are relics of an immature and barbaric past of some “other.” For Archer and his Enlightenment sensibilities, museums also reduce these artifacts to their formal qualities, justifying a “disinterested” appreciation of the objects since they have been divested of their contextual and ritual meanings.

For scholars of visual and material culture, context and use are precisely where meaning is found. Sri Aurobindo also claims in this article a certain kind of ritual behavior is necessary to gain access to this architecture’s messages. Firstly, he says that the Asian cultural way of seeing, for Indians in particular, is *inwardly* and *upwardly* oriented to the realm of the spirit and divinity, and not *outwardly* on isolated formal qualities found in matter. For “the Indian mind, form does not exist except as a creation of the spirit and draws its meaning and value from the spirit (270).” In his view, hermeneutics in Indian art and architecture that stresses the outward way of seeing physical form, and does not account for an inward/upward gaze to spirit would miss its meanings and fail to produce a “discerning appreciation of this art (272).”

To experience this Indian sacred gaze, Sri Aurobindo suggests the traditional method of Vedāntic (and Yogic and Buddhist) practice: *dhyāna* or “meditation, thought, reflection, (esp.) profound and abstract religious meditation.”³⁷ What he means by this generally is that traditional Indian sacred art has “to be seen in loneliness, in the solitude of one’s self, in moments when one is capable of long and deep meditation and as little weighted as possible with the conventions of

³⁷ *MMW*, s.v. “*dhyāna*.” Patañjali identified three phases of meditation in his *Yogasūtras*, in which *dhyāna* was the second: “the concerted fixing of the mind (*dharana*); effortlessly centered concentration (*dhyana*); and the transformative realization that the seer and the seen are one (*samadhi*).” *Yoga: The Art of Transformation*, ed. Debra Diamond (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Books, 2013), 124. Though Sri Aurobindo defined *dhyāna* simply as “concentration” in his Glossary, I think Patañjali’s view would not be too different from what Sri Aurobindo meant by *dhyāna* in this essay: “effortlessly centered” concentration.

material life (272).” He notes the difference in European salons and museums of his day, which often overcrowded their galleries with contemporary art that make this kind of inwardly directed gaze an impossibility; though he seems to recognize that the outwardly directed gaze of Europeans is supported by this kind of crowded context for art: “though perhaps I am wrong, and those are the right conditions for display of European art (272).” On the other hand, the Indian, Japanese, and other Asian contexts for sacred art and architecture are in seclusion, “in a treasured secrecy when the soul is at leisure from life (272).”

The inward/upward gaze of consciousness embodied in traditional Indian and Asian art and architecture is an expression of ascendant spiritual practice for Sri Aurobindo. For him, of all the traditional Indian arts, architecture requires this ascendant gaze the most to understand it. “Indian architecture especially demands this kind of inner study and this spiritual self-identification with its deepest meaning” since typically one has to move into secluded locations to experience these spaces (272). They are characteristically located in mountains and caves—separate, apart, and away from daily life and worries. He gives a few examples, which ironically, are now no longer secluded, since cities grew up around them in subsequent years: Srirangam, Rameshwaram and the Meenakshi temple in Madura from Tamil Nadu, and the Srikalahasti Temple and the Sinhachalam Temple in Andhra Pradesh (See Figure 2.3 for an example). They were built with upwardly formed *gopurams* and inwardly structured *garbhagrihas* (“womb chambers” or holy of holies). He notes that this ascendant spiritual experience in architecture is found in Aryan and Dravidian cultures, architecture of both the North and the South of India. These diverse architectural languages express “different styles and motives,” but they “arrive at or express unity,” a unity of purpose for spiritual growth, the element that Mr. Archer fails to see and feel since he does not gaze into their “spirit.” For Sri Aurobindo, even Muslim architecture—though different in style and motivation from Hindu architecture—shares an ascendant spiritual expression and awakens this kind of inward/upward gaze. “The great



Figure 2.3. Srirangam Temple Gopuram, <http://www.flickr.com/photos/appaji/> - <http://www.flickr.com/photos/appaji/242201883/sizes/l/>; accessed March 3, 2016.

mosques embody often a religious aspiration lifted to a noble austerity which supports and is not lessened by the subordinated ornament and grace. The tombs reach beyond death to the beauty and joy of Paradise (284).”

Scholars today, like Lindsay Jones and David Morgan, thankfully interpret sacred architecture with much greater nuance and understanding than William Archer. Jones notes that there is meaningful work involved in the process of meditative interpretation, the kind that Sri Aurobindo advocates, even as it is also an experience of play. It can be likened to a game that is played by a

willing ritual participant, not one devoted to an ivory tower experience of another's cultural objects. In fact, this ludic quality is key both to Jones's and Sri Aurobindo's hermeneutics. Jones writes, "Gadamer encourages us...to entertain the possibility that the experience (or interpretation) of a work of art or architecture...is less appropriately conceived as an instance of 'people viewing things' than as a 'dialogue between persons,' or even more graphically as the 'buoyance of a game in which the players are absorbed.'"³⁸ In the language of Sri Aurobindo, the experience of sacred art and architecture can be more than simply engaging the sense mind and the reasoning intellect, but involves the whole person in this view, in whatever way that "whole person" may be conceived. The analogy of the whole person in play gets to the heart of the productive or transformative nature of interpreting art and architecture. The participant both plays the game and is played by it at the same time.³⁹ This play may be experienced as lighthearted, but for Gadamer and others, it is also very serious. It requires, in the view of Paul Ricoeur, a surrender of mental control if one is to gain any benefit, to play "by the rules of the game" called for by the art or architecture, which may well conflict with rational logic. For Sri Aurobindo, surrender is also necessary, surrender of the *mānasa buddhi* (reasoning intellect), which he recognizes is a very serious and painful part of the game.⁴⁰

Jones notes that there are ritual-architectural events that can play roughly with the participants. This happens when the event destabilizes the participant and transforms what was familiar into what is strange. For Jones, "[e]ffective architecture both orients and disorients, beckons

³⁸ Lindsay Jones, *The Hermeneutics of Sacred Architecture*, 46. He quotes Gadamer in his treatment of this theme in *Truth and Method*, 97-105.

³⁹ See David E. Klemm, *Hermeneutical Inquiry* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986), 2: 235.

⁴⁰ As we will see in later writings of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, this notion of play (*līlā*) is important and it is related to the idea of *ānanda*, or delight, bliss. There is a point at which the play that is serious work becomes play that is pure delight, and one realizes the delight of *Brahman* through the play of the world. In this view, there comes a point at which one masters the work so well that it is no longer work, no longer an effortful endeavor, but is accomplished with ease and becomes genuinely play-ful.

and withholds, soothes and surprises.”⁴¹ There must be enough that is familiar and attractive with the architecture and the behavior within it that would lure one to participate. On the other side, there must be enough that is uncomfortable and destabilizing to insure the possibility of “productivity” in Jones’s word; or in Sri Aurobindo language, there must be enough opposition to fuel growth and transformation. In Chapter Five, we will see how he and the Mother built a dormitory to do just this kind of destabilization that might lead to growth for their students. The opportunity to find a new way of seeing, possibly a way of seeing with the vision of the intuition requires that the attachments to conventional, familiar ways of the *mānasa buddhi* be disappointed.

In a similar way, but for a different purpose directed at academics, Jones reminds his readers that although ritual-architectural events are playful, Paul Ricoeur’s notion of a wager in the hermeneutical endeavor is present as well. The rewards of interpretation for the scholar come with risks when one wagers on the potential value of another cultural experience. These risks include becoming a different person that one might not have intended as a result of participating in a ritual-architectural event of another culture; of potentially losing one’s own intellectual certainties and sense of place in the world. Jones writes, “Ricoeur (among others) additionally provides a clear warning that we must, methodologically speaking, be prepared for altered awareness that disappoint and undermine as well as extend our celebratory self-understandings. Interpreting the architecture of others is a gamble that we can, in an important sense, lose.”⁴² Indeed, it is hoped in Sri Aurobindo’s Yoga, that such experience of art and architecture would indeed disappoint and undermine “our celebratory self-understandings;” that we would indeed lose the gamble if such self-understandings have outlived their usefulness. His view of this kind of disappointment and loss, is ultimately not so lamentable even if painful. At about the time he wrote these articles on Indian art

⁴¹ Jones, *The Hermeneutics of Sacred Architecture*, 66.

⁴² Ibid.

(sometime between 1914-21), Sri Aurobindo describes this experience of loss in spiritual growth generally,

The future repels us even while it irresistibly attracts. The repulsion lies partly in our own natural recoil from the unknown, because every step into this unknown is a wager between life and death; every decision we make may mean either the destruction or the greater fulfilment of what we now are, of the name and form to which we are attached. ... But the conquest has to be attempted, the wager has to be accepted. We have to face the future's offer of death as well as its offer of life, and it need not alarm us, for it is by constant death to our old names and forms that we shall live most vitally in greater and newer forms and names. ... The greatest spirits are therefore those who have no fear of the future, who accept its challenge and its wager; they have that sublime trust in the God or Power that guides the world, that high audacity of the human soul to wrestle with the infinite and realise the impossible, that wise and warrior confidence in its ultimate destiny which mark the Avatars and prophets and great innovators and renovators.⁴³

This “challenge and its wager” of a future fulfillment, that both repels and attracts, “orients and disorients” in Jones’s words, is fuel for future spiritual growth and expansion in Sri Aurobindo’s view. For him, in a sincere experience of ritual architectural events, as well as in life in general, we can and should lose the value of previously cherished worldviews and our attachment to the intellect as being authoritative, so that we might gain broader worldviews based on broader ways of knowing especially in the faculty of the intuition. This loss is a real death, but this death “need not alarm us, for it is by constant death to our old names and forms that we shall live most vitally in greater and newer forms and names.”

V. INDIAN ART-3 [SCULPTURE]

Continuing with his desire to encourage the confidence of his fellow Indians and to herald the values of Indian art, in this article Sri Aurobindo writes about the achievements of Indian sacred sculpture and their relationship to Indian identity. Archer calls Indian sacred sculptures that adorn

⁴³ Sri Aurobindo, *Essays in Philosophy and Yoga* (Pondicherry: SAAP, 1998), 129-30. Chapters Five and Six are devoted to individual ashramites whose lives with the Gurus demonstrate a negotiation with this kind view of the future and the losses involved when one wagers on the value of life in the Ashram.

their temples “Mumbo-Jumbo,” “colossal, contorted forms, looming menacing through the gloom—everywhere a riot of violent, often sensual, imagery, nowhere one touch of nature or point of rest.”⁴⁴ In answer to this, Sri Aurobindo begins by making the usual pejorative comparisons with European sculpture, which again, fare badly in his estimation. However, he also makes some interesting comparisons and contrasts between sculpture and painting, and informs the reader of sculpture’s ideal and the kind of intuitive seeing that is needed for its successful interpretation. He writes,

Not the ideal physical or emotional beauty, but the utmost spiritual beauty or significance of which the human form is capable, is the aim of this kind of creation. The divine self in us is its theme, the body made a form of the soul is its idea and its secret. And therefore in front of this art it is not enough to look at it and respond with the aesthetic eye and the imagination, but we must look also into the form for what it carries and even through and behind it to pursue the profound suggestion it gives into its own infinite (290).

Interpreting Indian sacred sculpture as though it were art for the sake of aesthetics or art for the sake of morality would be a mistake, in his view, or at least to miss the potential depths held “in, through, and behind” the form. Indian sacred sculpture is art for the sake of (ascendant) spirituality, he might say, so it needs to be interpreted from this vantage. It must be seen with in an interior directed, sacred gaze. He argues that since this kind of sculpture was made from a consciousness trained in *dhyāna* (“effortlessly centered concentration”), the participant willing to use *dhyāna* would be the appropriate person to interpret it accurately. “Soul realisation is its method of creation and soul realisation must be the way of our response and understanding (291).”

We can hear echoes of this view, I think, in Stella Kramrisch’s interpretation of ancient and medieval Indian art and architecture, when she speaks of the yogic training that each artist must master to perform his craft. She says in an interview,

Yoga discipline is as much a prerequisite for the Indian artist as was physical discipline for the Greek. It is as though in Indian art the image is embossed from

⁴⁴ Archer, *India and the Future*, 188.

within by the movement of breath, or circulation, through the vital centers of the living being, unimpeded by the gross matter of the actual physical body. A plastic quality conducted by the smooth channels of the body and limbs. These smooth channels have a pristine glow and a continuity of outline as though what they hold were an equivalent of the breath of God.⁴⁵

The spiritual ideal that Sri Aurobindo seeks is, I think, what Kramrisch here describes, capturing in physical matter somehow the movement and flow of “the breath of God,” which leads the Indian imagination to make the human figure more plastic in its depiction (See Figures 2.4 and 2.5 for examples). This creative process and its products are made possible by yogic discipline.

Using a text of ancient and medieval Indian art by O.C. Gangoly, Sri Aurobindo describes the plates of different Buddhas and *Śivas* in this article, and notes the way that the human form in these images expresses something beyond itself while not relying on the natural form to “weigh down” the eye.⁴⁶ In these *ascendant* spiritual artworks, he argues that the ideal is a “divine and subtle body” rather than a physical body, an ideal that “appeals to the best, *sādhū-sammatam*, that is deepest and greatest which satisfies the profoundest souls and the most sensitive psychic imaginations (296).” In his view of the *sādhū-sammatam*, “that which is highly honored by the saint,” this art would please a saint, it would stimulate his or her taste. More broadly put, this art would satisfy the highest aspect of the person, the soul; the intuitive knowing that is latent in all.

The “divine and subtle body” that Sri Aurobindo mentions is similar to what Kramrisch discovered in Indian ancient and medieval art. One of her students, Barbara Miller, writes that it “was through the Sarnath Buddha images that [Kramrisch] perceived the process whereby a ‘subtle body’ is translated directly into stone, an insight that underlies her vision of Indian classical art (See

⁴⁵ Stella Kramrisch, *Exploring India's Sacred Art*, ed. B.S. Miller (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983), 24. Quoted in Dorothy Norman, “Conversations with Stella Kramrisch,” *Marg* 6 no. 4 (Deepavali, 1953): 3.

⁴⁶ He seemed to have used the following text: O. C. Gangoly, *South Indian Bronzes: A Historical Survey of South Indian Sculpture with Iconographical Notes based on Original Sources* (Calcutta: Nababharat Publishers, 1915).



Figure 2.4. Head of Buddha, 5th c. CE, Gupta period, Sarnath, India. <http://www.pinterest.com/pin/130534089172650964/>; accessed March 3, 2016.

again, Figures 2.4 and 2.5).⁴⁷ Kramrisch says that the sculptures of classical Indian art are based on the human form, but they represent the “subtle body” and not the physical body. Miller continues:

But to visualize this subtle body one must think of it as a combination of fluid, plastic shape and linear rhythms, a transubstantiated form...For this shape in life is the place of man’s transformation. Art divests it of the accidents of death, stagnation, labour and restlessness, and remakes it as a vessel that holds self-absorption in an unending flux of modelled form and gliding line.⁴⁸

Sri Aurobindo, like all Vedāntins before him, defines the subtle body—the *sūkṣma deha*—as the

“subtle-physical support of the inner being [*antahkaraṇa*]’ and contains the *cakras* or centres of the

⁴⁷ Barbara Stoler Miller, *Exploring India’s Sacred Art*, ed. B.S. Miller (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983), 3.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.



Figure 2.5. Buddha, 6th c. CE, Gupta period, Sarnath, India. <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/487866572105053801/>; accessed March 3, 2016.

inner consciousness; this subtle body ‘penetrates and is interfused with the gross body’ (*sthūla deha*).⁴⁹ Above the gross and subtle bodies is the causal body, the *kāraṇa deha*, which Sri Aurobindo defines as “the Causal Idea which, by supporting and secretly guiding the confused activities of Mind, Life and Body ensures and compels the right arrangement of the Universe,’ same as *vijñāna*.”⁵⁰

⁴⁹ The Glossary, 176.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 89. *Karṇa*, meaning “instrument or means” as in “inner instrument” in *antahkarṇa*, is similar to *kāraṇa* meaning “effecting or causing” but also “instrument and means.” *MMW*, s.v. *karṇa* and *kāraṇa*. We can note here that an artistic depiction of the causal (*vijñāna*) body in physical form is what he and the Mother later called the supramental body, which has specific characteristics that we will see in the Mother’s work with her painters in Chapter Six. The innovation in art owing to this supramental depiction is distinctive in Indian art history as I hope to show.

The *vijñāna* (what he later calls the supermind) is the *kāraṇa deha* or causal body. Sri Aurobindo claims that this is the spiritual anatomy that ancient Indian art seeks to express, and an accurate interpretation of this sculpture would be impossible without an understanding of this perspective or familiarity with it. “Indian sculpture, Indian art in general follows its own ideal and traditions and these are unique in their character and quality (297).”

To be clear, Sri Aurobindo wants to ensure his readers do not think that he promotes a repetition of classical Indian forms in sculpture for the sake of those forms. “Let [India] recover, not limited by old forms, but undeterred by the cavillings [*sic*] of an alien mind, the sense of the grandeur and beauty and the inner significance of its past achievement; for in the continuity of its spiritual endeavour lies its best hope for the future (297).” He seems to say that there does not seem to be only one way of depicting the “subtle body” as though this has been achieved for now and always by classical Indian figures. There is ample variety of figures even in Indian classic art history when studied closely. He seems to want to remind and inspire his Indian readers of the complex and compelling heritage that they possess so that they might forge a new sculptural expression based on what he feels is the complex and rich ascendant experience of the spirit.

VI. “INDIAN ART-4 [PAINTING]”

Archer compares sacred Indian painting to the Modern art of his day, which is not a compliment. In his view, Modernist painting is just like Indian civilization at that time, in a state of arrested development. Further, Indian painting is only admirable when the Islamic influence came through. “Indian design,” he writes, “has never thrown off the shackles of a somewhat helpless convention.”⁵¹ In response to this summary dismissal, Sri Aurobindo describes the spiritual value of Indian painting, and articulates the key insight that all

⁵¹ Archer, *India and the Future*, 231.

Indian art is a throwing out of a certain profound self-vision formed by a going within to find out the secret significance of form and appearance, a discovery of the subject in one's deeper self, the giving of soul-form to that vision and a remoulding of the material and natural shape to express the psychic truth of it with the greatest possible purity and power of outline and the greatest possible concentrated rhythmic unity of significance in all the parts of an indivisible artistic whole (301).

Sri Aurobindo claims that any sacred Indian masterpiece in paint would have three characteristics based on an inward and upward gaze of the artist: “soul-form of self vision,” “purity and power of outline,” and “rhythmic unity of significance.” We will see the same three characteristics in what he calls the three “intensities of poetic speech” in *The Future Poetry*, which he calls 1. the “soul’s vision of truth,” 2. style or “verbal form woven with thought-substance,” and 3. “rhythmic movement.” These three “intensities” combine to form what he calls the *mantra*.⁵² Firstly, he notes that the physical basis of any artwork is the way the forms repeat and change, creating a coherent visual “rhythm.” The “power of outline,” the style of the forms, how they are rendered by the personality of the artist in the manner of the cultural traditions in which he or she lives, is the next major physical element. It would seem from his description that rhythm and style are only given life by something less tangible, if only less definable with words: inward and upward vision, which we discussed above, that sees the way in which the spirit of a form holds that form within itself, and not vice versa. It is a vision that would, in his understanding, be able to take hold of the artist’s consciousness to guide the composition in rhythm and form in order to manifest something compelling enough as to be considered true or genuine at some interior level, both for the artist and the audience. This vision might be related to what he means by *dṛṣṭi*, that spiritual vision expressed by the *Upaniṣads* that is progressively attained in his Yoga when first encountered in the *vijñānabuddhi*.

⁵² Sri Aurobindo, *The Future Poetry* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Press, 1997), 19. The visual equivalent might be a *yantra* though Sri Aurobindo never explores this Tantric means of meditation through geometric diagrams. He makes use of the word *yantra* in its other meanings of “tool, instrument, machine” in his *Record of Yoga*. The *yantra* is the “the *ādhāra* [vessel, receptacle] as ‘a complex engine of Nature’ placed at the service of the *īśvara*.” Glossary to the *Record of Yoga*, 213. See Madhu Khanna, “Yantra,” in *Encyclopedia of Religion* 14 (2005): 9871-9872 for a summary introduction of visual *yantras*.

In its fullness this faculty becomes the *vijñāna*, which has a nature that is perfect *dṛṣṭi*, “seeing, not conceiving. It is the vision at once of the essence and the image.”⁵³

Where sculpture’s aesthesis exists for Sri Aurobindo in the “static eternities” and “on the holding back of life in the stabilities of the self and its eternal qualities and principles,” painting’s expression of beauty can be found in “the moved and indulgent dwelling on...mobilities of the soul,” and “the grace and movement of psychic and vital life (301).” Painting can use color and movement more easily than sculpture, which must rely on “mass and line,” since for the sculptor of sacred forms, “eternity seizes hold of time in its shapes and arrests it in the monumental spirit of stone or bronze (302).” What is unique to sacred painting, then, is “the delight of the self out into a spiritually sensuous joy of beautiful shapes and the coloured radiances of existence (302).”

Building on the three characteristics that he names above, “soul-form of self vision,” “purity and power of outline,” and “rhythmic unity of significance,” Sri Aurobindo draws upon another important part of India’s cultural heritage and makes reference to the *ṣaḍaṅga* or “six limbs” of ancient Indian painting. The origin and date of these six principles of Indian sacred painting are not certain, as they were most likely handed down orally from master to student. Scholars place written record of their existence from the fourth century BCE to the first century CE. The most organized written version is included as part of a commentary by Yaśodhara on the *Kāma Sūtra* by Vātsyāyana in the first century and made into a couplet in that text: “Thus is painting six-limbed: differentiation of forms, proportions, sentiment, arrangement of beauty, likeness, and style of color, and brushwork.”⁵⁴ These six characteristics or “limbs” are meant organically to combine in a painting to produce the desired effect, which as Prithvi Kumar Agrawala writes, is “not to be thought of a mere

⁵³ Sri Aurobindo, *Isha Upanishad* (Pondicherry: SAAP, 2003), 71. It is important to distinguish this kind of *dṛṣṭi* from that of the Buddhist *dṛṣṭi*, which means “a wrong view.” *MMW*, s.v. “*dṛṣṭi*.”

⁵⁴ *rupabhedah - pramāṇāṇi - bhāvaḥ - lāvanyaḥ - sādṛśyam - varnikābhāṅga iti citraṁ ṣaḍaṅgakam*. See Prithvi Kumar Agrawala, *On the Ṣaḍaṅga Canons of Painting* (Varanasi, Ratna Printing Works, 1981), 47-84.

assemblage of six loose principles but like an *aṅgin* (living being) a compact and well-constituted body of painting with its six indispensable ‘limbs’ (*aṅgas*).⁵⁵ They make up, in Agrawala’s estimation, three levels of painting:

1. a formal level: *rūpabhedah-pramāṇāni*, or differentiation of forms, proportions, having to do with the theme of the painting.
2. an ideal level: *bhāvaḥ-lāvaṇyayojanam-sādhṛīyam*, or sentiment, arrangement of beauty, likeness having to do with the conceptual idea of the painting.
3. a practical level: *varnikābhāṅga*, or style of color and brushwork, which is craftsmanship.

In the early twentieth century, there were two competing interpretations of this ancient text. One was what scholar Natasha Eaton calls “archeological,” which eschewed any interpretation of the text that allowed for innovation, and upheld traditional canons that would “stipulate exact(ing) rules....[that] must at all times be followed by the modern artist.”⁵⁶ Akshay Maitreya, Ananda Coomaraswamy and Stella Kramrisch all shared this view. The other was an aesthetic interpretation that was put forward by a contemporary of Sri Aurobindo, Abanindranath Tagore, nephew of Rabindranath Tagore. He valued freedom to innovate and saw in this ancient text a way to pioneer his own creative method in his context. Eaton observes, “It was Tagore’s intention to blur color and word, to merge the ancient canons with subtle freehand innovation to create a hybrid aesthetic.”⁵⁷ He wrote a text to this end, one that commented on this couplet entitled *Ṣaḍaṅga or the Six Limbs of Painting*, written in 1916.⁵⁸ It seems clear that Sri Aurobindo read the ancient text of *Ṣaḍaṅga*, but not obvious that he read Abanindranath’s commentary. Still, Sri Aurobindo shares the value to blend

⁵⁵ Agrawala, *On the Ṣaḍaṅga Canons of Painting*, 17.

⁵⁶ Natasha Eaton, “*Swadeshi* Color: Artistic Production and Indian Nationalism, ca. 1905-ca. 1947,” *The Art Bulletin* 95, no. 4 (December 2013): 626.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 627.

⁵⁸ Abanindranath Tagore, *Sadanga or the Six Limbs of Painting: A Series of Canons Laying Down the Main Principles of Art* (Calcutta: The Indian Society of Oriental Art, 1916).

innovation with ancient canons or rules for painting. In fact, the Yogi spoke very positively of Tagore's work in both his journals *Karmayogin* and *Arya*, so he may have been at least familiar with his creative goals.⁵⁹

I would suggest that Sri Aurobindo gives more of a Vedāntic gloss to these elements of Indian painting, and one that fits his personal spiritual experience, which is his idea of vision (*dr̥ṣṭi*). Critical for him is the use of all six elements guided by the inner vision of the soul, otherwise achievement of these elements would be reduced to mere technique. Ideally, painting is an outward manipulation of matter guided by an inward authority, so mastering mimesis or correct *pramāṇani* for *pramāṇani*'s sake would not be appropriate. This is because Sri Aurobindo thinks that the mental capacities that control skill and technique should be subordinated to the intuitional or heart capacities of the soul in the creative process. If not, if the mental capacities guided the process, “the inner Artist, the wide-eyed voyager in the vaster psychical realms, is obliged to subdue his inspirations to the law of the Seer of the outward, the spirit that has embodied itself in the creations of the terrestrial life, the material universe (304).” For Sri Aurobindo, this mimetic painter à la William Archer, this “Seer of the outward,” possesses an imagination that can only serve the physical nature's imagination. In his view, one can only go so far in expressing the “psychical realms” with this imagination.

⁵⁹ As Partha Mitter has shown, Abanindranath's emphasis in *Sadanga or the Six Limbs of Painting* is to create a pan-Asian artistic program influenced by Victorian tastes. In this work, Abanindranath tries to show that India's *śaḍaṅga* shares a common origin as the Chinese six canons of painting articulated by Xie He. “Significantly, both the Sanskrit couplet and the Chinese canons were given a Platonic gloss, which confirmed Abanindranath's artistic priorities,” which were to interpret literally the six limbs. Partha Mitter, *Art and Nationalism in Colonial India: 1850-1922* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 371. Mitter claims that Abanindranath gave *rūpabheda* (differentiation of forms) and *pramāṇani* (proportion) a Platonic gloss, as he wrote that *rūpabheda* “enabled us to distinguish between things as they were [in the Forms] and as they appeared to the eye, and *pramāṇani* (measure or proportion) were interpreted literally, while *bhāva* [sentiment], the pivot point of his work, was given a Victorian slant. Explained as the power of suggestion, it described his own approach: if one wished to depict a beggar, one used indirect means such as a bowl of coins and torn rags rather than making a direct statement (Ibid., 371 and 373).”

He comments on the Impressionist movement as a more refined example of this limitation when he writes,

The farthest [the Impressionist artist] has got in the direction of a more intimately subjective spirit is an impressionism which still waits upon her models but seeks to get at some first inward or original effect of them on the inner sense, and through that he arrives at some more strongly psychical rendering, but he does not work altogether from within outward in the freer manner of the oriental artist (305).

Ever ready to defend the Indian character over the European, in his view, Impressionism is a good beginning by expressing a first turn inward to the subjective feelings of the artist, but the turn is still on the surface of inwardness, or maybe the underside of outwardness. Impressionism begins with the life of nature and moves to the life of the spirit, whereas he sees the heritage of Indian painting starting with the life of the spirit and moving through the medium of paint to the life of nature. It is a difference of starting points and emphasis. The loveliness (*lāvanya*) of nature has value, but in his estimation “a soul of psychic grace and beauty which is for the Indian artist the true beauty” shines all the more brightly (306-7).

In mimetic art and a mimetic *sādṛśya*, (likeness, resemblance, correspondence to the theme expressed in the art), he argues that the goal is “to correlate the form as it is to the physical eye with the truth which it evokes without overpassing the limits imposed by the appearance (307).” For him, making sure the image looks believable only from the perspective of the physical senses limits the artist from expressing ascendant spiritual experience. He thinks that the Indian sacred artist of the past was more liberated, because he started from an *internal* contemplative vision. The Indian artist was able to see

in his soul the thing he [wished] to express or interpret and [tried] to discover the right line, colour and design of his intuition which, when it [appeared] on the physical ground, [was] not a just and reminding reproduction of the line, colour and design of physical nature, but much rather what seems to us *a psychical transmutation of the natural figure* (307, my emphasis).

For Sri Aurobindo, the human form—in fact, all the forms used in an Indian sacred painting

(animals, buildings, plants etc.)—were used as a means to express a radiance, a presence that could be both immanent and transcendent of the forms.

How does one make a psychical transformation of a natural, i.e., physical figure? Sri Aurobindo says that “it is effected by a disposition of pure masses, a design and coloured wave-flow of the body, *bhaṅga* [style of color and brushwork/craftsmanship], a simplicity of content that enables the artist to flood the whole with the significance of the one spiritual emotion, feeling, suggestion (308).” For him, European mimetic painting expresses a mixture of desirable and unfavorable qualities; it expresses the spirit colored by the personality of the artist, expressing the active and vital natures with their passions. In comparison, in a painting that he called “The Adoration Group” of Ajanta, also known as “Buddha with [His Son] Rahula” depicts something more refined, less obvious and dramatic in his view (See Figure 2.6). For him, this painting shows how “the Indian artist tones down the outward-going dynamic indices and gives only so much of them as will serve to bring out or to modulate something that is more of the grain of the subtle soul, something more static and impersonal of which our personality is at once the mask and the index (311).” Sri Aurobindo points out that the devotion of both the Mother and the son Rahula to the Buddha in this painting expresses a unity of emotion rather than serving a variety of emotion. In his view, to interpret this painting correctly, it would not be enough to appreciate the religious feeling and creative techniques in the work. The “spiritual intention served by the technique, the psychic significance of line and colour, the greater thing of which the religious emotion is the result has to be felt if we would identify ourself with the whole purpose of the artist (309).”

There does seem to be a straightforward depiction of devotion, of love, and of intimacy in this image, and the figures are not rendered naturalistically, but represented enough to stimulate a recognition that these are human beings that live in a world where joy and peace, compassion, and affection are naturally the custom. In *Karmayogin* Sri Aurobindo writes that visual art “*stills* the



Figure 2.6. Cave 17, shrine Interior doorway, left: *Buddha with Rahula*, 5th century, Gupta period (c. 320-480), Maharashtra, Aurangabad District, Ajanta India. Taken from Sri Aurobindo, *The Renaissance in India*, with permission from the SAA Trust.

emotions and teaches them the delight of a restrained and limited satisfaction,” which is how this image seems to function for him.⁶⁰ Sri Aurobindo interprets classic Indian art as a process whereby the artist first goes inward to contact the spirit and essence of her theme, and then outward in creation of a form or image based on an experience of that spirit or essence.

VII. CONCLUSION

If we set aside the polemics of these articles, they creatively build on the motivations and

⁶⁰ Sri Aurobindo, *Early Cultural Writings*, 448. My emphasis.

language of the *Karmayogin* articles of “The National Value of Art” by examining actual examples of India’s heritage to prove his point that India is not a barbarous nation, and in fact, is a steward of ascendant spiritual knowledge and experience that only the best of human beings have achieved. This knowledge and experience come from an inward and upwardly directed sacred gaze of the spirit, not in the outward gaze of the senses to form or matter, which is evidenced in the experience of architecture, sculpture, and painting of India’s past. These four articles also lay out an intuitional hermeneutics that for him provides an accurate interpretation of sacred art and architecture, building on the psychological system of the *antahkaraṇa* (inner instrument) and higher spiritual levels that he articulated in *Karmayogin*. This hermeneutics proposes a process of growth in consciousness, which requires a certain way of seeing based on an ascendant spiritual practice of meditation (*dhyāna*) that might arouse the faculty of the intuition. This practice is necessary because the appropriate senses of the intuition must be awakened to feel the subtle stimulation that sacred art seeks to occasion. This stimulation comes not only from the art object, but also from the ritual-architectural/art event. In Sri Aurobindo’s view, poking with the sharp-edged critical eye of the intellect (the outwardly directed gaze that characterized William Archer’s criticism) into the amorphous and flowing forms of Indian sacred art, will lead only to misreadings and disappointments. The difficult and painful surrender of the reasoning intellect (*mānasa buddhi*) to a process that is larger than the participant and the work of art is the key to accurate interpretation, and in the end, mature spiritual growth.

Sri Aurobindo might agree with Lindsay Jones’s comment, “the interpretation of sacred architecture, as I conceive of it, is an exercise in hermeneutical reflection upon a set of circumstances that are themselves exercises in hermeneutical reflection,” if Jones were talking about the lower mind, the rational intellect which can only grope for accurate interpretation using the

senses and imagination as its means.⁶¹ Sri Aurobindo, however, is not a scholar seeking to justify an important theory. He wants to show his readers that Indian sacred art and architecture invites the observer to go into a place within human consciousness that sees more clearly and ultimately without mediation, the essence of life. In either case, both Jones and Sri Aurobindo claim that one needs to be a willing participant of ritual architectural or artistic events to be able to fully appreciate the art and architecture. This is something that would have horrified people like William Archer in the early twentieth century.

Sri Aurobindo thinks that Indian sacred architecture, sculpture, and painting, each has its own “playful” methods for stimulating the growth of consciousness in an ascendant spiritual approach, if one can surrender to them by participating in the ritual forms that they invite and the potential loss of worldviews that they risk. He writes about upward climbing forms and inward holy chambers of classic Indian architecture, the inner subtle and causal bodies in sacred sculpture, and the inner vision (*dr̥ṣṭi*) that inspires and is expressed in sacred painting. These are beautiful and alluring Indian art forms, yet they pressure the participant to go beyond the intellect. They are confounding and disorienting at the same time, and therefore take on the character of a game. These artworks are playful, but they can indeed also cause the participant to “lose the game,” in the language of Jones and his hermeneutical tradition; “losing” in the sense of losing one’s previously valued worldview and praxis, and in losing the intellect’s authority for making sense of the experience. This loss is, in the end, a gain in the Yoga of Sri Aurobindo, since it is the necessary basis upon which growth into the spiritual faculties can begin. These losses are, therefore, a potential pressure or opposition to the lower nature that can fuel the progress of the *citta* into other centers of knowing like the intuition.

For the Yogi, the *rhythm* and *style* of Indian sacred art and architecture embody a *vision* of

⁶¹ Jones, *The Hermeneutics of Sacred Architecture*, 37.

divinity for the viewer. He does not explore the nature of these three crucial artistic elements or define their function with great clarity in this set of articles, but he will do so in the next text that we will consider, but relating them to the art form of poetry. In *The Future Poetry*, he examines a particular line of development in English poetry that for him, promises a future expression that would not just replace one kind of cultural gaze for another, but might utilize both the ascendant (inward and upward) spiritual gaze of traditional Indian art, but also the outwardly directed scientific and “disinterested gaze” of his Western opponents, to create something entirely new. This poetry would seek to celebrate the new human being of the supermind (*vijñāna*), and not only a new individual, but a new humanity living a life divine on a new Earth. We have so far explored what sacred ascendant spiritual art can do in Sri Aurobindo’s opinion: it can counteract the potentially abusive pull of the unchecked materialistic and scientific mind (*mānasa buddhi*) of the British with a broader inward gaze to spiritual potentials that can include more of life. In *The Future Poetry*, Sri Aurobindo will try to describe what a descendant spiritual art might be like for a future global culture. More than describe it, he also tries to demonstrate it in his epic *Savitri*, which we will consider as well.

Chapter Three

Sri Aurobindo's Yoga: Creating the Future Poetry

I. INTRODUCTION

The last two chapters covered Sri Aurobindo's affirmation and advocacy of traditional Hindu Indian culture in the context of British colonialism. During this period, in both poetry and prose, he praises the potential of Hindu visual art to help consciousness ascend to the realms of the divine. He writes poetry like the following, based on an early personal experience of a Hindu sculpture:

In a town of gods, housed in a little shrine,
from sculptured limbs the Godhead looked at me,—
A living Presence deathless and divine,
A Form that harbored all infinity.¹

He writes prose on the same theme: “The image to the Hindu is a physical symbol and support of the supraphysical; it is a basis for the meeting between the embodied mind and sense of man and the supraphysical power, force or presence which he worships and with which he wishes to communicate.”² Sri Aurobindo appreciates this ascendant experience of traditional Hindu iconography, but he did not remain within it. Heehs writes, “when we read his writings of 1913 and after, we find few references to Hinduism, and none in which he spoke of himself as a Hindu or wrote from a Hindu standpoint. A negative approach to religion in general came to the fore in his writings of this period.”³ It is helpful to note that “religion” means something specific in this

¹ Sri Aurobindo, *Collected Poems: The Complete Poetical Works* (Pondicherry: SAAP, 1972), 139.

² Sri Aurobindo, *The Renaissance and Other Essays on Indian Culture*, 147.

³ Peter Heehs, “Sri Aurobindo and Hinduism,” *AntiMatter* 2, no. 2 (2008): 40.

context. Sri Aurobindo had an increasingly negative view of the place of mainstream religions in his practice, not a negative view of religion generally. He considered the Integral Yoga a form of what he later called “true religion,” “spiritual religion,” or simply “spirituality,” which are distinguished in his thought from mainstream religions, including Hinduism.⁴ Sri Aurobindo was increasingly seeking to find an inclusive, non-sectarian approach to spiritual practice, one that tries to take the fruits of spiritual ascent (which his experience of the Hindu religion supported), and integrate them with matter in a more difficult spiritual descent to evolve nature and culture into what he calls the supramental manifestation (which both mainstream religions and even other “spiritual religions” did not yet know, in his opinion).

We see this later movement of descent expressed in his own art form of poetry beginning around 1916, when he began an experiment that was not limited to his Hindu experience or any religious approach that he knew. He began his epic poem *Savitri* to try to evolve his own version of a future, descendant, and non-sectarian poetry. We also see this approach in the way he created an intentional community devoted to this evolution of nature and culture that is explicitly for those who want to let go of rigid orthodoxy, ritual, and caste distinctions, and follow what he understands to be “the spiritual Truth,” which for him is preeminently the supramental transformation of creation. This eventually became his Ashram. Writing to a Muslim disciple, who felt excluded by some Hindu practice within the community, Sri Aurobindo said that his “Ashram has nothing to do with Hindu religion or culture or any religion or nationality. The Truth of the Divine which is the spiritual reality behind all religions and the descent of the supramental which is not known to any religion are the sole things which will be the foundation of the work of the future.”⁵

⁴ See Sri Aurobindo, “Religion as the Law of Life,” in *The Human Cycle* (Pondicherry, SAAP, 1997), 173-81.

⁵ Undated letter, published in *Bulletin of Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education* 53 (February 2001): 72.

The first set of articles that we examined, “The National Value of Art,” were written at a time in his life when he did call himself a Hindu. Even then, Peter Heehs writes, “this was a matter of cultural sympathy rather than religious conviction.”⁶ One may argue from a religious studies perspective that his cultural sympathy is an expression of his religious conviction, but still it must be admitted that “he never took part in conventional Hindu worship or observed Hindu social practices,” except his marriage ceremony in 1901.⁷ In 1912, about three years after he moved to Pondicherry, he dropped the terms “Hindu” to describe himself and the “*sanātana dharma*” to describe his path. The second set of articles that we examined last chapter on “Indian Art” were written after this period, in 1920. However, they still carried his deep interest in Hindu culture and its potential for human growth, but this was largely motivated by his political concerns, “as a defender of Indian culture against attacks by European rationalists” like William Archer.⁸

What marks the next text that I will examine as noteworthy is his departure from traditional Hinduism and the ascendant spiritual practices that they express and engender, as well as the strictly inward and upward gazes that they inspire. He clearly values this ascendant approach since he sees that the British materialistic approach to life (motivated by an outward gaze) is harmful to his country without it, and we see its influence both in his aesthetic theory in this next text and in his poetry. However, what became increasingly important to him is the ultimate value, not of Hinduism and its spiritual mastery, but of a thread of growth that he perceives within it that might lead to another kind of goal other than spiritual *or* material mastery: “the descent of the supramental which is not known to any religion.” *The Future Poetry* is his attempt to characterize in prose a descendant

⁶ Peter Heehs, “Sri Aurobindo and Hinduism,” 36.

⁷ Ibid., 33. Heehs implies that Sri Aurobindo’s insistence on getting married in a Hindu ceremony had nothing to do with orthodoxy, but was a way to rebel against his grandfather, who was a member of the Brama Samaj movement, which was influenced by European rationalism that disparaged Hinduism and its culture (36).

⁸ Ibid., 40.

spiritual practice embodied in a new kind of art that Hindu practices hinted at but never achieved in his view.⁹ Since this descent is a turn towards matter, in *The Future Poetry*, he turns toward the Western hemisphere to find evidence of its potential as well. Just as he made a kind of cultural pilgrimage to understand and honor the past Hindu ascendant spiritual traditions of sacred art, architecture, and literature in the journal *Karmayogin*, in this next set of articles he begins a cultural pilgrimage to understand and honor the potential of a future descendant approach in English poetry.

Like the articles on “Indian Art,” the articles of *The Future Poetry* were first written for the journal *Arya*, though editors in the Ashram Archives posthumously created the book. There is some overlap between the two series as the articles on Indian art were written from January-April 1920 and the ones in *The Future Poetry* were written from December 1917-July 1920. They fit within a larger project that Sri Aurobindo makes of the journal *Arya*, which is his attempt to link India’s ascendant spiritual wisdom with European critically- and scientifically-minded analysis. To accomplish this integrating task, he thinks that he needs to “acknowledge the problem in its integral complexity and not be restrained in the flexibility of its search by attachment to any cult, creed or extant system of philosophy.”¹⁰ He outlined a clear approach to fulfilling this task, which became his most important works in many volumes. Heehs concisely summarizes this project in the following way:

During the six and half years of *Arya*’s existence, Aurobindo never strayed far from this five-fold project: to reinterpret the Indian tradition, to develop a metaphysics based on the truths of the spirit and nature, to uncover the principles of yoga by which these truths could be experienced, to show how the same truths could be applied to political and social life, and to make them the basis of a spiritualized literature and art.¹¹

⁹ Although he finds poetic description of the supramental manifestation in the *Vedas*.

¹⁰ Sri Aurobindo, *Essays in Philosophy and Yoga* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Press, 1998), 146.

¹¹ Heehs, *The Lives of Sri Aurobindo* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 263.

The Future Poetry fits within the last crowning goal of this five-fold project, for it expresses his understanding of aesthetics founded, not only on aspects of Hinduism, but mainly on his “own ideas and his already conceived views of Art and life.”¹² He wanted to expand and improve *The Future Poetry* in the late 1940s in order to make a book out of the articles; however, he died before he could complete it.

In this chapter, I will limit my analysis to the first part of this text, which comprises twenty-four chapters that describe: 1) three main features of the future poetry and how to read it; 2) how the English language and culture contributed to his notion of it; 3) some examples of twentieth-century poets that may have expressed it during his lifetime; and 4) what the future poetry might be like in a world culture that lived the “life divine.” The second part of *The Future Poetry* describes Sri Aurobindo’s notion of the “five eternal powers, Truth, Beauty, Delight, Life, and the Spirit,” which are the key attributes that for him will be harmonized and fully manifest in the future poetry.¹³ There is not the space to examine these in detail here, but I will examine the second and third “eternal powers” of beauty and delight in the conclusion of this dissertation, since beauty is an issue of disputed importance in our current cultural context of the United States as well as delight to some extent. We will conclude this chapter, however, with an examination of his poem *Savitri* as a means for his own growth in yoga, and an experiment to manifest these five powers in verse. It is in this poem that we can more clearly see his conscious hospitality for the principle that I mentioned in the Introduction, as defined by the Mother: “oppositions and contraries are a stimulus to progress” and “opposites are the quickest and most effective means of shaping Matter so that it can intensify

¹² Sri Aurobindo, *On Himself* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Press, 2000), 371.

¹³ Sri Aurobindo, *The Future Poetry* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Press, 1997), 222. Hereafter I will place page numbers in parentheses after each quotation and for this chapter only.

its manifestation.”¹⁴ His poem *Savitri* does more than theorize about supramentalizing poetry through this principle of opposition, but is his experiment to demonstrate it.

II. NEW WAYS IN ENGLISH LITERATURE: THE INFLUENCE OF JAMES COUSINS

In his articles on Indian art, Sri Aurobindo engages William Archer, who writes with an unsympathetic glare on Indian life and identity. In *The Future Poetry*, Sri Aurobindo engages with James Henry Cousins (1873-1956), a contemporary Irish Poet, who writes sympathetically about Indian poetry and culture (See Figure 3.1). Early on in his life, Cousins was part of the literary circle in Ireland that included W. B. Yeats, George William Russell and James Joyce. In this circle, he helped to create the Irish Literary Theatre that promoted Irish heritage and identity, motivated much like Sri Aurobindo, to combat British hegemony. Under the patronage of Annie Besant, the president of the Theosophical Society, Cousins traveled to India in 1915 for his first time when he became close to Rabindranath Tagore, the 1913 Nobel Laureate in literature.

In 1917, Cousins wrote a book that Sri Aurobindo read called *New Ways of English Literature*. In it, Cousins claims to have had an “experience of faculties and entities beyond the reach of the five senses,” and “[s]uch knowledge and experience have been granted to me in some measure, and have obviously influenced the judgment of these essays.”¹⁵ This must have attracted Sri Aurobindo, since finally, here is a Westerner who appreciates the inward and upward gaze of the Indian. He must also have been impressed with Cousins’ intention and demonstration “to make education in India both national and rational by putting it in contrast with the vital spirit of literature [and to]

¹⁴ The Mother, *On Thoughts and Aphorisms* (Pondicherry: SAAP, 2001), 165.

¹⁵ James Cousins, *New Ways in English Literature* (Madras: Ganesha and Co., 1917), xv. For more details about the life of Cousins, see James H. Cousins and Margaret Cousins, *We Two Together* (Madras: Ganesh and Co, 1950).



Figure 3.1: The Mother, *portrait of James H. Cousins*, 1920, Pondicherry, India. This painting must have been done in Japan, though it does not say so from the source *The Mother: Paintings and Drawings*.

make the cultivation of good modern English speech” possible for Indians.¹⁶ Sri Aurobindo shares this goal as well. Finally, Cousins reviews Sri Aurobindo’s poetry in *New Ways of English Literature* in a favorable way, saying that his work is “a meeting-place of Asiatic universalism and European classicism,” and “nothing is celebrated by him in song for its own sake. The poet’s [Sri Aurobindo’s] eyes perpetually go behind the thing visible to the thing essential, so that symbol and significance are always in a state of integration.”¹⁷ Cousins is speaking Sri Aurobindo’s language. Integration of

¹⁶ Ibid., xiii.

¹⁷ Ibid., 27 and 28. Cousins’s first edition came out in November 1917, and the first articles that make up *The Future Poetry* were written in December 1917.

symbol and significance, as we will see, is one of the characteristics of the Yogi's definition of supramental poetry.

James Cousins also met Mirra and Paul Richard a few years after *New Ways in English Literature* was published. He says that he met the couple in Japan "at whose home in the suburbs of Tokyo I was a frequent visitor," sometime between the dates of May 1919-April 1920.¹⁸ In his autobiography, he also mentions having gone on holiday with them. Cousins later visited the Sri Aurobindo Ashram in August 22-23, 1921. He writes:

My first visit to Sri Aurobindo, 9 to 10 a.m., was difficult. He left all the talking to me. But my second interview next morning was the other way around: he had presumably taken my measure from my previous day's talk (a risky thing for even a sage to do), and talked for the allotted hour. What he said is as completely forgotten as what I said the previous day; but I retain a flavour of gentleness and wisdom, breadth of thought and extent of experience that marked him out as one among millions.¹⁹

Curiously, Cousins does not mention anything about Mirra. She had been back to the latent community just over a year by this time.

In Sri Aurobindo's estimation, Cousins' work "suggests the whole question of the future of poetry in the age which is coming upon us (3)." What seems significant to Sri Aurobindo about Cousins' work is not so much the information that he writes, though Sri Aurobindo thinks India languished in knowledge of good English literature at this time, but that Cousins advocates for a sympathetic and familiar hermeneutic in *New Ways in English Literature*, which Sri Aurobindo prescribes in his articles on Indian art. Both men thought that India at that time lacked "a distinctive critical and literary temperament, which may be perhaps not so much the whole mind of the critic as the response to his subject in a mind naturally in sympathy with it (6)." Their kind of interpretation is intuitive, one that "is a greater (not exclusive) tendency to the spiritual rather than the merely

¹⁸ James H. Cousins and Margaret Cousins, *We Two Together* (Madras: Ganesh and Co, 1950), 352.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 394.

earthly, to the inward and subjective than the outward and objective, the life within and behind than to the life in front (6).”

III. THE MANTRA: INTENSE VISION, FORM, AND RHYTHM

Sri Aurobindo’s writings about literature and poetry compared to his writings about visual art are much more informed by his research interests and his own creative practice and experience as a poet. In fact, the Mother usually advised the visual artists in the Ashram, while he guided the poets. Nonetheless, one can detect in *The Future Poetry* important elements of Sri Aurobindo’s aesthetic theory that he develops in the previous writings: the same need to awaken the faculty of intuition and of art’s source in the *vijñāna*, what he now calls the supermind.

Sri Aurobindo claims that any ancient or medieval Indian masterpiece in visual art contains three characteristics: “soul-form of self vision,” “purity and power of outline,” and “rhythmic unity of significance.” As I mentioned last chapter, these three characteristics seem to be related to those in *The Future Poetry*, what he calls the three “intensities of poetic speech:” 1) the “soul’s vision of truth,” 2) style or “verbal form woven with thought-substance,” and 3) “rhythmic movement.”

Rarely, when these three “intensities” combine at very high levels of refinement in poetry, they form the *mantra* (19). Vision is the key element of the three in the creative process, but vision of what? It would not be vision of the world seen with the optic nerves (part of what I’m calling “the outward gaze”), though he does not completely exclude it. In “The National Value of Art,” he writes that art for the sake of aesthetics—art made by and for the pleasure of the senses—has a provisional value, as it is a prerequisite for the later functions of art, which are art for the sake of morality and then for spirituality. But art made for the sake of Sri Aurobindo’s idea of spiritual development, which is art that reaches for the ideal of the *mantra*, can “never be a copy of life (7).” This is because art in his view, if it seeks to express the deepest, the highest that the human self can know, must be creative,

not merely imitative, revelatory of something not seen by the eye, something hidden that is seen only with inner spiritual sight, what Sri Aurobindo calls *dr̥ṣṭi* in his previous writings we have examined. With this spiritual vision, Sri Aurobindo's yogi-artist "throws into significant form a truth he has seen (8)." He calls this significant form the *mantra*, his ideal of poetic expression in this text.

Sri Aurobindo seems to want to amplify the traditional meaning of the word *mantra* and, like Abanindranath Tagore with traditional Indian painting ideals, to retrieve what he considers the ancient Indian understanding of art for our contemporary context. Traditionally, *mantra* is defined as the "instrument of thought, speech, sacred text or speech, a prayer or song of praise, a Vedic hymn or sacrificial formula," "a sacred formula addressed to any individual deity ... a mystical verse or magical formula."²⁰ *Mantra* comes from the root $\sqrt{\text{man}}$ in Sanskrit, which means "to think, believe, imagine, suppose, conjecture," also "to think of in prayer," "to meditate on."²¹ This root is where we get our word "mind" (in Sanskrit *manas*) and "man" in English. A "man" is simply a "thinking, believing, imagining" (nongendered) being in this definition. *Tra* is an instrumental suffix. In a broad sense, the *mantra* is a tool to aid the thinking/believing human or *manu* to be what she or he is by nature; to maximize her potentials in thinking, believing, imagining, thinking of in prayer, or meditating on in life. In a word, the *mantra* is a tool to make human beings more fully human by expressing or opening to faculties above the intellect, which would amplify—in the words of Sri Aurobindo—the right hand of the *buddhi* and its ability to perceive and imagine, as well as the left hand and its ability to reason and judge by tying these two hands to the intuition. Sri Aurobindo conjectures what the future poetry might be like, which has implications, I would argue, for any art form and architecture. In his view, this future art would behave much like the *mantras* in the past, as instruments of human expression that elevate consciousness into broader ranges of itself; however,

²⁰ *MMW*, s.v. "*mantra*." See also Frederick M. Smith, "Mantra," *Encyclopedia of Religion* 8 (2005): 5676-5678.

²¹ *Ibid.*, s.v. "*man*."

without sectarian connections to traditional religions limited to only expressing so-called “religious,” “sacred,” or “liturgical” themes. Sri Aurobindo’s notion of vision or *dṛṣṭi* that this *mantra* seeks to embody includes both the inward/upward gaze and the outward gaze of consciousness.

Sri Aurobindo notes two errors that many tend to make when evaluating the worth of art and poetry, both of which obfuscate the possibility of creating or experiencing the *mantra*. The first is to assume that art is a luxury that is best regarded as an “elevated pastime (11).” By the eighteenth century, following the influence of Kant, cultivating taste meant becoming free from mundane life to contemplate objects of genius in a “disinterested way,” as we mentioned last chapter. Art increasingly became something reserved for the wealthy, who could afford this luxury. To use art this way is an error for Sri Aurobindo, because the arts can activate more than the pleasure of the body and its senses, the vital nature and its desires, the intellect and its imagination.²² The “*mantric*” art that he advocates would heighten the functions of the body, life, and mind, and at the same time, decenter them from the experience; they would become servants and lifted into the more inward reception of delight in the soul. The measure of art’s ability to reach through these veils (*kośaḥ*), making them work harmoniously with the soul behind them, is for Sri Aurobindo the test of art’s value. “Therefore poetry has not done its work, at least its highest work, until it has raised the pleasure of the instrument and transmuted it into the deeper delight of the soul (12).” Delight or *ānanda* is central. As we saw in Chapter One, Sri Aurobindo noted that in the *Upaniṣads*, this *ānanda* is the motivating force that created the universe, which he seeks to recapitulate in the creative process and in creative expression.²³ For him, *ānanda* is the goal of all human striving and as such, is very

²² Sri Aurobindo’s notion of *mantric* art was, it seems to me, for the poor as well as the wealthy. I will touch on this theme in the conclusion.

²³ See Chapter One, pp. 58-59.

serious play. This delight is not an “elevated pastime,” it is the serious play (*līlā*) of the force (*śakti*) of life, “a great formative and illuminative power (12).”

The other error that Sri Aurobindo thinks could be made when people evaluate the arts would be to equate poetic excellence with the perfections of technique or “correctness of execution (12).” This error is the general tendency of British cultural theorists and artists at the time.²⁴ For him, the *mantra* is not created by skill guided by the intellect, but by skill piloted by heightened consciousness in the soul. “In the heat of creation the intellectual sense of it becomes a subordinate action or even a mere undertone in his mind, and in his best moments he is permitted, in a way, to forget it altogether (13).” Of his own creative process, Sri Aurobindo writes, “I don’t think about the technique because thinking is no longer in my line. ...the two agents are sight and call. ...If the inspiration is the right one, then I have not to bother about the technique then or afterwards, for there comes through the perfect line with the perfect rhythm inextricably intertwined or rather fused into an inseparable and single unity.”²⁵ In his experience, the “heat of creation” spontaneously gives rise to skillful form and rhythm in his poetry: “there comes through the perfect line with the perfect rhythm.” Yet this skill is not acquired without past effort, it is just that he had achieved a certain level of mastery in his skill that he need not think about it for this kind of *mantric* expression. He writes, “But all [those technical issues are] usually taken care of by the inspiration itself, for as I know and have the habit of the technique, the inspiration provides what I want according to standing orders.”²⁶ These “standing orders” come from the soul such that its spontaneous action takes over and replaces the intellect in the consciousness (*citta*) that in a paradoxical manner is motivated by “a surge of hidden spiritual excitement by the subconscious part of his Nature (13).”

²⁴ See Chapter One, pp. 39-41.

²⁵ Sri Aurobindo, “Letters on ‘Savitri,’” in *Savitri*, 730.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 731.

This seems to be another way to say that somehow the inspiration above is linked with the subconscious below, completing a circuit of creative force. This is the role of intuition, as we will see below. This “spiritual excitement by the subconscious” is “caused by a vision in the soul of which it is eager to deliver itself (17).” This vision in the soul could be related to any (inner or outer) object, physical, vital, intellectual, or spiritual. “It is sufficient that it is the soul which sees and the eye, sense, heart, and thought-mind *become passive instruments of the soul* (17, my emphasis).”

He notes the essential musical quality of rhythm that can engage the body of the listener to first physically feel the message of a poem. Rhythm is more than metrical form for him, but it can carry a “subtle music” that delivers its impact to the “inner hearing” (*śruti*) of the listener (19). At its height, rhythm is a “balanced harmony maintained by a system of subtle recurrences in the foundation of immortality in created things, and metrical movement is nothing else than creative sound grown conscious of this secret of its own powers (21).” Therefore, rhythm, a physical manifestation in the poem felt in the body and heard by the physical can express spiritual hearing. It would seem that if this physical manifestation of *śruti* amplifies the vision, the *mantra* manifests. Vision or *dṛṣṭi* has another technical meaning for Sri Aurobindo, which he also calls “revelation” in his *Record of Yoga*. It is accompanied by *śruti* or “hearing,” which he also calls “inspiration.” Vision and hearing (*dṛṣṭi* and *śruti*) respond to the “sight and call” that he writes about in his creative experience of writing *Savitri*.

It is helpful to note that in his system *dṛṣṭi* and *śruti* are two of the four powers of his notion of “genius,” the *jñāna*, which is part of his vocabulary in the *Record of Yoga*, his personal journal of yogic experiments written during this time period (mainly from 1912-20). This vocabulary is not present in *The Future Poetry*, which relies on English terms, but using these Sanskrit is helpful to bridge the previous chapters with this one (See Table 4). For Sri Aurobindo, the soul seems to be the music conductor of these higher powers of genius that in the end have their “own higher and

Table 4.

The higher faculties of consciousness with the “inner instrument” or *antahkaraṇa*.

<i>Brahman</i> (<i>Saccidānanda</i> -Being/Consciousness/Bliss)		
I. <i>Vijñāna</i> (Gnosis or Supermind)		
II. <i>Jñāna</i> (Genius)		
SARAMĀ (<i>intuition</i>) + DAKṢIṆĀ (<i>discrimination</i>) = <i>smṛti</i> (<i>memory</i>)	ILĀ <i>dr̥ṣṭi</i> (<i>revelation</i>)	SARASVATĪ <i>śruti</i> (<i>inspiration</i>)
III. <i>Vijñānabuddhi</i> (Intuitive Mind)		
IV. <i>Buddhi</i> (Intellect)		
“Servant Left Hand” = reasoning + judgment	“Master Right Hand” = perception + imagination	
V. <i>Manas</i> (The Sense Mind or the “Sixth Sense”)		
VI. <i>Citta</i> (“The Storehouse of Memory”)		

unanalyzable methods (24).” The other two powers that make up the genius are intuition (*vijñānabuddhi*) and discrimination (*niveka*), which together he called *smṛti* (“that which is remembered”).²⁷

The four powers of the *jñāna* correspond to four lower powers of the intellect. Specifically, for Sri Aurobindo, the power of perception in the intellect becomes revelation when brought into the *jñāna*, the power of imagination in the intellect becomes inspiration in the *jñāna*, reasoning becomes intuition, and judgment becomes discrimination. When this elevation happens, according

²⁷ See Chapter One, pp. 50-53 for an exploration of Sri Aurobindo’s notion of *jñāna*. The Yogi’s use of *smṛti* and *śruti* should not be confused with the categories of religious texts in Hindu traditions. *Smṛti* (dharma texts, and the Epics) comprise more specific ethical, moral, and ritual directives, and *śruti* (the *Vedas* and *Upaniṣads*, mainly) comprise more poetic and mythic texts that give general inspiration and direction to thought, feeling, and behavior. *Smṛti* texts are comparable to state laws, while *śruti* texts could be thought of as federal laws. *Smṛti* comes from the Sanskrit root √*smṛ*, which means “to remember,” and *śruti* from the root √*śru*, which means “to hear.” *Śruti* are a higher order of language modality than *smṛti* because they are thought to have a more direct and intimate contact with Divinity, “heard” directly from God’s mouth as it were, whereas *smṛti* are more removed, “remembered” by lower faculties of human consciousness.

to him, artistic expression is affected; therefore vision, form, and rhythm are affected as well, and become more “intense.”

The elevation of the lower faculties into the higher can produce not only a particular character of rhythm, but also of form or style in the creative process. The first aim of style “is to make the thing presented living to the imaginative vision, the responsive inner emotion, the spiritual sense, the soul-feeling and soul-sight (26).” Style would be, it seems, the verbal form that holds the content of the vision and stimulates the imagination of the reader to share that vision. This “imaginative vision” is an interpretive faculty that is developed in the intellect and moves, according to Sri Aurobindo through different stages, from “aesthetic imagination,” which uses words to create surface beauty, “poetic fancy,” which is a play of mental fictions, “subjective imagination,” which creates images of the mental and emotional world within the poet, “objective imagination,” which creates vivid images of the outer world, and “poetic imagination,” which can take any or all of the previous uses of imagination and embody the spirit within them (27). This would be, I think, a description of the imagination being lifted in stages into the power of inspiration (*śruti*). Poetic imagination seems to be for Sri Aurobindo the deepest hermeneutical tool for the poet and the listener, as it is infused with a fuller force of inspiration by the *jñāna*. It “is creative, not of either the actual or the fictitious, but of the more and the most real; it sees the spiritual truth of things—of this truth there are many gradations—which may take either the actual or the ideal for its starting point (27).”

He does not seem to advocate any particular style in poetry that can best do this work of inspired imagination. His notion of style is expressed as something that flows spontaneously from the *jñāna* into the *mantra* through the individual personality and her social location. Therefore, it seems to me, his notion of the *mantra* would be possible in many different languages and cultures.

Though he is not as pluralistic in his view of past cultural achievement in ascendant sacred art, the future shows more promise for him in terms of descendant supramental art.

Since the kind of vision that is required for this high level of *mantric* writing is comparable for the Yogi to the kind of writing in the *Vedas* and the *Upaniṣads*, Sri Aurobindo logically compares the future poet with the *kavi*, the title of the inspired singers/writers of Vedic and Vedāntic revelation. *Kavi* comes from the Sanskrit root √*kū*, which means, “to sound, to make a noise, cry out, moan, cry (as a bird), coo, hum (as a bee).”²⁸ To reach her deepest potential, the artist as *kavi* seeks vision of truth that spontaneously and naturally results in a longing “coo” from the depths of her soul such that the audience, listener, or viewer might potentially sense the longing within her own personal experience. *Kavi* means poet, seer, prophet, or sage in different contexts and as an adjective means “gifted with insight, intelligent, knowing, enlightened, wise, sensible, prudent, skillful, cunning.”²⁹ Sri Aurobindo writes that the *kavi* helps others to see what she sees with “inner senses”:

Poetry, in fact, being Art, must attempt to make us see, and since it is to the inner senses that it has to address itself,—for the ear is its only physical gate of entry and even there its real appeal is to an inner hearing,—and since its object is to make us live within ourselves what the poet has embodied in his verse, it is an inner sight which he opens in us, and this inner sight must have been *intense* in him before he can awaken it in us (31-32, my emphasis).

Whether it is vision, style, or rhythm, Sri Aurobindo uses the category of “intensity” to describe progressive levels of these three elements of *mantric* poetry and art: they are the three “intensities of poetic speech.”

“Intense” comes from the Latin *intens-us* and means “stretched, strained, tight, violent,” and where we get the English verb “intend,” which means “to stretch forth, extend, to point forwards.”³⁰

²⁸ *MMW*, s.v. “*kū*.”

²⁹ *Ibid.*, s.v. “*kavi*.”

³⁰ *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd. ed., s.v. “intense.” I will be abbreviating this to *OED* from now on.

Intense can also mean: “raised to or existing in a strained or very high degree; very strong or acute; violent, vehement, extreme, excessive; of colour, very deep; of a feeling, ardent,” and “strained or strenuously directed to some end.”³¹ Given these definitions, Sri Aurobindo’s use of the word fits well with his overall view of growth and of spiritual growth in particular. This growth in his Integral Yoga is *intense*—ardent and strained, violent and stretched, tight and extreme, deep and excessive. It is to be accomplished in the crucible of internal and sometimes external conflict, in the heat of opposing forces that pull consciousness in directions that cannot at first harmonize, that stretch the sheaths (*koṣaḥ*) of thought and feeling “violently, excessively, acutely.” Sri Aurobindo’s *mantric* artist is therefore “high-strung,” it seems to me. We will see this kind of description of the Ashram artist more clearly in the next three chapters on the Mother; the artist-disciple of the Integral Yoga is one who seeks to be an instrument tuned for the plucking of a Master Musician who, in his *līlā*, stretches the strings of the mind for this purpose of “playing” on them, of sending out into the environment the clearer and purer vibrations to awaken others “to make them live within themselves” more fully. The Mother plays this role for her students, together with Sri Aurobindo. With this creative process in mind, it seems to me that the telos of Sri Aurobindo’s Yoga can be seen in his aesthetic theory, which is the transformation of the basic consciousness (*citta*) in the lower nature into that which is higher (*Cit*), by first stretching out the lower, straining it into the highest point of intensity, so that it can be a forceful and useful instrument in the Guru’s Hands.

IV. READER-RESPONSE HERMENEUTICS IN *MANTRIC* POETRY

In trying to read or interpret *mantric* poetry, Sri Aurobindo mentions a version of historical critical methodology. Typically, this approach, among other things, discerns the meaning of a text by constructing a valid image of the author. Sri Aurobindo is interested in this aspect in a secondary

³¹ Ibid.

way, however. Principally, he seeks to understand who is the “speaker” in the poem and how this voice relates to his own experience and his own time, using more of a synchronic approach. He writes, “we have to go straight to the poet and his poem for all we need essentially to know about them,—we shall get there all that we really want for any true aesthetic or poetic purpose (42).”

Therefore, the primary concern for Sri Aurobindo is his response as a reader to the poem and only secondarily he might be interested in the author and her context, or the historical critical method using a diachronic approach. He encourages reader-response, however, as long as the reader becomes an “intuitive” reader, which has to do with responding to the “eternal true substance” of the poem (42). He says, “It is when we can get this response at its purest and in its most direct and heightened awakening that our faculty of poetic appreciation becomes at once surest and most intense (42-3).”

For Sri Aurobindo, *mantric* meanings of a sacred poem are not isolated in the personality of only the author, the poem, or the hearer, but in an experience like Jones’s ritual-architectural event that we explored last chapter. Meaning is found, we might say, in a ritual-poetic event that surrounds and includes all three points of reference. For him, however, this event of meaning is a process of growth that is impersonal, which is why the historical author and reader are secondary. He describes the experience this way:

It is, we may say, the impersonal enjoyer of creative beauty in us responding to the impersonal creator and interpreter of beauty in the poet. For it is the impersonal spirit of Truth and Beauty that is seeking to express itself through his personality; and it is that and not his personal intelligence which finds its own word and seems itself to create through him in his highest moments of inspiration (43).

This impersonal nature of “Truth and Beauty” within the poem, the enjoyer, and creator characterizes the ritual-poetic experience, and it is intense: stretching the personal experience beyond itself to participate in an impersonal one. It is, in Sri Aurobindo’s words, “on the whole and up to a certain point a growth and progress, a constant labour of self-enlargement and self-finding (44).”

Interpretation of meaning is therefore a dynamic process of discernment that leads to understanding not only the voice of the poet, the meaning of the poem, but also to understanding a deeper, more impersonal self as a reader in light of the ritual-poetic event.

To unpack more what this ritual-poetic event might look like, we can compare Walker Gibson's reader-response hermeneutics to Sri Aurobindo's, especially when considering the ways to negotiate one's identity in the process of reading (See Table 5).³² Gibson observes that the reader's experience of reading is as complex as the author's experience of writing. The author's identity is secondary to the constructed speaker in a text. Compared to the speaker, for Gibson, the author is merely "distracting and mysterious, lost in history."³³ The speaker is a projection of the author, constructed by her imagination, a "mask and costume"—a *prosopon* or *persona*—that is the "real" object of interpretive reflection "in the sense most useful to the study of literature."³⁴ The reader's experience is just as involved, Gibson points out, since her flesh and blood identity is just as "irrelevant" and "lost in history" as the author's compared to the *prosopon* or "mask and costume" that the reader becomes in the process of reading.³⁵ This imaginative projection of the reader is what is of real use in Gibson's hermeneutics. He calls this mask the "mock reader," an artificial identity that the reader provisionally adopts to see how it may fit or not as she reads. Gibson writes: "Subject to the degree of [her] literary sensibility, [the reader is] recreated by language" into the mock reader.³⁶

³² I am more familiar with the work of Gibson than the work of Wolfgang Iser and Hans-Robert Jauss, who are more commonly known for reader-response hermeneutics.

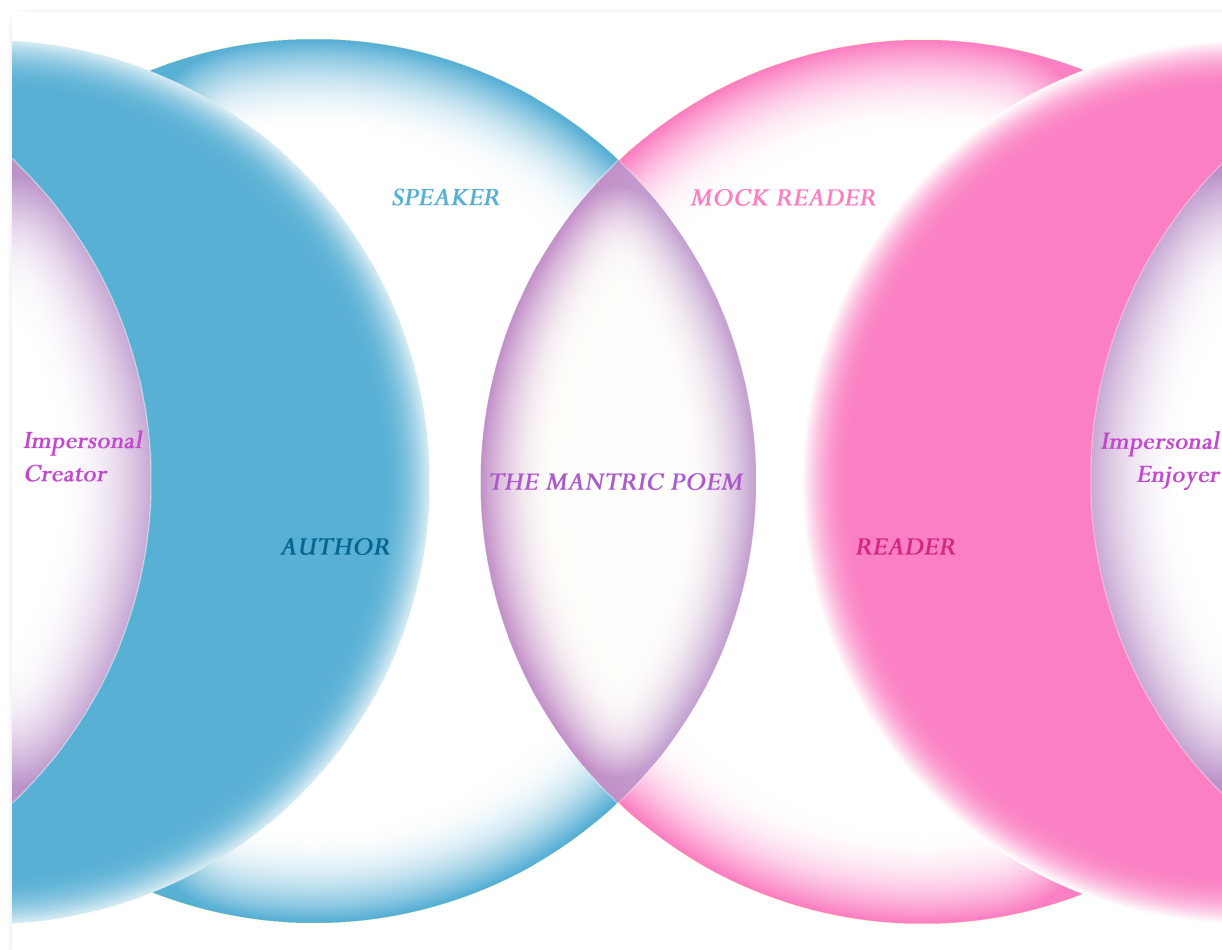
³³ Walker Gibson, "Authors, Speakers, Readers, and Mock Readers," in *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism*, ed. Jane P. Tompkins (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1980), 1.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 1-2.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 1.

Table 5.
Sri Aurobindo's Intuitive Reader-Response Hermeneutics (the ritual-poetic event) of a *mantric* poem.



The reader becomes a mock reader if the language of the speaker in the text is compelling enough to inspire a temporary surrender of one's current personality, to "try it on for size," we could say. Trying on a new identity that is presupposed in the text challenges the identity of the reader as she currently is. This dynamic stimulates a kind of crisis of self: Is this new identity someone that the reader wants to be or not? Jane Tompkins comments on this process, that "the concept of the mock reader makes [one] more aware of his own value system and better able to deal with problems of self-definition."³⁷ Gibson's theory, like all reader-response hermeneutics,

³⁷ Jane P. Tompkins, "An Introduction to Reader-Response Criticism," in *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism*, xi.

subordinates the text to the value of the reader, suggesting “that literary criticism be seen as part of larger, more fundamental processes such as the forming of an identity.”³⁸

Sri Aurobindo could not agree more, that art should always be placed in service to growth. Reading *mantric* poetry is a process of surrendering one’s personal identity for an impersonal one, in an experience that is, “a growth and process, a constant labour of the self-enlargement and self-finding (44).” Like reader-response, Sri Aurobindo is describing a process of self-discovery in reading: of coming to the text as a certain person, whose personality is somehow found wanting or limited in light of the impersonal spirit of Truth and Beauty in the *mantric* poem. The poem reveals this and invites the reader to surrender to being a new person that she is not currently, what Gibson calls a “mock” reader; what Sri Aurobindo might call a “mock intuitive reader.” This surrender, therefore, arouses what it might be like to think and feel with the intuition, what it might feel like to taste (*rasa*) the impersonal spirit of Truth and Beauty. In the reading and in the process of testing the poem to see if integrating it into her life over time is found life-giving and amplifying, the reader may become that “mock intuitive reader” in a permanent way. She is not just a reader in the guise of who the poem wants her to be; she has become that in fact, no longer artificially acting the part. In other words, the *mantric* language invites the reader to surrender over time, an old identity for a new one, what is lower (the intellect) for what is higher (the intuition); to surrender a personal experience for an impersonal one. In fact, the poem invites the reader to become someone she is not on the surface, yet truly *is* in her secret heart. She is invited to be “blent” with God’s glory as Sri Aurobindo writes in his poem “Surrender.”

Surrender

O Thou of whom I am the instrument
 O secret Spirit and Nature housed in me,
 Let all my being now be blent
 In Thy still glory of divinity.

³⁸ Ibid.

I have given my mind to be dug Thy channel mind,
 I have offered up my will to be thy will:
 Let nothing of myself be left behind
 In our union mystic and unutterable.

My heart shall throb with the world-beats of Thy love,
 My body become Thy engine for earth-use.
 In my nerves and veins Thy rapture's streams shall move,
 My thought shall be hounds of Light for Thy power to loose.

Keep only my soul to adore eternally
 And meet Thee in each form and soul of Thee.³⁹

This surrender is an extreme kind of transformation and union when we consider that to blend means to “mix ... intimately or harmoniously so that their individuality is obscured in the product.”⁴⁰ The reader is invited to surrender the personality and blend her mind, will, heart, and body with the language of the impersonal “still glory of divinity” in the *mantric* poem, such that poem, reader, and poet lose a fixed and separate identity in the radiance of the divine in this ritual-poetic event.

As I read Sri Aurobindo, from another level, all three poles (poet, poem, and reader) of the ritual-poetic event are caught up in a game of surrender that is about “the impersonal spirit of Truth and Beauty” communicating itself to itself. This is why the experience is ultimately impersonal, since it does not center itself in any one place or person, for it is found “in each form and soul of Thee.” This experience even leaves the current structure of the personality behind as the historical author and the historical reader surrender to being the impersonal speaker and the impersonal mock reader. In Sri Aurobindo's language, the projection of the poet is “the impersonal creator and interpreter of beauty,” who invites the reader to try her language on for size (See the blue side of Table 5). On the other hand, the projection of the reader—the mock intuitive reader, is

³⁹ Sri Aurobindo, *Collected Poems*, 611. It is unclear when, but he wrote this sonnet sometime between 1934-47.

⁴⁰ *OED*, s.v. “blend.”

“the impersonal enjoyer of creative beauty in us responding to” the speaker in the *mantric* poem (See the pink side of the Table). A *mantric* poem does its work when the divine within the author meets the divine within the reader and the three join the divinity within the poem, leaving “nothing behind” in the experience, except “to adore eternally/ And meet Thee in each form and soul of Thee.” (See the purple within the Author, Reader and Poem).

V. A CULTURAL PILGRIMAGE: THE ROLE AND LIMITS OF A NATIONAL IDENTITY FOR POETRY

Sri Aurobindo notes that “[g]enerally, every nation or people has or develops a spirit in its being, a special soul-form of the human all-soul and a law of its nature which determines the lines and turns of its evolution (46).” He devotes the next seventeen chapters of *The Future Poetry* to a Western cultural pilgrimage, interpreting English poetry and its *dharmā* or “law of its nature,” which is its potential for expressing an intuitive kind of vision, style, and rhythm in a new supramental way and in an English soul-form.

Sri Aurobindo estimates that the English language combines two elements that have vied for dominance in the course of its development since Chaucer: the Anglo Saxon and the Celtic. The former deals pragmatically with the facts and difficulties of life “by a strong vital instinct, a sort of tentative dynamic intuition,” not by “clear intellectual thought or by force of imagination or mental intuition (52).” The later Celtic element possesses an “inherent spirituality, the gift of the word, the rapid and brilliant imagination,” “love of the things of the mind” and beyond it with a forgotten but still influential “mystical tradition (52).” This seems to be a description of each cultural element, one could say, of the right and left hand of the *buddhi*, which battles for control of the consciousness of the English without a balanced resolution. After describing in detail this English development, he argues that poetry as well as all art that relies on the Anglo Saxon influence more than the Celtic

leads to a surface “imitation of nature,” which is a neglect of the spiritual and the universal (the left usurping the right hand of the *buddhi*). The result is a “defect in the English mind,” which “is its inability to follow the higher motives disinterestedly to their deepest and largest creative results (61).”

Sri Aurobindo sees that in his context, English poetry is at a crossroads between the two cultural influences. He feels that to blend these Anglo Saxon and Celtic elements with Indian influences is to cure any overly materialistic experience and expression, and, it would seem, to transform a wholly ascendant spiritual expression into a descendant one as well. If this hybridity can be achieved, he thinks poetry will “move to the impersonal and universal, not through the toning down of the personality and individuality, but by their heightening to a point where they are liberated into the impersonal and universal expression (61).” The paradox of his perspective about human growth is expressed here in this quotation. The more impersonal one becomes, the more the personality is amplified, stimulated and useful to this “universal expression.”

Sri Aurobindo traces the psychological growth of this intensity by interpreting individual poets through a particular line of British cultural history. The following is his four-part list of development towards *mantric* poetry:

1. Chaucer and the Poetry of “the External Life of appearances”: an expression that relies on the body and its senses.
2. (Elizabethan Drama) Shakespeare and “the Poetry of the Life Spirit”: an expression that relies on the vital nature and its desires
3. Milton and the Poetry of “the Light of Reason”: an expression that relies on the intellect and its capacity for detached observation and mature imagination
4. Wordsworth/Byron, Blake/Coleridge, and Keats/Shelley, and the beginning stages of the Poetry of the “intuitive seeing and the inspired hearing (101)” (the initial rays of light from the powers of *dr̥ṣṭi*, *śruti*, and *smṛti*)

As Sri Aurobindo explores each of these poets and their achievements in analyzing the psychological growth of English poetry, one gets a clearer picture of what he means by the inner spiritual faculties and by *mantric* poetry and art. For Sri Aurobindo, this examination of English poetry, at

least this chosen line of development, leads to *mantric* poetry written with the intuition. He places each of the nine poets above on a continuum that spans the age of pre-modernity to the age of reason, and the age of reason to the dawn of the age of intuition.

For Sri Aurobindo, these poets and those who are influenced by their work are evidence of “a new futurist rather than modernist age in which the leader of the march shall be intuition rather than the reasoning and critical intelligence (108).” This “new futurist age” is growing, he acknowledges, alongside the “reasoning and critical” Modernist age that has been overly influenced by what he sees as “the observing and analyzing eye of science (109).” Early twentieth-century poetry includes some helpful and interesting innovations, but Sri Aurobindo thinks that on balance, the Modern period creates more excesses and incomplete attempts to understand and express the essence of nature, humanity, and God than the way a future use of the *mantra* would do. As he understands it, Modern poetry and art reflect a scientific bent and becomes “sentimental,” “superficial,” keying in on “the fantastic and the supernatural,” “artificial,” and “bizarre (112).” This Modern impulse can be summed up for Sri Aurobindo in the word *realism*, which is not the value of representational or mimetic works of art that the Italian Renaissance and its legacy produced, but “an attempt to see man and his world as they really are without the veils and pretenses; it is imagination turning upon itself and trying to get rid of its native tendency to give a *personal* turn or an enhanced colouring to the object, art trying to figure as a selective process of scientific observation and synthesized analysis (114, my emphasis).” Modern realism involves an impersonal, yet mechanical, outward gaze on the personality, not yet an inner contemplative gaze with feeling on the inner divine being, who remains hidden within the heart. This outer realism “is imagination turning upon itself,” a faculty of the lower mind coming to know only itself, which yields a kind of intellectual hall of mirrors. Sri Aurobindo notes that this realism seeks first objectivity and mechanical impersonality through observation, then secondly, a strong subjectivity, “an intense

consciousness of the I, the soul or the self, not in any mystic withdrawal within or inward meditation, or not in that preeminently, but in relation to the whole of life and Nature (117).” In a final phase, this realism may lead to “the love of close and minute psychological observation,” which could be the beginning of a spiritual search, in his estimation, that can potentially go from a “psychological mysticism” to a more mature spirituality (120). The mechanical impersonal experience of science may yet yield the impersonal experience of “Truth and Beauty,” which is one of warm, profound feeling, not cold calculation. This “hotter” impersonal experience is of the intuition.

VI. THE INTUITION

If Sri Aurobindo’s future poetry were to flower in the wasteland of Modernism’s realism, the faculty of intuition needs to be present, both to create it and to hear it. His position is that this faculty experiences the unity of the “really” real in poetry, life, and self, which the scientific gaze misses in its separative view of reality. In *The Life Divine*, Sri Aurobindo describes the intuition as the “edge” of supermind. Compared to the effulgent solar light of supermind, he calls the intuition a “sea or mass of ‘stable lightnings.’”⁴¹ (See Appendix I for the diagram of the lightning of the intuition coming from the light of the supermind). In his view, the intuition condenses or reduces the “intenser light” of the supermind and enters and amplifies the senses, the imagination, and the intelligence, making of them the “intuitive sense,” the “intuitive imagination,” and the “intuitive intelligence.” In other words, this transformation does not cancel these lower senses but intensifies them, for all levels of one’s being become infused with a new shock of light when joined with this lightning.

Sri Aurobindo takes this image of the intuition as lightning from the *Rgveda*, which often

⁴¹ Sri Aurobindo, *The Life Divine*, 983.

describes *Indra* and his lightning-power to destroy the lower forces of darkness that seek to keep human consciousness in their grip. This lightning is coupled with another image in the *R̥gveda*, *Saramā*, the female hound of *Indra*, “the fleet one,” who faithfully helps *Indra* free the Light of higher realms hidden in what he calls the subconscious.⁴² We can see Sri Aurobindo’s use of this image above in his poem “Surrender,” when he calls for the transformation of his rational mind into intuitive mind: Let “[m]y thoughts be hounds of light for Thy power to loose.” The legends that include the hound of light, *Saramā* in the *R̥gveda* vary, but they involve a battle between forces of darkness (*asuras*), the *Panīs*, and the forces of light, led by *Indra*. In some of the stories, the *Panīs* steal the cows of the *Angirasas* (human ancestors) and hide them in a cave. Helping *Indra* and his cavalry, *Saramā* sniffs out the tracks of the cows, and—depending on the version in the text—simply finds them; or finds them by the path of Truth; or finds them by simply “knowing” their location. Scholars consider this legend “the central myth of the *R̥gveda*, [and it] has meaning on several levels: It means what it says (that *Indra* helps the worshipper to obtain cattle, as he is so often implored to do), and also that *Indra* found the sun and the world of life and light and fertility in general, for all of which cows often serve as a Vedic metaphor.”⁴³ Comparatively, Sri Aurobindo interprets the story in the following way, showing why *Indra* is useful for his descendant spiritual approach:

Indra, the Puissant next, who is the power of pure Existence self-manifested as the Divine Mind. As Agni is one pole of Force instinct with knowledge that sends its current upward from earth to heaven, so *Indra* is the other pole of Light instinct with force which descends from heaven to earth. He comes down into our world as the Hero with the shining horses and slays darkness and division with his lightnings, pours down the life-giving heavenly waters, finds in the *trace* of the hound, Intuition, the lost or hidden illuminations, makes the Sun of Truth mount high in the heaven

⁴² See *R̥gveda* 1.62.3, 1.72.8, 1.104.5 (which do not mention *Saramā*, but Sri Aurobindo interprets these passages as a description of her work); and 3.31.6, 4.16.8, 5.45.7-8, and 10.108.1-11.

⁴³ Wendy Doniger, “*Indra*,” *Encyclopedia of Religion* 7 (2005), 4467.

of our mentality.⁴⁴

Trace can mean the “series or line of footprints left by an animal.”⁴⁵ In Sri Aurobindo’s interpretation of the *Rgveda*, the intuition is the trace of the hound *Saramā*, the path of this faithful animal’s footsteps that sniffs out with certainty the stolen cows of supramental light that have been caged in the dark recesses of the subconscious. The Yogi writes,

These are the two essential characteristics of Sarama; the knowledge comes to her beforehand, before vision, springs up instinctively at the least indication and with that knowledge she guides the rest of the faculties and divine powers that seek. And she leads to that seat, *sadanam*, the home of the Destroyers, which is at the other pole of existence to the seat of the Truth, *sadanam ṛtasya*, in the cave or secret place of darkness, *guhāyam*, just as the home of the gods is in the cave or secrecy of light. In other words, she is a power descended from the superconscious Truth which leads us to the light that is hidden in ourselves, in the subconscious. All these characteristics apply exactly to the intuition.⁴⁶

Intuition has five essential characteristics according to Sri Aurobindo’s reading of the *Rgveda*:

1) What the intellect does with a medium, indirectly and with unreliable halting steps, intuition does with swift accuracy and confident perfection. 2) *Saramā* the Hound knows where the cows are beforehand. The intuition, likewise, also knows its knowledge before searching; it knows before reason or sense can trace a path to it. 3) *Saramā* leads consciousness (“the rest of the faculties and divine powers”) to the cave of darkness, finding the truth where one expects it least: in the home of the enemies of light. The intuition leads one to find the supramental light hidden within her darkness, limitations, ignorance, and resistances. 4) The intuition is unitive, experiencing reality’s wholeness. Just as the home of the gods is in a hidden cave of light according to the Vedic image, so the home of the demons is in the cave of darkness. Intuition links these two caves. It unites all the

⁴⁴ Sri Aurobindo, *Hymns to the Mystic Fire* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Memorial Fund Society, 1972), 30-31. My emphasis.

⁴⁵ OED, s.v. “trace.”

⁴⁶ Sri Aurobindo, “The Hound of Heaven,” in *The Secret of the Veda*, 212.

lower faculties (the intellect, emotions, desires, and senses) to the higher ones on the plane of *jñāna* (memory, revelation, and inspiration).⁴⁷ We can add a fifth, based on the last section's consideration: 5) the intuition is impersonal, even as all sense, feeling, and imagination are warmed by its light.

This “secret place of darkness” seems to be the Vedic symbol for the Vedāntic idea of *citta*, “the storehouse of memory;” the part of passive memory that resists becoming conscious of itself and becoming the active memory. However, through effort and the catharsis (*cittaśuddhi*) occasioned by the arts, it may be purified and made to embody higher and higher faculties; increasingly able to experience the *Cit* of *Brahman's Saccidānanda*. The intuition is the force that travels into the depths of the *citta* and leads the way out of the cave of the unconscious into the light of superconsciousness: the Hound that finds the cows of light within the cave of the demons. The intuition retrieves the memory of the higher Self that is hidden in the darkness of many layers of forgotten experience of the lower self and past lives, which seek to confuse and assert their separative experience of life. This role of remembrance is why Sri Aurobindo also calls the intuition one of the hands of *smṛti*, which in Sanskrit means memory. Its role is to transform the *citta*, the “the storehouse of memory.”

What about the image of lightning? The Vedic image of the intuition that Sri Aurobindo retrieves as a “mass or sea of stable lightnings” is a paradoxical one: how can lightning be stable? Maybe this is an image that speaks about a way to stay grounded while constantly changing, staying within the stable weather of an eye of the hurricane by moving with it? It seems to be a stability that *moves* within a larger pattern, therefore surrender to that movement is necessary to reckon its existence.

In Sri Aurobindo's description of intuition, it seems to me, one does not feel satisfaction in possessing knowledge, because one is aware of being so thoroughly possessed *by* the knowledge, and stunned by the joy of the possession. This is another characteristic of its impersonal nature. His

⁴⁷ See Table 4 above.

claim is that the possession is direct, instantaneous, and sure. It is unitive, as it joins opposites, makes wholeness of fragments and lifts it into deeper realms of the being. He writes in *The Life Divine*, “It is when the consciousness of the subject meets with the consciousness in the object, penetrates it and sees, feels or vibrates with the truth of what it contacts, that the intuition leaps out like a spark or lightning-flash from the shock of the meeting.”⁴⁸ Sri Aurobindo’s poem expresses these insights:

Perfect Thy Motion

Perfect thy motion ever within me,
 Master of mind.
 Grey of the brain, flash of lightning,
 Brilliant and blind,
 These thou linkest, the world to mould,
 Writing the thought in a scroll of gold
 Violet lined.

Tablet of the brain thou hast made for they writing,
 Master divine.
 Calmly thou writest or full of they grandeur
 Flushed as with wine.
 Then with a laugh thou erasest the scroll,
 Bringing another, like waves that roll
 And sink supine.⁴⁹

I would interpret this poem in the following way, according to Sri Aurobindo’s worldview: firstly, the brain (the *manas*) is illuminated with a “flash of lightning,” with “brilliant” knowledge of *Indra’s* force that makes the *manas* “blind,” lost in the desert of sense, separated from its natural sense world and thrown into a new one. Somehow, however, this *manas* will be used in its transformation by the intuition to create a new world, becoming “gold,” what he and the Mother say is the color of “the supramental Truth Consciousness.” This process is essentially physical: even the grey matter of the brain is infused with this gold, and it is lined with violet, a color that he says “is

⁴⁸ Sri Aurobindo, *LD*, 981. See pp. 981-984 for a more detailed explanation of intuition.

⁴⁹ Sri Aurobindo, *Collected Poems* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Press), 285.

the light of the Divine Grace and Compassion.”⁵⁰ The intuition creates a new *manas*, the foundation for being a “new divine man.”

For the Yogi, when the mind is surrendered to the lightning flash of the intuition, thought is born of intuition not the intellect, and the expression of thought—language, takes on the rhythm of that higher realm and is not personal, that is, not a personal (ego) construct of the intellect. The poet becomes a kind of *ṛṣi* in this impersonal state, as Sri Aurobindo says:

The Rishi was not the individual composer of the hymn, but the seer (*draṣṭā*) of an eternal truth and an impersonal knowledge. The language of Veda itself is *Śruti*, a rhythm not composed by the intellect but heard, a divine Word that came vibrating out of the Infinite to the inner audience of the man who had previously made himself fit for the impersonal knowledge.⁵¹

The process of becoming “fit for impersonal knowledge” is described in Chapter Two, the *cittaśuddhi* or purification of consciousness, a process that requires effort. Those who make the attempt in an exemplary way for Sri Aurobindo were the ancient *kavis*, the *ṛṣis*. They used language, according to him, in a way that retained the openness of pure possibility in an age of intuition, when language was “young.” However, language passes through cycles of birth, growth, and decay, in his view, eventually becoming “old” or decadent. The Modern period of “realistic” poetry is an example of Sri Aurobindo’s notion of old age and decadence. The way to grow out of this old age is to take a cue from the Vedic *ṛṣis* and “open ourselves to all the potentialities of the World of Nature and hear again the divine vibrations of the Transcendent.”⁵² Sri Aurobindo’s poets of the future, if they can get beyond an “art for art’s sake” mentality, if they can “successfully speak this vision [of the World

⁵⁰ “The Symbolism of Colours” in The Mother, *The Spiritual Significance of Flowers Part 2* (Pondicherry: SAAP, 2000), 365-66. These explanations were compiled from both the Mother and Sri Aurobindo’s writings to explain the color of flowers that the Mother named.

⁵¹ Sri Aurobindo, *The Secret of the Veda*, 10. *Ṛṣi* may have its root in the root *√ṛṣ*, which can mean “to see.” See *MMW*, s.v. “*ṛṣi*.”

⁵² *Ibid.*, 116.

of Nature and hear again the divine vibrations of the Transcendent], they, like the Rishis of old, will provide the seed sound from which a new literary language will spring.”⁵³

For Sri Aurobindo, *mantric* poetry is the key to this future age of Intuition—a time when it might be used in its fullest way: when poetry might become transparent to the divine, offering fresh starts in the evolution of language.

VII. POETS OF THE DAWN

In more or less ways, the Yogi thinks that the six English and Irish poets previously mentioned in the last part of his cultural pilgrimage show signs of incarnating the ancient *kavis* of old in a new Western guise, demonstrating the presence of the intuition in their works. He suggests the poetry of Wordsworth and Byron, Blake and Coleridge, and Keats and Shelley accomplish this, exhibiting what to him is one of the positive characteristics of the early Modern mind, which “is too large in its aim and varied in its approach to be satisfied by any definite or any fixed symbolic or hieratic method, it cannot rest within the special experience and figures of a given religion (128).” In the Yogi’s understanding, the Modern mind seeks more universal truths, ones that are present in more than one religious tradition, one culture, or one worldview. This aspect of Modernism in these poets harmonizes with Sri Aurobindo’s non-sectarian spiritual aspirations. He also thinks these poets succeed in some ways and fail in others so that the achievement of full intuitional poetry of *mantric* quality has yet to arrive.

According to Sri Aurobindo, Wordsworth and Byron stay too much within the intellect, without piercing its ceiling in a stable way to the intuition, though they often reach beyond it. Blake and Coleridge, on the other hand, “miss the highest greatness they might otherwise have attained by an opposite defect, by want of the gravity and enduring substance which force of thought gives to

⁵³ Ibid.

the poetical inspiration (138).” They go up to the heights of spiritual vision, but leave the intellect behind so it lacks “substance” rooted in *this* world. Shelley “sings from the skies earthwards,” while Keats “looks from the earth towards Olympus (145).” For Sri Aurobindo, Shelley gives us the best example of the Modern mind’s ability to pull the gravity of this world into union with the ideal, though Shelley’s poetry lacked the living quality of the material and sensible world of Keats. “Shelley is the bright archangel of this dawn and he becomes greater to us as the light he foresaw and lived in returns and grows, but he sings half concealed in the too dense halo of his own ethereal beauty (145).” Keats writes in a similar motivation—to marry heaven and earth, but died before he could make the necessary attempts, let alone the possibility of achievement. For Sri Aurobindo, Keats achieved an intuitive expression of sensuous and imaginative beauty, but did not master the full intellectual beauty of expression and that of the ideal beauty above the mind.⁵⁴

For the next four chapters Sri Aurobindo examines early twentieth-century poetry and the possible psychological development of *mantric* expression by these writers. They are poets who experiment with new rhythms, most notably free verse, like Walt Whitman. Sri Aurobindo remains unconvinced, however, that this free verse, in terms of its rhythm, is anything but a passing phase and a “cadenced prose poetry.” However, he recognizes that trying new forms of tempo is fundamental for the growth of his *mantric* poetry; this new message of the supramental life would necessitate a new kind of rhythm. For the Yogi, what Walt Whitman achieved is not great rhythm, but excellent style and vision, most of all. In him and other poets like Rabindranath Tagore and A.E. (George William Russell), Sri Aurobindo sees a new level of broad and inclusive subjectivity. He sees in this poetry a change from a “psychological individuality” with an intellectual emphasis to a spiritual subjectivity that sees, feels, and knows by an identification with the greater individual,

⁵⁴ See also Sri Aurobindo, “The Sources of Poetry” in *Essays Divine and Human* (Pondicherry: SAAP, 1997), 28-32 for his reflections on these issues earlier in his thought form 1910-13, which are based on *Saṃkhya* categories of the three *gūṇas* (*tamas*, *rajas*, and *sattva*) and how these characterize some of the different poets he examines in *The Future Poetry*.

communal, or universal Self.

In these poets, Sri Aurobindo seems to view the intellect as having become strong enough to be extended beyond previous boundaries of consciousness and hermeneutical possibilities into an “intuitive mentality [*vijñānabuddhi*] supported by the liberated intelligence (195).” Pursuing the development of the “poets of the dawn,” Sri Aurobindo argues that these “things have not all arrived, but they are on their way and the first waves of the surge have already broken over the dry beaches of the age of reason” into a new age of intuition (195).⁵⁵

VIII. GLOBAL CULTURAL RENAISSANCE?

The last chapter to the first part of *The Future Poetry* is entitled “New Birth or Decadence?” This is a summary chapter that explores the question of whether the first fruits of *mantric* poetry will become endemic in world culture or fail to manifest universally. He notes three levels of reality in the evolution of poetry that need to be distinguished in order to project a possibility for the future:

- 1) The external development, which can be documented in the variation of styles and forms of poetry in history, which always change but lack a clear direction;
- 2) The internal *dharmā* of poetry that is always the same;
- and 3) A more interior line of growth or evolutionary impulse “within this law of being [*dharmā*]” that evolves in the direction of union with divinity (205). This third motive is a “soul motive” and is characterized by the principal that “the simple develops to the more complex...the superficial gives place to the more and more profound, the lesser [nature] gives place

⁵⁵ Another poet that seems to me as potentially fulfilling the goals that Sri Aurobindo has for a future poetry is Emily Dickinson, who lived a secluded life wearing white like the Yogi in pursuit of her own internal growth, loved children, animals and botany, mathematics and baking, among many other things. Her poetry sings about the hidden light and meaning within all and the difficult lessons of growth that come in trying to love God. An apt example of her poetry: “This World is not Conclusion/A Species stands beyond-/Invisible, as Music-/But positive, as Sound-/It beckons, and it baffles-/Philosophy, don’t know-/And through a Riddle, at the last-/Sagacity, must go-/To guess it, puzzles scholars-/To gain it, Men have borne/ Contempt of generations/ And Crucifixion, shown-/Faith slips-and laughs, and rallies-/Blushes, if any see-/Plucks at a twig of Evidence-/And asks a Vane, the way-/Much Gesture, from the Pulpit-/Strong Hallelujahs roll-/ Narcotics cannot still the Tooth/That nibbles at the Soul-”. *Poems of Emily Dickinson: Reading Edition*, ed. Ralph W. Franklin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).

to the greater nature of the common manifestation (205).”

Sri Aurobindo focuses on the third line of growth. This development is of the soul, that he compares to a rose bush that is ever seeking to blossom and share its fragrance in the world, born of the spiritual planes of consciousness. He writes,

I put it that from this point of view the soul of man like the soul of Nature can be regarded as an unfolding of the spirit in the material world. Our unfolding has its roots in the soil of the physical life; its growth shoots up and out in many directions in the stalk and branches of the vital being; it puts forth the opulence of the buds of mind and there, nestling in the luxuriant leaves of mind and above it, out from the spirit which was concealed in the whole process must blossom the free and infinite soul of man, the hundred petalled rose of God (206).⁵⁶

For the Yogi, as consciousness grows in the soul, so goes poetic expression. Sri Aurobindo finds evidence of potential supramental growth in some contemporary poetry, sprouting a few buds; however, it is not clear if they will bloom into this “hundred petalled rose of God.” It seems to depend on the use of the intellect in relation to the heart, since the “pure intellect cannot create poetry,” only the heart (*hr̥d*) where this plant is rooted (211). The heart, we might say, grows the soul’s rose, from seed to blossom.

Sri Aurobindo locates the connection of art to the supermind through the heart. He takes his cue again from the *Vedas*, which describes the *mantra* as being *hr̥dā taṣṭam* or “hewn in the heart.”⁵⁷ The *R̥gveda* describes the heart as the place nearest to the “cave that hides the stolen cows of light,” so in Sri Aurobindo’s view, it is nearest the subconscious that lays in attendance for an illumination from within by the lightning traces of *Indra’s* Hound. He writes that the heart

in Vedic psychology is not restricted to the seat of the emotions; it includes all that large tract of spontaneous mentality, nearest to the subconscious in us, out of which rise the sensations, emotions, instincts, impulses and all those intuitions and inspirations that travel through these agencies before they arrive at form in the

⁵⁶ This image seems to have a relationship to the *sahasradala* or “thousand-petalled” *cakra* located at the crown of the head in yoga theory.

⁵⁷ See *R̥gveda* 4.16.47: “*ā te aghna ṛcā havirhr̥dā taṣṭambharāmasi*” or “Agni, we bring thee, with our hymn oblation fashioned in the heart.”

intelligence. This is the “heart” of Veda and Vedanta, *hṛdaya*, *hṛd*, or *brahman*. There in the present state of mankind the Purusha is supposed to be seated centrally.⁵⁸

Inspiration follows a path from the heart to the body, and only after to the head, which is used as a servant of these others to express their experience. *Puruṣa*, “the primaeval man as the soul and original source of the universe” is also the impersonal self, who produces and enjoys the *mantra* from the heart.⁵⁹ Sri Aurobindo continues, “Nearer to the vastness of the subconscious, it is there that, in ordinary mankind,—man not yet exalted to a higher plane where the contact with the Infinite is luminous, intimate and direct,—the inspirations of the Universal Soul can most easily enter in and most swiftly take possession of the individual soul. It is therefore by the power of the heart that the mantra takes form.”⁶⁰ According to this Vedic image, the heart is where the *Puruṣa* can “take possession of the individual soul,” to originate and enjoy the *mantra*. However, though the mind is not master of this process, the *mantra* does not fully exist without the service of the mind. He writes, “But [the *mantra*] has to be received and held in the thought of the intelligence as well as in the perceptions of the heart; for not till the intelligence has accepted and even brooded upon it, can that truth of thought which the truth of the Word expresses be firmly possessed or normally effective. Fashioned by the heart, it is confirmed by the mind.”⁶¹ In Sri Aurobindo’s view, the hermeneutics of the heart is what the poet primarily needs, for it is here where the most internal level of inspiration in art happens. The difficulty is illuminating the outer being with this inner level of the heart, especially the mind. If accomplished, seeing with the heart leads to poetic expressions or forms that are “drenched in the light of the intuitive and revealing mind (211).”

⁵⁸ Sri Aurobindo, *The Secret of the Veda*, 271.

⁵⁹ *MMW*, s.v. “*puruṣa*.” The *puruṣa* is the “impersonal enjoyer and creator” in violet in my Table 4.

⁶⁰ Sri Aurobindo, *The Secret of the Veda*, 271-2.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

For Sri Aurobindo, the direction that English poetry is potentially heading—at least in the poets that he singles out at the beginning of the twentieth century—is one that is written from the heart of the poet and directed at the heart in the audience, as it strengthens and raises the level of experience in the mind and other parts of the being. It is remarkable that he took this view, since the external line of development in history was growing in quite different ways at the time, such that much literature, poetry, and art were being created from places of great pain, anxiety, and anger coupled with the guidance and authority of the personality and the intellect.⁶² However, if we keep in mind his and the Mother's principle that oppositions intensify manifestation and growth, this hostility in the twentieth century plays a role in awakening new potentials in poetry in his view, fueling its potential supramental birth. This principle of opposition is better understood in what he says about his own creative process as a means to practice yoga and his experiment with the poem *Savitri*.

IX. SAVITRI: SRI AUROBINDO'S OWN YOGA

Sri Aurobindo not only explains the nature and possibility of the future poetry, he tries to create it himself. He wrote hundreds of poems in English, Latin, Greek, Sanskrit, Bengali, and other languages; however, his English epic poem *Savitri* is the most significant. He revised it, completely starting over in many cases, from 1916-1950, using the creative process as a means for his own growth in consciousness and to advance the potentials of the art form itself. In his view, his growth occurs because of opposition, which is the key feature within his own experience of yoga and the creative process. He also thematically incorporates this principle into *Savitri* in a very full way, as I will show below.

⁶² I will have more to say about this difficult context next chapter and in the Conclusion in Chapter Seven.

1. *The Yogi's Creative Process*

Before I discuss the poem itself, it is helpful to address the creative process, as Sri Aurobindo describes it in his own case, in writing *mantric* poetry. He sees this process as a means of ascension and descent and the heart guides it, not the intellect, which are two central factors that he describes in *The Future Poetry*. However, what becomes even more salient in his personal reflections is another factor: this descent into matter in the form of language requires facing oppositions to fuel his growth in consciousness.

Diane Apostolos-Cappadona describes Sri Aurobindo's manner of writing *Savitri* in the following way:

Savitri must be understood as Sri Aurobindo's personal and spiritual myth. The actual writing brought forth the widening of his consciousness and as such was his *sadhana*. His writing and rewriting of the poem allowed the opportunity for its assimilation as his personal myth. As his consciousness widened he entered further and further into the myth—transforming it as it was transforming him. The poem was his myth, the act of writing his ritual, and the ritualizing enabled him to sacralize and interpret his own life.⁶³

Sri Aurobindo says he wrote *Savitri* as a way to go above/deeper than the mind and as a way to awaken and perfect the faculties that are beyond the mind, what he calls “overhead” faculties. He writes,

I used *Savitri* as a means of ascension. I began with it on a certain mental level, each time I could reach a higher level I rewrote from that level. Moreover I was particular—if part seemed to me to come from any lower levels I was not satisfied to leave it because it was good poetry. All had to be as far as possible of the same mint. In fact *Savitri* has not been regarded by me as a poem to be written and finished, but as a field of experimentation to see how far poetry could be written from one's own yogic consciousness and how that could be made creative.⁶⁴

Making one's yogic consciousness creative is the key to his descendant spiritual aesthetic approach.

⁶³ Diane Apostolos-Cappadona, “Poetry as Yoga: The Spiritual Ascent of Sri Aurobindo,” *Horizons* 7, 2 (1980): 282.

⁶⁴ Sri Aurobindo, “Letters on ‘Savitri,’” in *Savitri* (Pondicherry: SAAP, 1995), 728.

Though he used *Savitri* “as a means of ascension,” the idea is not to remain in the higher impersonal realms of Truth and Beauty, but to bring their presence here in the creative process and in the poem, to divinize language with their influence so that language and poetic forms are themselves transformed. This is a yogic effort of consciously facing the opposition of matter and one’s lower nature.

In (re)writing *Savitri* he tried to put into practice what he called the “triple labor” of aspiration, rejection, and surrender through the creative process, which are keynotes to his and the Mother’s Yoga.⁶⁵ The poem gives him the chance to *aspire* for mastery of the higher faculties that supply revelation, inspiration, intuition, and discrimination; to *reject* the mind’s attempts at authority through the mundane mental faculties that give perception, imagination, reasoning, and judgment; and to *surrender* to his muse, the Divine Mother, and through her to link to *Brahman*, so that ultimately it is she who writes the poem, with him as her instrument.⁶⁶ Writing this poem was a constant effort of this triple labor so that poet and poetry might become supermentalized.

Sri Aurobindo’s constant revision of *Savitri* demonstrates the principle of opposition stimulating growth.⁶⁷ In this case, the effort is one of facing the opposition of inadequate expression written from a lower, more limited position of the basic consciousness (*citta*), and then striving to grow beyond it when it is mastered and higher levels of consciousness are encountered. These higher levels challenge the heart and mind to write from that new level, to put into word-form the experience of that broader place of the *citta*. The result of this effort is that the words themselves, the mind itself, and the body that hears them are all potentially transformed. The descendant approach of his spiritual practice is this facing of what is limited in the material nature in

⁶⁵ Sri Aurobindo, *The Mother with Letters on the Mother*, (Pondicherry: SAAP, 2012), 6.

⁶⁶ The Glossary, 39.

⁶⁷ See also Sri Aurobindo, “The Sources of Poetry,” in *Essays Divine and Human* (Pondicherry: SAAP, 1997), 28-32 for his thoughts about encountering the oppositions of *tamasic* laziness and *rajasic* willfulness in the creative process.

light of new inspiration, and trying to raise the nature and refine it into a more supple medium of higher consciousness of “Truth and Beauty.” Struggling with creative resistances goes hand in hand with divinizing language and matter. Poetry is a means for this kind of divinization for Sri Aurobindo.

This creative effort is not guided by the intellect as we explored above, but must be directed by the authority of the heart. Sri Aurobindo writes, “I don’t think about the technique because thinking is no longer in my line.” He continues, “the two agents are sight and call. Also feeling—the solar plexus has to be satisfied and until it is, revision after revision has to continue...the object is not perfect technical elegance according to precept but sound-significance filling out the word-significance.”⁶⁸ It seems the great difficulty that Sri Aurobindo sets for himself is to find poetic language in which the sound of the word, as this registers in his physical ear (“sound-significance”), somehow harmonizes with the meaning of the word (“word-significance”), a kind of union of communication in both form and content that is a continual, meaningful, and intensely satisfying onomatopoeia at a very high level of feeling. The message of the *mantric* poem (from the vision) is not separate from the physical nature of the words (rhythm and style) and vice versa.⁶⁹ The message *is* the form as much as the content. Behind this is a motivating “sight and call” and feeling, which all guide the process and the mind. Sri Aurobindo seeks vision by/of the higher self, hearing in the deepest heart, and feeling by a life attuned to these spiritual levels, as they register in his body—in his solar plexus as he says—so that in concert, they eventually replace the mind in terms of its authority over all the other members of the human being. In sum, through writing and rewriting his poetry, especially *Savitri*, Sri Aurobindo seeks not only to express but also to become the supramental being that he theorizes in *The Life Divine* and other prose works.

⁶⁸ Sri Aurobindo, “Letters on ‘Savitri,’” in *Savitri*, 731.

⁶⁹ As we will see in Chapter Six, the Mother had the same goal in painting, but with color and form.

2. *Savitri*

William Cenkner writes that *Savitri* “is the life of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo unfolding in poetry, in twelve books of forty-nine cantos. *Savitri* is not only the theory and knowledge of *yoga*, but it is also a manual of *yoga*.”⁷⁰ In order to understand what William Cenkner means, we must review the poem itself and the legend on which it is based.

A. Background

The tale of Sāvitrī is a small story within the great story of the *Mahābhārata* found in Book III, the “*Vanā Parva*” (The Forest Book) sections 291-97, the “*Pativrata-mahātmya Parva*” (“The Section on Magnanimous Fidelity to a Husband”).⁷¹ Sri Aurobindo developed his poem based on this legend by expanding its 298 lines in Sanskrit to a poem that covers 23,837 lines of English in the final edited version we now have. The original story in the Epic can be seen as a kind of moral: if one maintains virtue in the face of suffering, one will be given the power to change one’s fate. The story in the Epic begins when king Yudhiṣṭhira asks the sage Mārkaṇḍeya for an example of any other woman who maintained her nobility in the face of suffering, like his wife Draupadi, who was recently abducted by his enemy. Yudhiṣṭhira wants to find some meaning in his own situation. Mārkaṇḍeya then begins the tale of Sāvitrī, as she also suffered greatly for the love of her husband. In this story, Sāvitrī’s suffering and sacrifices move Yama, the God of Death, to change the fate of both she and her husband.

⁷⁰ William Cenkner, *The Hindu Personality in Education: Tagore, Gandhi, Sri Aurobindo* (1976) (New Delhi: Manohar, 1994), 141-2.

⁷¹ See P. C. Roy and K. M. Ganguli, *The Mahabharata of Krishna-Dwaipayana Vyasa*, 12 vols. (1884–1896), 2d ed. (Calcutta: Bharata Press, 1970). This book-edition is difficult to find, but it can be read on-line. The section for the story of Savitri in this English translation can be found at <http://Satyavān.sacred-texts.com/hin/m03/index.htm>. The Sanskrit version is divided differently than the English translation. It is found in chapters 277-83 and can be found on this same site: <http://Satyavān.sacred-texts.com/hin/mbs/mbs03277.htm>; both accessed March 3, 2016.

The tale begins with Aśvapathi, “Lord of the Horse,” who is an old and righteous king from Madra. He is childless, and like anyone who propitiates the Gods for a boon, performs austerities to gain an heir. After eighteen years of these works, Sāvitṛī, Goddess of the Sun, appears in the sacrificial fire and grants him a child. Aśvapathi names his new daughter after the Goddess. She grows to be a beautiful and admirable woman; so compelling that men are fearful, more moved to adore her from a distance than to court her. Aśvapathi is disconsolate and tells her to go and find a worthy man to marry her. She travels for two years with a companion and finally recognizes her future husband in Satyavān, “the Bearer of Truth.” He is the prince of a blind King, Dyumatsena, who is without a kingdom because usurpers took advantage of his blindness. Sāvitṛī brings Satyavān to her family and informs them of her choice. Nārada, the local sage, is present and foresees the fate of this man: he is going to die in one year. Nārada informs Sāvitṛī, but she is resolute and marries Satyavān anyway, keeping this knowledge from her husband. The pair returns to live with Satyavān’s family in the woods, living a simple yet meaningful life immersed in conjugal love and duty. The fateful day approaches and for three days before her husband’s death, Sāvitṛī performs austerities to prepare herself. She obtains special permission from her in-laws to go with Satyavān into the forest as he cuts wood on his last day. While working, Satyavān gets a terrible headache and collapses. As he dies in her lap, Yama comes to take him away. Sāvitṛī insists to accompany them. Yama is charmed and moved by Sāvitṛī’s incredible devotion and willingness to suffer for love of Satyavān, so he makes a promise to her. The God of Death offers a boon for her in-laws and for her: children and grandchildren. Since Satyavān has to be alive for this gift to be given, Yama realizes that he has been tricked into granting Satyavān’s life. He keeps his word, however, and grants Sāvitṛī all her wishes. Conjugal love triumphs over death by transforming Yama into Dharma. Death becomes the one who upholds the law, the right order, or virtue, in its deeper meaning.

B. Sri Aurobindo's Retelling

Sri Aurobindo keeps this basic story and the characters in his version. However, he universalizes the meanings of the austerities and the boons, giving mythic and cosmological dimensions to all the characters. His version of *Savitri* is, among other things, an expression of growth through the creative yet difficult handling of opposition, embodied and embedded in the poem by two principle features: 1. the three main characters, Aśvapathi and especially Sāvitṛī and Satyavān, and 2. the structure of the poem, which goes from dawn to night back to dawn again. The structure is one of light battling darkness to achieve permanent light.

Firstly, Sāvitṛī and Satyavān face the ultimate opposition in the character called Death throughout the poem and from this epic conflict, they grow to experience a new immortal life lived in new bodies on a new Earth. Secondly, the key time period of the poem is the “Dawn Time,” that “time in the middle,” as John Collins calls it, which is the uncomfortable time and place for consciousness because it is neither light nor dark.⁷² It may give a sense of hope for a new day, but there is a darker side of dawn. Collins writes, “Thus, dawn comes with a sense of hope combined with despair. It feels the light but cannot liberate itself from darkness.”⁷³ In the poem, dawn is a symbol of human experience filled with opposition, uncertainty, and pressure, as consciousness is pulled and pushed in different directions by light and dark. Dawn is the context for growth as it embodies the tension of opposing forces (the lower and the higher selves) and the possible use of this tension for growth. In my view, the poem is a creative expression of the new supramental creation, accomplished in welcoming oppositions and contraries as the very fuel that will take the aspirant to that supramental goal.

⁷² John Collins, “Savitri: Poetic Expression of Spiritual Experience,” in *Six Pillars: Introduction to the Major works of Sri Aurobindo*, ed. Robert A. McDermott (Chambersburg, PA: Wilson Books, 1974), 20.

⁷³ Ibid.

In Sri Aurobindo's version, Aśvapathi is not just seeking progeny and future security for himself and his own individual family. He seeks perfection universally for the family of creation. Prema Nandakumar writes, "Aśvapathi's yoga articulates the earth's cry for perfection, and in answer, the power behind the cosmos promises the advent of Savitri."⁷⁴ In the poem, Sāvitṛī is more than a special daughter, but is the Divine Mother, the very Conscious-Force (*Cit-Śakti*) of the Supreme, incarnated to bring the necessary grace to mature humanity in its development towards perfection: "the supramental being." Dawn, that key image of the poem, is also linked to Sāvitṛī herself, the one who bridges the darkness of ignorance with the coming light of wisdom in the poem. "In the issue between Night and Day, Darkness and Light, Dawn obviously forms the link, the mediator, the passage; and Savitri the 'incarnation of the Divine Mother' is here the mediator, the vanquisher of Night and the redeemer of Day."⁷⁵

Sri Aurobindo in fact spends the bulk of his epic on Aśvapathi's yoga. Aśvapathi seems to represent the value and honor that Sri Aurobindo pays to the ascendant spiritual accomplishments of the past that open up to the source of matter's divinization. He seems to say as much, "This incarnation [of Aśvapathi's yoga] is supposed to have taken place in far past times when the whole thing had to be opened, so as to 'hew the ways of Immortality'."⁷⁶ In Sri Aurobindo's view, generally speaking, spirituality in the past sought to unite with the divine in spirit without being able to divinize matter; it being too dense and atavistic to become immortal. Aśvapathi symbolizes the perfection of this spiritual progress that successfully goes in one direction: an ascent from Earth to Paradise and beyond, from biological evolution to human growth in reincarnation to spiritual growth in transcendence to God realization. He is the man of ascendant spirituality come to its term. A. B.

⁷⁴ Prema Nandakumar, *A Study of "Savitri"* (Pondicherry: SAAP, 1962), 152.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 306.

⁷⁶ Sri Aurobindo, *Letters on Poetry and Art* (Pondicherry: SAAP, 2004), 276.

Purani, one of Sri Aurobindo's commentators writes, "He becomes by his *yoga* the representative of the upward aspiring and striving soul of man during aeons of evolution."⁷⁷ However, Aśvapathi does not want to stop at achieving consciousness of the highest regions of divinity and *transcend* duality. He wants to bring this consciousness back to the Earth to *transform* the Earth. Nevertheless, he is blocked by matter's atavistic resistance. It will not respond to his force of higher consciousness and so, in the poem, he seeks the grace of Sāvitṛī to bring her pressure to bear on matter's refusal.

The Goddess Sāvitṛī is given to him as a human child. Her work, as she discovers it in later life, is to find a mate who would be able to take up the task with her to reach perfection in matter and make life divine: to permanently illumine the mind, life, and body of all human beings. Not with Aśvapathi, the symbol of spiritual perfection of the past, does she do this work in the poem. It seems to me that the poem is saying that the spiritual accomplishments of Aśvapathi are foundational; they are a partial basis upon which the new supramental creation or life divine can be built. It seems that the love of father and daughter that has formed a spiritual bond does not hold a strong enough link to transform the present. So, Sāvitṛī sets out to find a mate who can embody a yogic paradigm for the future that will base the new creation on both spiritual and material bonds, uniting the poles of duality, even male and female.

In the poem, Sāvitṛī and Satyavān recognize one another and they recognize each other's spiritual achievements in gaining consciousness of all the realms above the mind, like Aśvapathi. However, they also realize what each has not been able to achieve on their own: applying the force of this titanic mastery on the material plane to bring about the new creation. "If only Savitri would share Satyavān's life, could they now with their joint efforts succeed where singly they had failed?"⁷⁸ They join in this great process of love for each other, for the Earth, and for God and to perfect this

⁷⁷ A.B. Purani, *Sri Aurobindo's Savitri: An Approach and a Study* (Pondicherry: SAAP, 1952), 125.

⁷⁸ Prema Nandakumar, *A Study of "Savitri,"* 170.

process of love. In doing so, they become gods in human flesh. As John Collins comments, they “are cosmic male and cosmic female, Purusha and Prakriti, Shiva and Shakti, Krishna and Radha, Yin and Yang. Their marriage is the union of eternal cosmic forces which create and sustain the life of the cosmos; their separation would mean the end of all motion, all evolution, all life.”⁷⁹ The poem seems to say that their love is the process of nature’s transubstantiation and has many levels of development before it reaches its maturity in a kind of androgynous wholeness. In its maturity, love is the force that unites and elevates duality to the supramental integration.

And Love that was once an animal’s desire,
Then a sweet madness in the rapturous heart,
An ardent comradeship in the happy mind,
Becomes a wide spiritual yearning’s space.⁸⁰

Love tutors the soul from erotic impulse, to romance, to friendship, and then longing for union with each other in God. This union of spirit with God is only the beginning. According to Prema Nandakumar’s interpretation of the poem, Death is the last opposition that pushes growth over to the highest level of love that can bridge and then unite spirit with matter. In the poem, Satyavān dies and Sāvitri comes face to face with Death, face to face with pushing her love beyond the bounds of what is normally thought or imagined as possible, even in the highest causal (*vijñāna*) planes. “Savitri concludes [her argument with Death] by maintaining that love like hers for Satyavān is centered in God, and if she claims from Death ‘the living Satyavān,’ it is only ‘for his work and mine, our sacred charge,’

For I, the Woman, am the force of God,
He the Eternal’s delegate soul in man.”⁸¹

Sāvitri’s sacred charge is a new offspring, not just for herself, but the whole Earth, all of whom

⁷⁹ John Collins, “Savitri: Poetic Expression of Spiritual Experience,” 33.

⁸⁰ Sri Aurobindo, *Savitri*, 632.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 633.

would share the boon of a deathless life, and not just her husband as in the version of the *Mahābhārata*. To convince Death, Sāvitṛī first shows him her universal body, as did *Kṛṣṇa* for Arjuna on the battlefield of Kurukṣetra, or Christ did for Peter, James, and John on a mountain in Israel. Yet this supremacy will not accomplish the task. Sri Aurobindo's solution in the poem seems to be not just a retreat of Death and a victory of Sāvitṛī, but a transformation of them both in a new integration.

Unlike the version in the *Mahābhārata*, where Yama is transformed into Dharma, in Sri Aurobindo's tale, Death, in the end, must be transformed into Deathless Life birthed by the highest love. Death is not seen as the enemy in this version—something to be transcended, but as a living process that contributes to the advancing stream of life, pushing growth into a new creation—something to be welcomed and transformed, like all opposition. Sri Aurobindo writes an aphorism on this theme that we mentioned in the Preface: “This world was built by death that he might live. Wilt thou abolish death? Then life too will perish. Thou canst abolish death, but thou mayest transform it into a greater living.”⁸² Its defeat is not needed nor sought, but its transformation into life divine, since, as Collins says, “when the final phase of evolution is completed by the descent of the Divine [which Sāvitṛī symbolizes], death [like all opposition] will no longer be useful to the Divine purpose in the world.”⁸³

The Mother's comments on this principle in *Savitri*,

It is this kind of constant “brooding” or presence of Death and the possibility of death, as it is said in *Savitri*: we have a constant companion throughout the journey from cradle to grave; we are constantly accompanied by this threat or presence of Death. Well, along with this, in the cells, there is a call for a Power of Eternity, with an intensity which would not be there except for this constant threat. Then one understands, one begins to feel quite concretely that all these things [all these oppositions] are only ways of intensifying the manifestation, of making it

⁸² Sri Aurobindo, in The Mother, *On Thoughts and Aphorisms* (Pondicherry: SAAP, 2001), 164. See p. xii.

⁸³ Collins, “Savitri: Poetic Expression of Spiritual Experience,” 33.

progress, of making it more perfect. And if the means are crude, it is because the manifestation itself is very crude. And as it becomes more perfect and fit to manifest that which is *eternally progressive*, the very crude means will give way to subtler ones and the world will progress without any need for such brutal oppositions. This is simply because the world is still in its infancy and human consciousness is still entirely in its infancy.

This is a very concrete experience.

It follows that when the earth no longer needs to die in order to progress, there will be no more death. When the earth no longer needs to suffer in order to progress, there will be no more suffering. And when the earth no longer needs to hate in order to love, there will be no more hatred.⁸⁴

Like *Savitri*, the Yoga of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo is one that seeks a very difficult task: an integration of light and dark, life and death, delight and suffering, and love and hate such that the negative pole is transformed into the positive one, and yet the positive one is amplified by the negative. The union creates an entirely new *res* that is “eternally progressive” without needing opposition to achieve its growth.

The current creation does need opposition, however; an understanding that is based on their experience of who God is, which one could say, is essentially *Śiva*.⁸⁵ God is not only creator, but destroyer/transformer and has built into creation these forces that oppose one another to move creation forward. In his *Essays on the Gita*, Sri Aurobindo writes, “For God the Time-Spirit does not destroy for the sake of destruction, but to make the ways clear in the cyclic process for a greater rule and a progressing manifestation, *rajyam samṛddham* [abundantly endowed kingdom].”⁸⁶ As a kind of further commentary, Sri Aurobindo writes in his work *The Synthesis of Yoga* about intimacy with God that is achieved owing to the destructive forces of *Śiva*,

The [divine] lover can wound, abandon, be wroth with us, seem to betray, yet our love endures and even grows by these oppositions; they increase the joy of reunion

⁸⁴ The Mother, *On Thoughts and Aphorisms* (Pondicherry: SAAP, 2001), 164.

⁸⁵ And his consort *Kālī*.

⁸⁶ *Essays on the Gita* (Pondicherry: SAAP, 1997), 387. For more on this in Sri Aurobindo’s writings, see especially, “Kuruksheṭra,” “Man and the Battle of Life,” “The Creed of the Aryan Fighter,” and “The Vision of the World-Spirit Time the Destroyer,” in *Essays on the Gita*, 39-67, 377-87.

and the joy of possession; through them the lover remains the friend, and all that he does we find in the end has been done by the lover and helper of our being for our soul's perfection as well as for his joy in us. These contradictions lead to a greater intimacy.⁸⁷

This notion of divinity seeks to keep the aspirant precisely in the center of the contradictory “Dawn Time” experience for the sake of “greater intimacy” with Him, where that transformation of light and dark into supramental light is not yet ready. The aspirant of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram is not meant to jump into the conventional light of day, a state of consciousness where a settled and provisional comfort might be achieved, maintained, and defended—where the pressure of growth can be avoided for the time being. Collins writes that the supramental “integration is accomplished by a continuous extension from and return to the dawn as the proper place in the middle where all the various experiences can be united.”⁸⁸ As Sri Aurobindo writes, one will therefore naturally feel abandoned by God in the very process of trying to come close to Him. One must learn to live with this feeling constructively:

the seeker of the integral fulfilment [is not] permitted to solve too arbitrarily even the conflict of his own inner members. ...To him as to all seekers of the spirit there are offered for solution the oppositions of the reason, the clinging hold of the senses, the perturbations of the heart, the ambush of the desires, the clog of the physical body; but he has to deal in another fashion with their mutual and internal conflicts and their hindrance to his aim, for he must arrive at an infinitely more difficult perfection in the handling of all this rebel matter. Accepting them as instruments for the divine realisation and manifestation, he has to convert their jangling discords, to enlighten their thick darknesses, to transfigure them separately and all together, harmonising them in themselves and with each other,—integrally, omitting no grain or strand or vibration, leaving no iota of imperfection anywhere.⁸⁹

To “arrive at an infinitely more difficult perfection” requires that the student of the Integral Yoga tenaciously hold in tension his or her “jangling discords,” not permitting a solution that “too arbitrarily” reaches a social convention of what is right, just, or good. Surprisingly, this is because

⁸⁷ *Synthesis of Yoga*, 603-4.

⁸⁸ Collins, “Savitri: Poetic Expression of Spiritual Experience,” 30.

⁸⁹ *Synthesis of Yoga*, 78.

these discordant parts are actually “instruments for the divine realisation and manifestation.” To stay this course is to stay within the Dawn of one’s being to grow the new creation living the life divine, “leaving no iota of imperfection anywhere.” In a spontaneous and natural way, if this process is faithfully undertaken, it is presumed that the new creation will bloom in its own time from within the very oppositions that currently bind consciousness in this “old” creation.

This theme of growth through contradiction leading to a new kind of growth without it is what *Savitri* seeks to express in both “sound-significance and word-significance.” It is Sri Aurobindo’s attempt at what he means by “the future poetry,” which expresses this kind of complex growth in perfection. It also is an expression of his vision of future human beings: a supramental race made up of what he called

Discoverers of beauty’s sunlit ways
And swimmers of Love’s laughing fiery floods
And dancers within rapture’s golden doors,
Their tread one day shall change the suffering earth
And justify the light on Nature’s face.⁹⁰

X. CONCLUSION

In this period in Sri Aurobindo’s life, he is no longer identifying as a Hindu, even as he uses Sanskrit and some Hindu philosophical systems and yogic practices for his own unique purposes. He is charting new territory by seeking to bring down the inner attainment of spiritual mastery into the material plane so that the reality of the spiritual realms reliably and permanently lives externally in time and space. Besides his non-sectarian Ashram, his use of poetry is one of the important means that Sri Aurobindo uses to accomplish this integral transformation, which is neither spiritual nor material in its nature. It is “supramental” as he calls it, a new creation. In the collection of articles now called *The Future Poetry*, he analyzes these issues. To achieve the supramental transformation in poetry, which he calls the *mantra*, he explores the unlikely language of his colonists: English. He

⁹⁰ Sri Aurobindo, *Savitri*, 344.

notices that the line of evolution in English poetry that he focuses on is actually leading to this *mantra* in some important ways, and there are even English speaking critics who are independently describing its possibility, notably James H. Cousins, a poet from Ireland. Sri Aurobindo says that the *mantra* is composed of three “intensities”: vision, form, and rhythm, and thinks that the Anglo-Saxon and Celtic nature of this language, coupled with Indian spiritual practice will accomplish the integration and high intensity of these three *mantric* elements. This spiritual practice, like meditation (*dhyāna*) that we explored last chapter, specifically involves accessing the level of consciousness that he calls “genius” (*jñāna*) and its four powers of revelation, inspiration, intuition, and discrimination. The next descendant step for this poet is bringing the light of these higher levels down into the intellect’s (the *buddhi*’s) four powers of perception, imagination, reasoning, and judgment to affect the rhythm and form in the poetry. Sri Aurobindo notes that the Vedic notion of the *ṛṣi* or *kavi* is what best describes his kind of poet. The *kavi* surrenders her personality to the impersonal spirit of Truth and Beauty in these higher realms of consciousness to become its instrument on Earth.

Sri Aurobindo explains how best to interpret *mantric* poetry as well, which is not unlike Lindsay Jones’s notion of interpreting a ritual-architectural event. Sri Aurobindo presupposes a ritual-poetic event that requires the reader to interpret the *mantric* poem’s meaning within the dynamic relationships of poet, poem, and herself. This methodology is also not unlike reader-response hermeneutical methods that focus on the reader’s experience of the poem. Comparing Walker Gibson’s reader-response theory, for Sri Aurobindo, the reader must surrender her personal identity and become a “mock intuitive reader” in this ritual-poetic event, which has transformative potentials: transforming a personal experience into an impersonal one, since the experience is decentering and shared rather than self-referencing and isolated. This impersonality is not cold and calculating, but warm and filled with deepest feeling, which is an experience of the intuition. Therefore, reading *mantric* poetry risks losing an old (potentially cherished) identity that is

experienced as limited in light of the poem, but it opens one to the possibility of gaining an enlarged intuitional experience in this new impersonal identity.

Sri Aurobindo's cultural pilgrimage through English poetry shows him that it possesses a *dharmā* or "law of nature" that is signaling the supramental manifestation in poetry. In contrast to the prevailing Modernist poetry during his time, the line of development he traces in the English language goes from poetry that runs through expressions of the life of the senses, the vital nature, the intellect, and even the intuition, if only nascently. I note five characteristics of the intuition according to Sri Aurobindo's descriptions: 1) it is direct and accurate knowledge; 2) it has foresight; 3) it guides one to face one's darkness and limitations to find divinity; 4) it unites all opposites; and 5) it is feelingly impersonal. He recognizes some contemporary poets like Whitman, A.E., and R. Tagore that demonstrate many of these qualities in their work, but not all, making the full manifestation of *mantric* poetry uncertain. He is sanguine, however, that these poets are signs of a "new dawn" in global culture. He is confident because of how poetry is growing towards it, sprouting that growing sacred rose bush from the human heart (*hr̥d*). (The *English* human heart, in fact!) For him, though contemporary history threatens this development (World War I ended eleven months after he began these articles), he sees enough signs within culture and society of this progressive growth that he can project a positive conjecture for its manifestation. Threats like world war, ironically, are his sign that this growth is potentially assured since it more fully stimulates a hunger for it.

The epic poem *Savitri* is Sri Aurobindo's own yoga. Both his process as a poet and the poem itself demonstrate the characteristics of the *mantra* and how to both create it and interpret it as explained in *The Future Poetry*. Most notably, they demonstrate the principle of growth to the supramental creation through facing opposition in a descent into matter's resistances. As he describes his creative process, it is a procedure of first, rejecting current, limited expression in light

of encountering higher consciousness, which oppose each other. Second, it requires that the personality surrender to that higher place of consciousness, which awakens and strengthens an aspiration to meet its impersonal demand in an increasingly *mantric* way. The practical goal in this creative practice is a union of poetic content with the very sound of the words, such that what one hears physically in the rhythm and vibration of the poetry is in fact the very message that the poem communicates in terms of its content. In other words, the meaning of a *mantric* poem is the physical material of the poem as much as the content or theme that is expressed.

The message of *Savitri*, in both sound and content, adapts and universalizes a well-known Hindu story. Sri Aurobindo's poem honors past ascendant spiritual striving; however, in light of the new supramental consciousness, it is found wanting. *Āśvapathi* is representative of the honored past, and the union of *Sāvitṛī* and *Satyavān*, the inchoate future. However, this movement into the future and this displacement of the past will not go on without a fight. *Āśvapathi* tries and fails where *Sāvitṛī* and *Satyavān* succeed. They welcome this battle, which takes place in the very nature of the Earth itself, which is limited by death, suffering, falsehood, and darkness. These are the very phenomena that stimulate *Sāvitṛī*'s and *Satyavān*'s desire for their opposites and motivates their effort to make mortal life immortal. This effort means to transform the very way that life grows. The goal of these characters is to reach a life divine on Earth in which the oppositional pressures that push growth along will no longer be necessary. The path of this battle is long and requires constructively living within the contrary and dual experience of "the Dawn time," as John Collins aptly calls it. Progress in this new world will proceed without opposition when the Earth no longer needs it in the supramental manifestation.

The Mother, like *Sāvitṛī* in his poem, takes on more importance at this stage in Sri Aurobindo's life: for his poetry, for his Yoga, and for his Ashram, supporting a cultural dawn for him, as well as the spiritual dawn of the supramental manifestation. In the next three chapters we

will see how the Mother works in the arts and the Integral Yoga, as she works to further the potentials of her consort's creative and spiritual ideals.

Chapter Four

The Mother On Art and Stimulating Progress

I. INTRODUCTION: THE GURU AND ART

In the last chapter we saw the way in which Sri Aurobindo's aesthetics for the future poetry centers on his notion of the *mantra*, which is composed of the highest intensity of form and rhythm and is inspired, not by a vision of the soul transcending the material plane only, but ultimately by a vision (*dṛṣṭi*) of the soul in/as a transformed material body. This vision has a guide, the "lightning" fast trace of intuition. He writes that intuition connects the higher supramental light with the hidden light within the heart (*hṛd*) of the poet where this *mantra* is born and to which it potentially returns in the hearer. In this chapter, we will examine the following query: what is the role of a guru or spiritual guide in this creative process, since Sri Aurobindo and more actively, the Mother, play this role for their artist-students? What is the interplay between the artist, the intuition, and the heart with the Mother?

As we saw in the Introduction, the Mother is Sri Aurobindo's *Śakti* to his *Īśvara*, *Prakṛti* to his *Puruṣa*, *Rādhā* to his *Kṛṣṇa*; that is, she is a spiritual figure who "shares the lot" or mission and spiritual goals of her partner in a unique and privileged way.¹ In the Introduction, we briefly compared other examples of spiritual consorts in India in the twentieth century in a similar way, notably, Ramakrishna (1836–1886) and Sarada Devi (1853–1920); Meher Baba (1894-1969) and Mehera Irani (1907-1989); and Upasni Maharaj (1870-1941) and Godavari Mataji (1914-1990). This pattern of spiritual relationship is not just a Hindu phenomenon as all of these couples are

¹ "Consort" etymologically comes from *con-* together + *sor, sortem-* lot. See *OED*, s.v. "consort."

associated with different traditions or mixtures of traditions: Hinduism for the first couple, Zoroastrianism in the second, Hinduism and Islam in the third.²

Another element that most of these couples have in common with the Mother and Sri Aurobindo is that they think of themselves as representing a spiritual practice that is non-sectarian and universal.³ These couples might agree with the non-denominational spirit I briefly mentioned last chapter. Sri Aurobindo says the following, when he counseled a Muslim devotee about the perceived “Hindu” nature of his Ashram,

If this Ashram were here only to serve Hinduism I would not be in it and the Mother who was never a Hindu would not be in it. ...Every Hindu here...give[s] up all observance of caste, take[s] food from Pariahs and are served by them, associate[s] and eat[s] with Mohomedans, Christians, Europeans, cease[s] to practice temple worship or Sandhya (daily prayers and mantras), accept[s] a non-Hindu from Europe as their spiritual director. ...What is kept of Hinduism is Vedanta and Yoga, in which Hinduism is one with Sufism of Islam and with the Christian mystics. ...I have not the slightest objection to Hinduism being broken to pieces and disappearing from the face of the earth, if that is the Divine Will. I have no attachment to past forms; what is Truth will always remain; the Truth alone matters.⁴

The non-sectarian and universal nature of this spiritual practice is seen in the way that traditional Hindu social observances are ignored, in the pluralistic membership of the Ashram, and most clearly in the non-Hindu and female guru that guides it: the Mother.

Sri Aurobindo designated a French Jewish woman as “spiritual director” of his Ashram, and in so doing, contributed to a change in paradigm for what it means to be a guru in India. Karen Pechilis adds that “Sri Aurobindo’s extension of the paradigm to a foreign woman parallels his

² Though Meher Baba and Mehera Irani came from Zoroastrian families, Meher Baba did not claim to teach any one religious tradition. His principle text *God Speaks* summaries Sufi, Vedāntic and Christian thought, in an attempt to unify all three. Upasni Maharaj’s guru was the Hindu/Muslim Sai Baba of Shirdi, which connects him to both religions.

³ It is not clear to me if those who live in the Ashram of Upasni Maharaj in Sakori would fit into this category as they maintain a Hindu form of life and worship, though the wider following is quite pluralistic. An unedited biography of Upasni is currently being revised, which will shed light on these issues: S.M. Desai, B. Irani, *The Sadguru of Sakori: Upasni Maharaj*, trans. Anura Gumashta (North Charleston, SC: Create Space, 2012).

⁴ Sri Aurobindo, letter of 17 November 1932, published in *Bulletin of Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education* 52 (August 2000): 70 and 74.

expansion of the traditional [Indian/Hindu] teachings to the international community,” in a non-sectarian form, I would add.⁵ It was not the Mother’s gender, her religious background, or national identity that was important to him, but her being adequately prepared for the role according to what he saw as the progress of her *citta*. It is important to keep in mind, therefore, that although the Mother later held many Hindu sacred texts, art, and mythologies as valuable in her teachings, and commented on Sri Aurobindo’s Hindu influenced writings, she was not a Hindu. Therefore, we will have to go beyond a comparison of other Hindu female gurus at a certain point to understand her work, and think of her (and Sri Aurobindo) properly as part of a new religious movement, as I argue in the Preface. Her teachings and behavior in fact, have less to do with her treatment of any religious texts, rituals, behaviors, or propositional beliefs than with her innovative use of visual and material culture, which will become apparent below. We will also examine this aspect of the Mother’s way of being a guru in more detail for the next two chapters.

Firstly, it will be helpful to define the word ‘guru.’ In Hindu student/teacher traditions, Pechelis writes, the “guru is understood to experience the real continuously,” the “real” being the experience of *Brahman*, *saccidānanda*.⁶ Further, the “guru is able to inspire the experience of the real in others, for the purposes of spiritual advancement, total self-realization, or evolution as a human being.”⁷ The word guru may have its roots in either \sqrt{gri} (to invoke or to praise) or \sqrt{gur} (to raise up, to make an effort). As an adjective, guru means “heavy,” that is, heavy with wisdom, or weighty with spiritual significance.⁸ It is a cognate of the Latin, *gravis*, which means grave, heavy, weighty, serious.⁹

⁵ Karen Pechilis, *The Graceful Guru: Hindu Female Gurus in India and the United States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 32.

⁶ Ibid., 4.

⁷ Ibid., 5.

⁸ *MMW*, s.v. “guru.” It is interesting to note that some of the later images of the Mother giving *darśan* from her balcony show her bent over as though pressed downward by an invisible weight.

⁹ Robert K. Barnhart, *The Barnhart Dictionary of Etymology* (New York: H.W. Wilson Co., 1988), 447.

In light of these insights, the guru is literally the weight of wisdom's pressure on the student, stimulating the student's elevation in the context of the student's labor (and the guru's play or *līlā*). In the context of our study, the Mother is regarded as the active guru of the Ashram, a living embodiment of the pressure and weight of *Cit*—what Sri Aurobindo actually calls the *Cit-Śakti* or Conscious-Force—so her students aspire to surrender their *citta* to that forceful weight in order to elevate and expand it. In other words, the transformation of the student's *citta* into the Mother's *Cit* is their aspiration.

Pechilis notes that some scholarship argues that female gurus in our contemporary context emphasize *bhakti* more than male gurus. She is not convinced by this, however, compared to the more important idea of *śakti*, which female gurus are always said to embody.¹⁰ Pechilis writes that “[f]emale gurus are understood by Hindu tradition and by their followers alike to be manifestations of the Goddess; that is, as perfect embodiments of shakti.”¹¹ In the past, female gurus in India were not as prevalent nor were their roles as public. They usually had a limited, private role confined to the home, teaching their husbands possibly, whereas in the twentieth century, female “gurus were appointed in many distinctive traditions within Hinduism, and they played public leadership roles.”¹² It is as if the medieval sacred text of the *Devī Gītā* is realized in the female Hindu teachers of the twentieth century. This text elevates the goddess (*devī*) from being merely a supporting consort of a god (as typically depicted in Puranic texts) to that of being the Supreme Divine *Śakti*, “One without a second,” “envisioned as ‘the embodiment of compassion,’ a gracious and knowledgeable teacher,

¹⁰ See Karen Pechilis, *The Graceful Guru*, and Elizabeth Puttick, *Women in New Religions: In Search of Community, Sexuality and Spiritual Power* (New York City: Palgrave Macmillan, 1997). It is all too easy to recount the many male examples of gurus who embodied *bhakti*: from Caitanya to Kṛṣṇa, Ramakrishna to Meher Baba. I would also argue that one could study the ways in which male gurus in India embody the characteristics of *Śakti*, as well. Meher Baba, for instance claimed to be both Father and Mother: “in this incarnation of the Avatar, God has the occasion, as it were, to play the part of both Father and Mother.” C.B. Purdom, *The God-Man* (Myrtle Beach, SC: Sheriar Foundation, 1971), 315.

¹¹ Karen Pechilis, *The Graceful Guru*, 9.

¹² Ibid., 31.

and ultimate goal of religious contemplation.”¹³ Being identified with this elevated notion of the *devī* means that female gurus are authoritative teachers, which, in Pechilis’ view, is a role that is distinct from a being saint. She argues that a guru has a teaching office that is authorized by her having reached the goal of spiritual striving: the embodiment of the *devī*; whereas a saint is a mature aspirant on the path and embodies *bhakti*, or loving devotion to her goal, and so presumably in Pechilis’ view, the saint does not have the same teaching function. She proposes a distinction that “The woman saints present poems and stories that we can admire and learn from, but they themselves are not remembered as teachers,... and the saint’s relationship to the social world is arguably too controversial to place them in the inherently social role of teacher.”¹⁴

I find this view unconvincing as the labels of guru, saint, and goddess are so fluid in India that it seems impossible to pin them down when describing actual examples from a religious studies perspective.¹⁵ However, Pechilis’ development is interesting. Wanting to somehow bridge twentieth-century female gurus with twentieth-century feminist concerns, Pechilis laments that the “focus of the teaching of Hindu female gurus is not specifically expressed as ‘empowering women.’”¹⁶ Therefore, this notion of guru as divine *Śakti* contrasts with the contemporary western “evocation of the goddess energy,” which some feminists have constructed, borrowed, or valued for psychological, social, cultural, and political purposes related to “power, self affirmation, and

¹³ Ibid., 24.

¹⁴ Ibid., 23.

¹⁵ Godavari Mataji mentioned above would explode these clear distinctions, for example, for her followers use all of these labels. In Meher Baba’s system, for another contrary point of view, there are seven planes of consciousness, and a saint is someone who has consciousness of either the fifth or sixth plane. According to him, one can be a guru on these planes as well. A guru of the seventh plane, he calls a Perfect Master or *Sadguru* (True Teacher). Therefore, in Meher Baba’s system, one can be both a guru and a saint in the fifth or sixth plane, or a *Sadguru* and God-realized soul on the seventh. See Meher Baba, “The Unlimited One is the Sadguru” in *The Everything and the Nothing* (Myrtle Beach, SC: Sheriar Foundation, 1998), 18-32 or see http://www.ambppct.org/Book_Files/Everything_r.pdf; accessed March 3, 2016.

¹⁶ Pechilis, 10.

celebration of earth energy.”¹⁷ I can see a positive interpretation of this disconnect. Hindu female gurus reside in a unique position of critique of, and pressure against, both patriarchy and matriarchy. Hindu female gurus are not necessarily opposed to feminists concerns, they simply subordinate them to a larger goal of perfection that is fundamentally inclusive of women and men and their potentials for harmonious gendered integration (*viz.*, androgynous integration) within one’s *citta*. The Mother shares this androgynous goal, which is poetically expressed in the poem *Savitri* as we saw last chapter. The Mother was a well-educated and self-affirmed French woman, who became the guru of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, exemplifying the goal of Hindu gurus who abandon “dualistic thought (such as, ‘I and you,’ ‘male and female,’ etc.) in favor of experiencing ‘unqualified divine unity,’” not female ego-affirmation (any more than male ego-affirmation).¹⁸

As a guru, what is the Mother’s relationship to art and the creative process? In Chapter Two, we discussed Sri Aurobindo’s understanding that ancient sacred Indian art expresses an ideal of the “divine and subtle body,” and the sure way to find this ideal is with the aid of a *sādhū* or saint since the *sādhū* embodies it.¹⁹ The *sādhū-sammatam*, literally “that which is highly honored by the saint” is, in relation to art, that artwork which satisfies the taste of a *sādhū*, or the *sādhū* within us, which we might say, seeks perfection or perfect self-expression. The Mother taught some of her students to use the arts to potentially grow in perfection and in this process, they relied on her to be the *sādhū-sammatam*, the standard of perfection by which their art and their growth could be measured. For her students, the Mother possesses “the profoundest soul and the most sensitive psychic imagination,”

¹⁷ Ibid., 9.

¹⁸ Ibid. We will have a chance to consider in Chapter Six what she means by the future human species of “the new creation,” which is an androgynous image of human perfection in her view; androgyny being a time honored way of expressing “unqualified divine unity” or, in the words of Mircea Eliade, “the mystery of wholeness” in sacred texts the world over. See Mircea Eliade, *Mephistopheles and the Androgyne*, trans. J. M. Cohen (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1965), 80.

¹⁹ See Chapter Two, p. 105.

for she is a saint and even more, the *Avatāra* of the Divine Mother.²⁰ As evidenced in their journals, letters, and my contact with *sādhaks* (spiritual aspirants) of the Ashram, I would say that her students see her as the externalized version of their intuition—the *sādhya-sammatam*—who guides their creativity and spiritual progress in a faster and more reliable way than depending on their own efforts to distinguish the deepest dictates of their heart from the discords of their lower natures.

In the experience of her students, is there competition between what their intuitions tell them, and what the Mother counsels? When we study the interactions, there seems to be an inherent conflict that naturally tests the Mother's role and the student's trust. However, the goal for her artist-students is to reject what is low, aspire for what is high, and surrender to the higher nature within. The Mother represents this higher nature in the eyes of her disciples, so they seek to internalize her guidance as they seek to externalize the best of their heart in the midst of, and even because of, this conflict between the student and teacher. The Mother consciously uses the principle that opposition potentially stimulates growth in the Integral Yoga, as we will see more clearly in the next two chapters. The dynamic can now be seen in the context of a nurturing and caring relationship, where this support of the guru, like a parent for a child, encourages the student to face oppositions as they surface naturally, or even as the guru provides them herself. The Mother is truly a manifestation of *Sāvitṛī*, which etymologically means “stimulator.”

In this chapter, however, I will first make a more detailed sketch of the Mother's life as this relates to the visual arts and how she was prepared for her role as a guru and as the *sādhya-sammatam* for her artists. Secondly, I will describe what the Mother tells her artist-*sādhaks* generally to guide their creative efforts, which is meant to stimulate their growth.

²⁰ Sri Aurobindo, *The Renaissance and Other Essays on Indian Culture*, 296.

II. LIFE SKETCH

1. *Early Life and the Belle Époque (1878-1901)*

Blanche Rachel Mirra Alfassa was Parisian by birth, born to Sephardic Jewish immigrants: an Egyptian mother, Matilde Ismaloun, from Alexandria and a Turkish father, Moïse Maurice Alfassa, who was a banker from Adrianople. Her parents left Alexandria for Paris when Alexandria fell into economic and social disarray after the government began the difficult process of modernization. Living a rich lifestyle of horses and carriages, nannies and well-furnished homes, they moved in elite levels of French society and culture. Mirra “was proud of her middle Eastern heritage, but she never considered herself anything but French.”²¹ Mirra had a cousin who became director of the Louvre and her only sibling, Mattéo, became Governor-General of French Equatorial Africa later in life. Her mother Matilde was “thoroughly influenced by the spirit of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution underlying it. Matilde was a confirmed materialist and atheist to whom only what one touched and saw was important, but she believed in unending progress and self-perfection.”²² Both parents were quite puzzled by young Mirra, who was interested from an early age in spirituality and the occult, often spending hours in meditation. At age five, she began to spontaneously experience a kind of “inner light” as she described it, which to her was a guide for her growth in life, “though she did not know what it was.”²³

She became an accomplished painter, starting to paint at eight years old under the tutelage of three ladies, the Bricka sisters. She later said that “[a]ll aspects of art and beauty, but particularly music and painting, fascinated me.”²⁴ The apprenticeship with the Bricka sisters lasted until fourteen or fifteen. Her mother was not happy about this focus in her life, thinking that “art and artists

²¹ Peter Heehs, *The Lives of Sri Aurobindo*, 250.

²² Georges Van Vrekhem, *The Mother: The Story of Her Life*, 5.

²³ The Mother, *Paintings and Drawings* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Press, 1992), 156.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 156.

belonged to a shadowy, suspect social subgroup on the margins of society. Artists belonged to *la bohème*.”²⁵ Mirra was such a talented child, however, that she even taught painting to others at this young age. By her own accounts, her interest in the arts naturally led to spiritual experience. In 1961 she described an experience of music at age fourteen:

The Jewish temples in Paris have such beautiful music. Oh, what beautiful music! It was in a temple that I had one of my first experiences. It was at a wedding. The music was wonderful. I was up in the balcony with my mother, and the music, I was later told, was the music of Saint-Saëns, with an organ. (it was the second best organ in Paris—marvelous!) This music was being played, and I was up there (I was fourteen) and there were some leaded-glass windows—white windows, with no designs. I was gazing at one of them, feeling uplifted by the music, when suddenly through the window came a flash like a bolt of lightning. Just like lightning. It entered—my eyes were open—it entered like this (*Mother strikes her chest forcefully*), and then I...I had the feeling of becoming vast and all-powerful. And it lasted for days.²⁶

Mirra lived in Paris at a very exciting time in Western art history when the very center of Western art was in her own backyard. Artists from all parts of Europe, North America, and even India came to Paris to perfect their talents and make a career.²⁷ The aesthetic norm at this time was mimetic “academic” painting that embodied biblical, mythical, allegorical, or historical themes, seen through late nineteenth-century French lenses. This kind of art defended its high place in culture as the movements of Modernism began to challenge it. Academic painting in Paris was configured in a triangle of institutions with the avant-garde of Modernism growing as a kind of threat in its

²⁵ Georges Van Vrekhem, *The Mother: The Story of Her Life*, 16.

²⁶ *The Mother, Paintings and Drawings*, 156-57.

²⁷ Indian examples: **Sashi Hesh** (1869-?) from Bengal spent many years in Europe studying the Western masters in Rome, Munich, Paris and London. “He met his wife Athalie Flamant in Paris, turning Francophile and admiring Victor Hugo more than that English poets. Hesh’s exposure to the French salon distanced him from British art, offering him ammunition for challenging the colonial legacy. Not that he was uncritical in his admiration of Continental art. He deplored the modern vogue for realism in France which threatened idealism.” Partha Mitter, *Art and Nationalism in Colonial India, 1850-1922* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 115-6. Hesh is significant to our study because he met Sri Aurobindo when they were in Baroda while Sri Aurobindo was beginning his revolutionary phase of work. Hesh made a portrait of Sri Aurobindo sometime between 1893-1906, but it is now lost; and **Farindranath Bose** (1888-1926) was another Bengali who gained commercial success in Europe. He went to Italy and Scotland to learn the classic figurative style of Western Europe. “He continued his training in Paris, where he impressed Rodin with his work. The use of broken surfaces in Bose’s bronze statuettes shows both Rodin’s and the Frenchman Mercié’s inspiration.” Mitter, 117.

center.²⁸ The first point of this triangle was L'Ecole des Beaux Arts. It is a school that still operates in Paris, founded in 1648 to teach the artistic forms and values of the classical Greek and Roman cultures. Its method, revolutionary in the seventeenth century, was to educate any worthy male student for free regardless of class, thus breaking from the class-based master-apprentice model that had crystallized in the Middle Ages.²⁹ The second point of this triangle was the loose community of ateliers that were run by graduates of L'Ecole and who taught potential applicants to the important school. The third pole was the Paris Salon, a gallery venue for the best artists to show their work and obtain commissions. Informally, in the middle of this triangle was the lively café life of Paris, where art and art theory were discussed and critiqued. In this casual atmosphere, the Impressionists and Post-Impressionists carved out an alternative Modernist artworld. Mirra moved and lived in this layered artworld.

It was mistakenly thought by some scholars that Mirra attended the prestigious L'Ecole des Beaux Arts. However, the school first allowed women in 1897 and according to biographers she “finished her art schooling and married in that year. Prior to that, the only place in Paris where women could study painting seriously was the Académie Julian.”³⁰ The founder, Rodolphe Julian, believed in the equality and potential of women and opened his doors to them in 1868. We do not know a lot about Mirra’s work at this time, but she did say later in life that a still-life of hers was accepted in the Paris Salon in 1904. The editor of *Paintings and Drawings* writes, “The Mother said little about her years as an art student; of the little she said, almost nothing relates to art. As with all her early life, one can only glean stray details from passing remarks, but these cannot often be dated with any precision.”³¹

²⁸ See http://www.jssgallery.org/Essay/Ecole_des_Beaux-Arts/Ecole_des_Beaux-Arts.htm; accessed March 3, 2016.

²⁹ See <http://www.culture.gouv.fr/ENSBA/History.html>; accessed March 3, 2016.

³⁰ *The Mother, Paintings and Drawings*, 157.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 159.

The marriage to her first husband in 1897, Henri Morisset, lasted eleven years. He was a painter and student of Gustav Moreau at L'Ecole des Beaux Arts, who also taught Henri Matisse at the same time. Morisset was dually enrolled at the Académie Julian. The editor of *Paintings and Drawings* speculates that Henri may have been “instrumental in her joining the Académie Julian.”³² Georges Van Vrekhem says that Mirra’s grandmother, also named Mira, may have introduced them to each other, as she knew Henri’s grandfather, Edouard Morisset, who was also a painter. Van Vrekhem writes that “Edouard was one of the artists from whom in former years Mira [the grandmother]...had ordered portraits of the Egyptian princesses ‘to be done from photographs.’”³³ Later in their marriage Henri and Mirra worked together on a mural project in Pau in the Church of Saint James. They also had a son, André in 1898.³⁴ They entered their works into the Salons and continued to paint. By this time, Morisset had a very secure career that supported Mirra and André. Heeh’s writes, “Few years went by without one or more of his works being accepted by the committees that set the guidelines of state-sponsored art.”³⁵ According to biographers, Mirra was productive but not as successful; “Perhaps the largest number of the Mother’s paintings are from this period, though the dating of her early works is often uncertain and many are now lost. She did not pursue “success” in the art world, but she did get several of her paintings exhibited in the Salon de la Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts in 1903, 1904, and 1905.”³⁶

Her early work is indebted to the values and forms of salon painting, akin to the romantic paintings of Eugène Delacroix (See Figure 4.1). Yet there are characteristics of the Impressionists

³² *The Mother, Paintings and Drawings*, 160.

³³ Georges Van Vrekhem, 17.

³⁴ André later fought in both World Wars, worked in France in the battery industry and later came to be a follower of his mother and Sri Aurobindo. He worked part time in France and the Ashram on their behalf starting in 1949 until his death in 1982.

³⁵ Heehs, 251. Morisset lost his notoriety after World War I with the rise of Picasso and Matisse.

³⁶ *The Mother, Paintings and Drawings*, 162.

and Symbolists in some of her later work, like Pierre-Auguste Renoir and Odilon Redon, respectively. The painterly brushstrokes in some of her work like *André as a Child* is an example of this kind of impressionism (See Figure 4.2). Mirra's *The Moon Goddess ("Apparition")* has something of the dreamlike environments of Redon (See Figure 4.3). Both Mirra and Redon created images that also have a quality of a visionary, of trying to express light that comes not from external sources, but from within the forms themselves. Mirra grounded her figure in a world, however, which is unlike Redon, who tended to paint figures as though they float above a world, as seen in *Apparition* and *Birth of Venus* (See Figures 4.4 and 4.5). Mirra's Goddess is clothed and upholds the moon even as she stands lightly, though firmly on the Earth, or is it between two worlds? She seems to stand between a world of light and our world, at the threshold where a veil is lifted to bridge them together.³⁷ Like the moon, she reflects the sun of the supermind.

Mirra did not fully seek artistic success in the conventional sense of the term. Van Vrekhem writes that "Mirra was not interested in an artistic career, but in the practice, mastery and enjoyment of art itself."³⁸ This was the same attitude that she later encouraged her students to adopt in the Ashram. Hechs notes that her "works of the period, many of them quiet interior studies, show excellent technique and classical balance, if little originality."³⁹ She might have agreed, as she thought of herself, in fact, as "a perfectly ordinary artist," though she thought she was more mature in what she called "observations, experiences, studies" compared to the "great" fine artists that she knew.⁴⁰ She ultimately sought not to compete with her creative skills, but to perfect her contact with "the

³⁷ The image has resonance with an important experience that Mirra as the Mother had many years later in 1956, what came to be called "The Golden Day." This was the day in a vision when she took a golden hammer, as she describes it, and broke through a golden door that barred the force and presence of the Supermind from entering our physical world. This is the beginning of accomplishing the ultimate goal of the Yoga of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo.

³⁸ Georges Van Vrekhem, 17.

³⁹ Hechs, 251.

⁴⁰ The Mother, *The Mother's Agenda III* (Paris: Institute for Evolutionary Research, 1979), July 25, 1962.

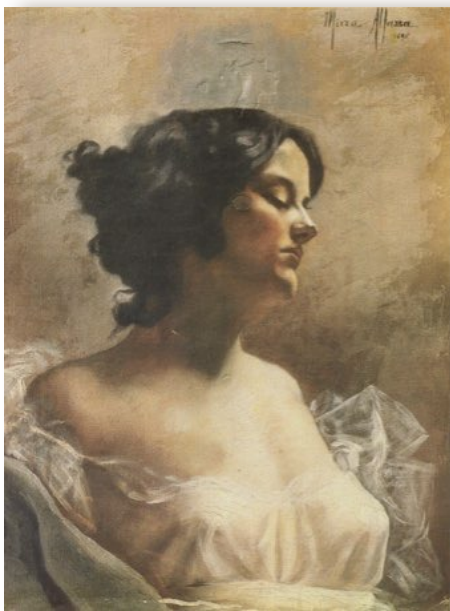


Figure 4.1. Mirra Alfassa, *Early Study*, 1895, France.



Figure 4.2. Mirra Alfassa, *André as a Child*, 1903, France.



Figure 4.3. The Mother, *The Moon Goddess* ("Apparition"), c. 1920-30, Pondicherry, India.



Figure 4.4. Odilon Redon, *Apparition*, c. 1905, Museum of Modern Art, New York City, NY. Artstor.



Figure 4.5. Odilon Redon, *Birth of Venus*, c. 1912, Museum of Modern Art, New York City, NY. Artstor.

inner light;” being an artist, for the time being, served that purpose.⁴¹

Mirra describes artists at the turn of the century in Paris as living from the consciousness in the “vital nature,” which she sought to master by subordinating it to her “inner light.” She writes,

[Artists] usually live in the vital plane, and the vital part in them is extremely sensitive to the forces of that world and receives from it all kinds of impressions and impulsions over which they have no controlling power. And often they are very free in their minds and do not believe in the petty social conventions and moralities that govern the life of ordinary people. They do not feel bound by the customary rules of conduct and have not found an inner law that would replace them. As there is nothing to check the movements of their desire-being, they live easily a life of liberty or license. But this does not happen with all. I lived ten years among artists and found many of them to be bourgeois to the core. They were married and settled, good fathers, good husbands, and lived up to the most strict moral ideas of what should and what should not be done.⁴²

⁴¹ It is, I think important to understand that it is difficult to make a just assessment of the Mother’s artwork since the Ashram Archives only has about 40 of the Mother’s paintings. Half of them were made pre-1914 before she first came to Pondicherry. The Mother said that her best paintings are now lost as they were given away or sold years ago.

⁴² The Mother, *The Mother, Paintings and Drawings*, 163-4.

As we will see, the purification of the vital nature or “desire-being” becomes a very important focus not only in her own life, but also in the life of her students later in the Ashram. Flowers are also connected to this work as well, as I will show.

We do not know all the “great” artists with whom Mirra associated. She said she was “a kid sister to them.”⁴³ Kumari Jayawardena states that she knew Degas, Monet, and Renoir, though this cannot be corroborated. At that time, her being 19 or 20 years old, Degas, Monet, and Cézanne were in their 60s and reclusive, so it is unlikely that she knew their circle. The Mother mentioned Renoir in her later talks about her acquaintances. Heehs lists Matisse, Rodin, César Franck, Anatole France, and Émile Zola.⁴⁴ The editor of *Paintings and Drawings* surmises that maybe “the range of ages given by the Mother should not be taken too literally. But it is probable that she was referring in part to artists who were well-known in their own time but whose names are not household words today.”⁴⁵

She later told an anecdote about how Auguste Rodin sought her advice about some jealousies between his wife and his model. Mirra admired his work and his character. She said Rodin was a mature person in her experience, one “who [was] generous and good and incapable of cruelty.”⁴⁶ She also seems to have known Henri Matisse, given that he was a student with her husband under Moreau’s guidance.

The Mother liked [Matisse’s] work better than most modern art, for “he has a sense of harmony and beauty and his colors were beautiful.” She had little positive appreciation of modern art in general. At best, the Cubists and others “created from their head. But in art it is not the head that dominates, it is the feeling for beauty.” Yet for all the apparent incoherence and ugliness of many of its manifestations, the Mother could detect in the modern art movement “the embryo of a new art.”⁴⁷

⁴³ The Mother, *The Mother’s Agenda III*, July 25, 1962.

⁴⁴ Heehs, 251.

⁴⁵ The editor, in *The Mother, Paintings and Drawings*, 164.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 165.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* I will examine these thoughts about her view of Modern art in more detail in the Conclusion.

After the divorce from Morisset in 1908, Mirra gradually left her life in the artworld of Paris. She began a new phase of her life of turning to inner realms, though she continued to paint and sketch in brief periods. 1908, however, “marked the end of a distinct phase in her life, the period of predominantly ‘artistic and vital’ development,’ culminating in the occult development with Théon.”⁴⁸ As we will see in Chapter Six, her development as an artist was not at all finished, but lasted until 1972, the year before she died.

2. *From Art to the Occult (1901-1914)*

Sometime in the first decade of the 1900s, through her brother’s friend Louis Thémansly, Mirra joined a spiritual group called “Le Mouvement Cosmic” in Paris, which Max Théon and Félicien Charles Bartlet founded in 1884. It was headquartered in Tlemcen, Algeria, but published its material in Paris. Mirra helped to edit their monthly journal *Revue Cosmique*. Max Théon (1855?-1927) was possibly a Polish (or Russian or Ukrainian?) occultist of Kabbala and other esoteric traditions. Mirra seems to have met him at the earliest by age 23 in 1901. His name is a pseudonym meaning “Greatest God,” yet his given name seems to have been Louis Maximilian Bimstein. He and his wife, Alma, experimented together in the occult and were, we might say, spiritual consorts as well. However, with Alma’s death in 1908, Max was unable to continue his spiritual work. Alma was an Englishwoman, previously named Mary Christine Woodroffe Ware, who also went by another pseudonym Una. Biographers write that Mirra’s contact with the couple fueled deeper experiences of “the inner light,” and helped her to master very subtle and sometimes dramatic occult powers. These included reading others thoughts, leaving her body and traveling to other cities, going into other planes of consciousness where she met or battled other divine or demonic beings.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

Mirra visited Max and Alma two important times (1906 and 1907) in Algeria where they lived and she explored her spiritual gifts with their collaboration. In Algeria, Mirra continued to paint landscapes; for example, the garden and home of the Théons. Like many esoteric groups of the early nineteenth century (Theosophy being the most well known), Le Mouvement Cosmique thought of itself as upholding and honoring the wisdom traditions of the “Orient” and Near East to counter what they considered a dark age of Western materialism and individualism. Their teaching, however, was an innovation on Asian thought and practice that sought to transform the material realm into a more divine reality. It too aspired to be a descendant spirituality.⁴⁹

Right before she traveled to Algeria, by the end of 1905, Mirra became obsessed with contacting and permanently uniting with her inner light, what she later called *l'être psychique*, “the psychic being.” She claimed later that by the end of 1906, she had come to this consciousness. “My psychic being governs me—I am afraid of nothing.”⁵⁰ She also had, at about this time, many visions of a being that she recognized as *Kṛṣṇa*. In these visions, she behaved like a devoted Hindu would to a guru, though she knew nothing about India and Hindu courtesy with a guru. This was two years before Sri Aurobindo had his *Kṛṣṇa* experiences in the Alipore jail in 1908-09.

She began a friendship with Paul Richard at this time as well. He was a French Reformed Church minister turned lawyer and aspiring politician, who became interested in the occult. In 1907 he too went to Algeria to stay with the Théons. Paul and Mirra first met one another at a discussion group she founded called “Idéa,” at the Morisset’s home, which explored intellectual topics on life and its meaning. Paul came to these meetings and impressed everyone with his insights. After Mirra divorced Henry, she moved into the apartment building where Paul lived. They soon developed a relationship and started to live together. Paul pressured her to marry for legal reasons, even though

⁴⁹ See Georges Van Vrekhem, “Explorations of the Occult,” in *The Mother*, 37-69 for the influence of this couple and their teaching on the descendent spirituality that the Mother later developed with Sri Aurobindo.

⁵⁰ *The Mother’s Agenda XIII*, April 15, 1972.

they both did not want to go through the formalities. Heehs describes their relationship as “an unusual one. Early in their friendship, Mirra explained to Paul ‘that the animal mode of reproduction was only a transitional one and that until new ways of creating life became biologically possible her own motherhood would have to remain spiritual.’”⁵¹ Heehs intimates that Paul wanted children, so Mirra told him to find this and sex elsewhere, which he did, even as they stayed married.

Mirra edited Paul’s writings for a few journals that he published. They continued to participate in intellectual and spiritual groups and to give talks. Some of the first teachers of Eastern traditions travelled through Paris and she met them in these meetings. For instance, she met the sufi teacher Hazrat Inayat Khan (1882-1927) of the Sufi Order and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá (1844-1921), the son of the founder of the Baha’i faith. These meetings are significant in that they exemplify a pattern that was very rare at the time and that has become more commonplace today: Eastern spiritual masters coming to the West and Western seekers going to the East.

3. Meeting Sri Aurobindo (1914-1926)

Mirra and Paul made their way to India to meet Sri Aurobindo in 1914. The Mother later said that as “soon as I saw Sri Aurobindo I recognised in him the well-known being whom I used to call Krishna.... And this is enough to explain why I am fully convinced that my place and my work are near him, in India.”⁵² However, they had to leave India because of The Great War, and travelled to Japan to teach French in 1915.⁵³

Mirra had not painted or sketched for many years, but in Japan, she returned to this way of relating to her environment and the people she met. She wrote what was later entitled *Prayers and Meditations* at this time, detailing her profound inner life, and she drank in the beauty of the Japanese

⁵¹ Heehs, 254.

⁵² The Mother, *Words of the Mother I* (Pondicherry: SAAP, 2004), 39.

⁵³ See Chapter Two, pp. 79–81.

landscapes in different seasons. She saw in Japanese culture an example of the unity of art and life that was her ideal: the integration of architecture with the landscape, and the artwork with the architecture. She learned the art of ink scroll painting and wrote in Japanese on these images. She made many contacts with Japanese Zen practitioners who gathered with her to meditate. She painted or sketched many of their portraits. Though she was enamored with Japan, it did not provide the deep spiritual outlet that she had discovered in India with Sri Aurobindo. The offer for Paul's job with the National Union for the Export of French Products in Japan was withdrawn, so they both found jobs teaching French so that they could be nearer to India and Sri Aurobindo, it would seem. "The artist in her was in a constant state of wonder in Japan, but the seeker in her lived in a spiritual vacuum. The dominant mood of her diary was withdrawal and expectation."⁵⁴ They finally left for India in 1920.

As Paul and Mirra settled in their new home in Pondicherry, Mirra and Sri Aurobindo began spending more and more intense time together in meditation and silence, which had the effect of making her husband and Sri Aurobindo's fellow residents jealous. This jealousy did not concern the couple. Mirra later described this time with her consort in terms of a vision,

I was standing just beside him. My head wasn't exactly on his shoulder, but where his shoulder was (I don't know how to explain it – physically there was hardly any contact). We were standing side by side like that, gazing out through the open window, and then TOGETHER, at exactly the same moment, we felt, "Now the Realization will be accomplished." That the seal was set and the Realization would be accomplished.⁵⁵

Paul's jealousy led to rages and he demanded to know Sri Aurobindo's intention with his wife. Sri Aurobindo said he had become her guru, but also he seems to have provoked Paul, according to Hechs. "Aurobindo said that [their relationship] would take any form that Mirra wanted. Paul persisted: 'Suppose she claims the relationship of marriage?' Marriage did not enter into

⁵⁴ Hechs, *The Lives of Sri Aurobindo*, 319.

⁵⁵ The Mother, *The Mother's Agenda II*. December 20, 1961.

Aurobindo's calculations, what was important to him was Mirra's autonomy, so he replied that if Mirra ever asked for marriage, that is what she would have."⁵⁶ Paul became violent and even tried to choke Mirra. He left for France, ending the marriage.

Sri Aurobindo wanted to concentrate on the work of bringing down the supramental manifestation, to anchor its presence in creation. To do this he felt that he needed the focused secluded time and space, and Mirra's taking charge of the Ashram allowed this to happen. This was not a comfortable transition as not all his Indian disciples thought they could surrender to this foreign European lady for their spiritual growth, while they no longer had daily contact with him. Sri Aurobindo made it clear, however, that he and Mirra, who he now called "the Mother," indeed were one and equal in consciousness and were initiating a Yoga that required them both. With the coming of Mirra Alfassa, Sri Aurobindo's aesthetic theory and Yoga entered their fullest stage of development and the poem *Savitri* took on a whole new character with this new partnership. As the partnership developed, it could be argued, it became a poetic expression of their collaboration.

4. *Overmind and Surrender to the Mother (1926-1950)*

On what has become known as "Siddhi Day" or the day of success or attainment, Sri Aurobindo experienced the fourth realization that he mentioned in his autobiography, that of "the higher planes of consciousness leading to the Supermind [to which] he was already on his way in his meditations in the Alipore jail."⁵⁷ November 24, 1926 marks this important day in which Sri

⁵⁶ Heehs, *Lives*, 327. This is an oft quoted section of Heeh's Indian detractors. Heehs unfortunately does not support this conversation with commentary about why Sri Aurobindo provoked Paul in this way. It has led some unsympathetic readers of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo to question their relationship as sexual or romantic. The Mother claimed that Paul "had a quite unhealthy sexual side" and was even possessed by an *asuric* (demonic) force—what she called "the Lord of Falsehood"—that was in competition with Sri Aurobindo. The Mother claimed to try and transform him since the beginning of their relationship, but said she failed to do so. Given this background, I would argue that the Mother and Sri Aurobindo interpreted this episode as a kind of exorcism. One can also see Sri Aurobindo using the opposition of Paul to stimulate Mirra's resolve to be with him and abandon Paul. See *The Mother's Agenda II*, November 5, 1961 for the Mother's account of this time period.

⁵⁷ Sri Aurobindo, *On Himself*, 64.

Aurobindo and his community claimed to move closer to their goal of bringing what he called “the tail of the supermind” into creation in the intermediate form he called “the overmind.” The overmind is a level or state of consciousness between mind and supermind. Today, this date is celebrated as the founding of the Ashram.

The Mother, both as a principle of creation and as personified in Mirra Alfassa, is the key to Sri Aurobindo’s metaphysics, but also in the practical application in yogic practice. After the Day of Siddhi in 1926, Sri Aurobindo went into contemplative seclusion while the Mother became the active face of his vision and work. The previous six years had seen the opposite pattern. She writes,

Sri Aurobindo put me in charge of the outer work because he wanted to withdraw into concentration in order to hasten the manifestation of the supramental consciousness and he announced to the few people who were there that he was entrusting me with the work of helping and guiding them, that I would remain in contact with him, of course, and through me he would do the work.⁵⁸

The progress for all the Ashram members brought about very rapid returns, including visions, powers, and experiences of higher planes of consciousness, but many of the students were also becoming psychologically unbalanced. It was thought that a new strategy was needed that took more effort at a slower pace. Sri Aurobindo writes, “instead of doing all from above, it seemed necessary to come down into the lower vital and material nature for a long, slow, patient and difficult work of opening and change.”⁵⁹ In order to ascend in consciousness like the two Gurus, it was thought that the students needed first to strengthen and stabilize their bodies and emotional life. As Peter Heehs notes, “[b]efore 1926 Sri Aurobindo emphasized the role of the mind in yoga,” to overcome the ignorance of the mind by rising through it to the supermind.⁶⁰ Heehs writes,

This is what he had done in his own practice and he thought at first that others could follow his example. Some tried, lacking his experience and balance, they could not repeat his success. Eventually he realized that the transformation he envisioned

⁵⁸ The Mother, *Questions and Answers*, 1957-58, 168-9.

⁵⁹ Sri Aurobindo, letter of September 30, 1929, in Sri Aurobindo Ashram Archives, quoted by Heehs, *Lives*, 364.

⁶⁰ Heehs, *Lives*, 357.

would be difficult if not impossible for others without a preliminary awakening of the psychic being, a development of such qualities as sincerity, devotion, and inner discrimination. To bring about this awakening was the primary aim of the *sādhana* under the Mother's guidance.⁶¹

It was under these general principles of “awakening of the psychic being, [and] a development of such qualities as sincerity, devotion, and inner discrimination” that the Mother gave guidance to her artist *sādhaks* using art as a means to purify the vital, as we will see below. The Mother also implemented physical education in a very complex and ordered way to address the physical strengthening.

This kind of Yoga leads to a very practical kind of ashram-living that tries to integrate both material and spiritual growth for the students. While Sri Aurobindo entered what Heehs calls “an active retirement” of arduous spiritual work at this time (spending incredibly long hours on correspondence, poetry, and revisions on most of his major literary works while he underwent transformative processes), the Mother oversaw the very practical affairs of their community, which grew in many active ways. By 1928, the Ashram had about 70 members; 1929, 80 members; by 1934, 150 members; 1937, 200 members. At first, it was a community of Bengalis and Gujaratis with a few Europeans and Americans, mostly men at this time, owing to the fact that women had such defined domestic roles in Indian society that made it difficult if not impossible to leave home and join an ashram.⁶² However, the population rose to about 400 during WWII, adding many more women, some of whom brought their children, fleeing threats from a possible invasion by the Japanese. In the 1920s and 30s the Mother did not allow children to live at the Ashram, but with the crisis of WWII, she changed this rule and started a school. She formally opened the school for twenty students on December 20, 1943. It was only later, January 6, 1952, after Sri Aurobindo had passed

⁶¹ Ibid., 358.

⁶² The make up of the Ashram today is being changed by a large influx of followers from Orissa.

away that she inaugurated the Sri Aurobindo International University Center. She later changed the name in 1959 to the Sri Aurobindo International Center of Education, which is still in existence.

By the 1950s, the Mother taught and played tennis, directed the work of all the departments and, as personal guru, maintained intimate relationships with her students. She was a truly gifted administrator. She made sure that food, clothing, and shelter were provided as the basis for learning at the emotional, psychological, intellectual, and spiritual levels. In the Ashram, the Mother initiated gardens to grow vegetables and flowers, cattle and poultry farms, granaries, gardens and kitchens for cooking; departments for physical education, including a tennis court, soccer field, and basketball court; and a ceramic studio for making vessels and bricks for building. There are weaving studios for cloth making, fiber art departments, paper making and a laundry facility. There are machine and wood working shops, a metal foundry, and design and building departments that maintain the physical plant. With the libraries and school, there are photography and video studios, and a large printing press for texts of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo printed in many European and Indian languages. There is a theatre for music, drama and dance programs in celebration of the Ashram's spiritual principles. All of these departments create the Mother's Ashram where each of her students can put into practice the principles of the Integral Yoga based on a basic security of a material needs being met. For some, the arts and the creative process are important ways to practice this Yoga.

III. THE MOTHER ON ART AND YOGA

Given her role as Sri Aurobindo's spiritual consort, one is not surprised to find that what the Mother has to say about art in her training of her *sādhaks* (spiritual aspirants), supports and amplifies his aesthetic principles that we have so far considered. Like his use of poetry, she amplifies them by giving them very practical application. First of all, she understands the value of the arts as a mandatory part of the education of the mind, the vital, and the body. These are preparations for the

use of the arts to awaken the psychic being, both for her students and their children. In fact, she says, of “all education, vital education is perhaps the most important, the most indispensable.”⁶³ She made the arts a crucial part of the curriculum of study at the Sri Aurobindo International Center of Education, which teaches students from nursery to college level. This fulfills in a small yet significant way, Sri Aurobindo’s goal for the arts in education in India, which he describes in his essays on “The National Value of Art” that we examined in Chapter Two. The goal of this education at SAICE “is not to prepare a man to succeed in life and society, but to increase his perfectibility to the utmost.”⁶⁴

She says both the creative process and the spiritual process in her Yoga share the “same principle,” which is to become more conscious of the psychic being within the heart and within all.⁶⁵ Ultimately, the arts are never an end in themselves, but a means of expressing the indwelling Godhead, the artist’s “relations with the Divine.”⁶⁶ To explore these issues in more detail, we will examine the Mother’s remarks about art in a compilation of articles, messages, letters, and conversations in *On Education* and in another book compiled by the Ashram Archives entitled *The Mother: Paintings and Drawings*, which are drawn from other sources beyond *On Education*. I will also be using compilations of the Mother’s teachings on flowers, which bear directly on her understanding of the creative process and how one can enter into contact with one’s own psychic being. The Mother says that “[b]eauty is the joyous offering of Nature,” which is given as nourishment for spiritual growth.⁶⁷ She writes, “the beauty of flowers ...is a means used by Nature to awaken in human beings the attraction for the psychic.”⁶⁸

⁶³ The Mother, *On Education* (Pondicherry: SAAP, 2002), 18.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 120.

⁶⁵ This was the first of the three changes that the Yoga sought, the psychic change. The other two were “the spiritual change” and “the supramental change.” See Appendix I.

⁶⁶ The Mother, *The Mother: Paintings and Drawings*, v.

⁶⁷ The Mother, *On Education*, 233.

⁶⁸ The Mother, *Flowers and Their Messages*, 2nd ed. (Pondicherry: SAAP, 1979), ii.

1. *Beauty, Art, and Growth*

For the Mother, beauty is the central attribute of the divine that is concealed as a potential in the physical dimension, which art tries to bring forward in meaningful form in a descendant spiritual practice of growth in consciousness. She writes, “In the physical world, of all things it is beauty that expresses best the Divine. The physical world is the world of form and the perfection of form is beauty. Beauty interprets, expresses, manifests the Eternal. Its role is to put all manifested nature in contact with the Eternal through the perfection of form, through harmony and a sense of the ideal which uplifts and leads towards something higher.”⁶⁹ Perfecting form interprets, expresses, manifests the Eternal. Doing this—“doing Beauty” in life—is therefore central to her supramental goal of divinizing matter, and can be developed in thought, feeling, and behavior, as well as nature and art.

In the context of making art she says that the artwork should be created in harmony with and support of a shared experience of life. She writes, “true [descendant] art means the expression of beauty in the material world. In a world wholly converted, that is to say, expressing integrally the divine reality, art must serve as the revealer and teacher of this divine beauty in life.”⁷⁰ Instead of seeking for a transcendent and solely spiritual consciousness away from the Earth, this creative approach seeks to manifest the divine here through the use of media and the aspiration for perfection in form in the creative process. Since “Spiritual beauty has a contagious power,” this beauty potentially forms itself also in those sensitive people who view this kind of art, pressuring their consciousness to emulate its style, rhythm, and vision, in Sri Aurobindo’s language.⁷¹ Beauty in art does not draw attention to itself as being “self-sufficient” or “extraneous” like a “mushroom,” “which has no roots in the totality of creation,” but it would draw from and contribute to a larger

⁶⁹ The Mother, *On Education*, 232.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 233.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

whole.⁷² Instead of a mushroom, which draws its nourishment with shallow roots as a saprophyte (an organism living on decayed matter), the Mother's notion of descendant art has deep roots in living matter like a flower, and grows in harmony with other living organisms. This kind of art exists symbiotically with other forms in culture, amplifying, not depleting their energy for life; offering a beauty that is a sacrifice of itself to nourish other's growth and progress, by awakening their "attraction for the psychic."

2. *Flowers and the Creative Process*

The Mother's work with flowers, in fact, is an important use of visual culture in the Ashram, one that expresses these values of beauty, art, and individual and communal growth. As I defined it in the Preface, relying on the scholarship of David Morgan, visual culture is both an object and a methodology.⁷³ As an object it includes more than what is agreed to be "art" by art authorities, but also, it includes any and all visual objects, made of digital, physical, or natural media. As a methodology it is the many different approaches that scholars employ to examine the ways that individuals and communities use images for shaping their understanding of reality and their identity within it. According to Morgan, the visual culture of religion recognizes that

what believers see is the image as an engaged signifier, not the aesthetic object or curiosity that the connoisseur, art collector, or tourist may see. Vision is a complex assemblage of seeing what is there, seeing by virtue of habit what one expects to see there, seeing what one desires to be there, and seeing what one is told to see there. Parsing these intermingled motives and discerning the cultural work they perform as intermingled is the task of critical scholarship.⁷⁴

⁷² The Mother, *Questions and Answers, 1953* (Pondicherry: SAAP, 2003), 338

⁷³ See David Morgan, *The Sacred Gaze: Religious Visual Culture in Theory and Practice* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005), 25-27, 29-34. See also my Preface, pp. xix-xxiv where I apply visual culture methodology to study the religious use of photographs of Sri Aurobindo in the Integral Yoga community.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 74.

Morgan's framework helps to describe the Mother's use of flowers to strengthen a kind of vision that communicates her understanding of beauty, art, and growth of consciousness. As we will see, the Mother's use of flowers shapes the non-sectarian and descendant sacred gaze of the Integral Yoga, which effects her understanding of the creative process and how she teaches it to her students.

The Mother writes that with the biological evolution of organic life "the vital element is [introduced in creation], and it is this vital element that gives to flowers the sense of beauty."⁷⁵ For the Mother, this inchoate vital nature makes flowers automatically aspire for light and surrender to it, leading to expressions or sacrifices of beauty in their blossoms. To merge one's consciousness with flowers, therefore, is first to feel "perfection in form," and also it is to feel this aspiration for the light, which awakens the human being to sacrifice and offer herself to the world and to God in this same way. In Japan during the Spring of 1917, she had this same kind of experience:

A deep concentration seized on me, and I perceived that I was identifying myself with a single cherry-blossom, then through it with all cherry-blossoms, and, as I descended deeper in the consciousness, following a stream of bluish force, I became suddenly the cherry-tree itself, stretching towards the sky like so many arms its innumerable branches laden with their sacrifice of flowers. Then I heard distinctly this sentence:

"Thus hast thou made thyself one with the soul of the cherry-trees and so thou canst take note that it is the Divine who makes the offering of this flower-prayer to heaven."

When I had written it, all was effaced; but now the blood of the cherry-tree flows in my veins and with it flows an incomparable peace and force. What difference is there between the human body and the body of a tree? In truth, there is none: the consciousness which animates them is identically the same.

Then the cherry-tree whispered in my ear:

"It is in the cherry-blossom that lies the remedy for the disorders of the spring."⁷⁶

In regard to this remedy for Spring disorders, she later said, "There are certain illnesses that people get particularly in Spring—boils, impurities of the blood, etc.—which the Japanese cure with teas

⁷⁵ The Mother, *Flowers and Their Messages*, ii.

⁷⁶ The Mother, *Prayers and Meditations* (Pondicherry: SAAP, 2003), 364.

made from cherry-blossoms. I did not know this when I had the experience.”⁷⁷ This experience of joining the consciousness of the cherry tree taught the Mother that the consciousness that animates her life is the self-same divine consciousness that animates all of creation in an intimately benevolent way. Further, it seems to have taught her that the purpose of life is to follow this inclusive and non-sectarian benevolence and blossom like a flower so that she can be of service to others, whether by feeding their soul or healing their body. It is this experience of consciousness that she sought to embody as a guru and to impart to her students to stimulate their elevation of consciousness. Her use of flowers is one of the most important means by which she did this.

Over the years, the Mother named 898 flowers, and exchanged them with her ashramites on many different occasions as a way to deepen the students’ contact with nature and with her consciousness. If one studies the names that she gives these flowers with her commentary, as well as the colors, the botany, and even medicinal qualities in some cases, one can come to a very visual and creative understanding of the Integral Yoga. The fragrances are also instructive for her understanding of spiritual growth.⁷⁸ She would give a student a daffodil, for instance, if she thought the student could benefit from the “Power of Beauty,” which is what she calls this flower.⁷⁹ About this flower, she comments: “Beauty acquires its power only when it is surrendered to the divine.”⁸⁰ She might give a fuchsia blossom if the aspirant could be aided by “Art,” which she says is a flower that is “Living only to express beauty.”⁸¹ “Beauty in art” is a peony and it holds the experience of “A

⁷⁷ The Mother, *More Answers from the Mother* (Pondicherry: SAAP, 2004), 183.

⁷⁸ I experienced the importance of this medium for art and potentially for spiritual experience in “The Art of Scent: 1889-2012” at the Museum of Art and Design in New York City, which was “the first major museum exhibition to recognize scent as a major medium of artistic creation and fifteen artists who work in this medium.” <http://www.madmuseum.org/exhibition/the-art-of-scent>; accessed March 3, 2016.

⁷⁹ The Mother, *The Spiritual Significance of Flowers: Part I*, 177.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid., 180.

beauty that displays itself and allows itself to be contemplated.”⁸² Students often gave flowers to the Mother as well, as a way to offer their love, adoration, and devotion. Doing so, however, comes with a risk. The Mother says, “When, therefore, you offer flowers to me, their condition is almost always an index of yours. There are persons who never succeed in bringing a fresh flower to me—even if the flower is fresh it becomes limp in their hands. Others however always bring fresh flowers and even revitalize drooping ones. If your aspiration is strong your flower offering will be fresh.”⁸³

The Mother says that flowers are highly receptive organisms that can receive and transmit anyone’s force of consciousness. When she used them, she found that different flowers are capable of holding different blends of her *Cit-Śakti* in their fragrance, color, and blossom. The name she gave a flower has to do with this individual blend of divine consciousness that she experienced in each. She first learned about this phenomenon from her teacher, Alma Théon in Algeria. Alma once sent pomegranate petals to the Mother in Paris, which she then placed within a glass pendant to keep them close. (The Mother later called pomegranate flowers “Divine’s Love”). The Mother said that with these petals around her neck, she “always felt a kind of energy, warmth, confidence, force which came from it ... I did not think about it, you see, but I felt like that.”⁸⁴ These feelings did not last, however, when “suddenly I felt depleted, as though a support that was there had gone.”⁸⁵ She noticed only later that evening that the petals had fallen out of the pendant. For her, this experience proved the special receptivity and transmitting power of flowers, even in their dried state.

It is important to have this theory of flowers in mind in understanding the Mother’s advice to beginning painters. She directs them first to engage the natural world when learning the creative process. She tells one her of students who wanted to draw birds or animals that “drawings *from*

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ The Mother, *Flowers and Their Messages*, iv.

⁸⁴ Ibid., v.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

nature are best for learning.”⁸⁶ She says that studying the natural world allows one to achieve “richness, variety and precision” in art.⁸⁷ For her, one begins with nature, much like a Renaissance artist, scientifically and emotionally to understand the natural world by training keen observation with the five senses.⁸⁸ Only when this is achieved can one progress to the business of what she says is the more elevated goal: “The true painting aims at creating something more beautiful than ordinary things.”⁸⁹ Nature gives form, she seems to say, and art is meant to try and perfect it. Sri Aurobindo puts this succinctly when he writes, “If Art’s service is but to imitate Nature, then burn all the picture galleries and let us have instead photographic studios. It is because Art reveals what nature hides, that a small picture is worth more than all the jewels of the millionaires and the treasures of princes.”⁹⁰

The Mother notes that nature does not give up her hidden riches without a keen effort. It seems to me, one can even be an abstract expressionist and benefit from being sensitive to nature in this way. Playwright, John Logan captures this kind of sensitivity very well, keying in on the sense of sight in his play “Red,” a fictional account of the color field and Abstract-Expressionist painter Mark Rothko. In the play, Mark Rothko asks his assistant, Ken, what color he should use in his paintings for the Four Season’s Restaurant in New York City (an actual commission he completed). Ken replies, “Red.” Rothko, in a rage, yells, “I don’t even know what that means! What does ‘red’ mean to me? You mean scarlet? You mean crimson? You mean plum-mulberry-magenta-burgundy-

⁸⁶ The Mother, *On Education*, 233. Her emphasis.

⁸⁷ The Mother, *The Mother: Paintings and Drawings*, 179.

⁸⁸ James Elkins has a wonderful book on this topic that I think demonstrates what the Mother may mean: *How to Use Your Eyes* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2000). Some of the chapter headings focus on “How to look at a twig,” “How to look at the periodic table,” or one of my favorites: “How to look at the inside of your eyes” where Elkins describes how one can actually see “floaters” which are the “red blood cells deep inside your eye, suspended between the retina, in the back of the eye, and the transparent ball of jelly—the “vitreous body”—that fills the eyeball (232).”

⁸⁹ The Mother, *On Education*, 233.

⁹⁰ Sri Aurobindo, *Essays Divine and Human* (Pondicherry: SAAP, 1997), 440.

salmon-carmine-carnelian-coral? Anything but ‘red’! What is ‘RED’?!”⁹¹ Why would he be so intensely critical of Ken’s response of “red”? It is because his response is bland, common, and imprecise. Every color and every shape in nature and experience is, in the words of the Mother, rich, various, and precise in its effects. For an artist, expressing these things correctly is life or death in relationship to the success or failure to express the desired theme, object, feeling, or effect.

The yogic artist in the Ashram is not meant not stop here, but must intuit nature’s broader characteristics of potential perfection. For the Mother, these are held in its “love and longing” for the sun, and it is no more expressed than in the life of plants.⁹² This love and longing for light is the yogic labor of “aspiration” in plant form. She says “plants have more [aspiration] in their physical being than man. Their whole life is a worship of light. Light is of course the material symbol of the Divine, and the sun represents, under material conditions, the Supreme Consciousness. The plants have felt it quite distinctly in their own simple, blind way. Their aspiration is intense, if you know how to become aware of it.”⁹³ The Mother’s constant use of flowers with her students is a practice to awaken this kind of intense longing and awareness in a conscious, human way.

The Mother recommends communing with nature at specific times to awaken this thirst. She writes,

When the sun sets and all becomes silent, sit down for a moment and put yourself into communion with Nature: you will feel rising from the earth, from below the roots of the trees and mounting upward and coursing through their fibres up to the highest outstretching branches, the aspiration of an intense love and longing,—a longing for something that brings light and gives happiness, for the light that is gone and they wish to have back again. There is a yearning so pure and intense that if you can feel the movement in the trees, your own being too will go up in an ardent prayer for the peace and light and love that are unmanifested here.⁹⁴

⁹¹ John Logan, *Red* (London: Oberon Modern Plays, 2009), 435-455/1474 of the digital book.

⁹² The Mother, *Flowers and Their Messages*, i.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

The Mother is paradoxically inviting one to physically see nature in the dark. There and then aspiration and its stimulus to growth occurs. This experience is also about feeling this aspiration and growth intuitively, even as one sits on the Earth physically.⁹⁵ The opposition of darkness is what awakens this aspiration and growth in the tree, awakening “an intense love and longing ... for the light that is gone,” wishing to have it back again.

She also mentions certain types of nature to find more clearly this aspiration for light. She notes that

in a virgin forest, for instance, where man does not interfere, there is this kind of struggle among all the plants which are always growing straight upwards in one way or another in their effort to catch the sunlight. It is very interesting. But even if you put a flower pot in a fairly small courtyard surrounded by walls, where the sun doesn't come, a plant which normally is as high as this ... becomes as tall as that: it stretches up and makes an effort to find light. Therefore there is a consciousness [in plants], a will to live which is already manifesting [in the evolution of creation].⁹⁶

Not only at night, but in wild contexts and even landscaped ones, where there is struggle and competition among plants for space and access to the sun, there is the intense presence of consciousness, of aspiration, a form of love for the light. Therefore, one of key places where she encounters the principle that “oppositions and contraries are a stimulus to progress,” is in the natural world.⁹⁷

Of course, it is true that the light of the sun helps plants to grow. The Mother makes this obvious observation: “plants need sunlight to live—the sun represents the active energy which makes them grow.”⁹⁸ However, her point is larger, which includes the role of darkness in growth. It is the darkness that represents, she might say, an equally intense counter energy that places the sun in

⁹⁵ The same could be said of the roots in a drought, that it is the dry period that they grow deeper in seeking the nourishment of water in deeper aquifers.

⁹⁶ The Mother, *Flowers and Their Messages*, ii.

⁹⁷ The Mother, *On Thoughts and Aphorisms*, (Pondicherry: SAAP, 2001), 164-5.

⁹⁸ The Mother, *Flowers and Their Messages*, i.

a passive mode. Maybe it is better said that the darkness *is* the sun in passive mode, so the inactivity of the sun activates the longing for it. It stimulates growth, in fact, beyond boundaries of contentment and pushes it into the realm of improvement and what she calls *progrès* or progress, a word that she uses over two thousand times in her writings. In this case, if one wants to pressure a plant to progress beyond normal size, it is important to put the plant “in a place where there is no sunlight,” for there “you see it always growing up and up and up, trying, making an effort to reach the sunlight.”⁹⁹ This is instructive when trying to describe spiritual progress in her Integral Yoga and the way she guides her own aspirants. She is known for placing her students “in the dark” to awaken more intense aspiration for God. She is not interested in a practice that maintains the status quo; where growth is maintained at the current configuration of form and consciousness. She seeks beauty, that is, “perfection in form” in all levels of life. She notes that continual life in the active sun cannot give this progressive perfection to a plant, and that for human beings, continual comfort and protection from suffering, fear, and death cannot give this supernormal progress either. It is the stimulus of darkness, the passive energy of the sun, that encourages thirst for perfection in the light in both the plant and herself.

The Mother’s understanding of development in nature helps one to go from the initially difficult task of “drawing from nature,” to the next level of “creating something more beautiful than ordinary reality,” to “reveal what nature hides.” This understanding of growth is not a mental one. For her, as with Sri Aurobindo, the mind and senses must go dark and rely on other faculties for their compass. One must eschew the processes of rationally thinking and physically feeling for the process of intuitively seeing and feeling in the dark. As the Mother says to another student who struggled to create without mental control,

⁹⁹ Ibid.

But you *think* too much and you do not *see* enough. In other words, your vision is not original, spontaneous or direct, which means that your execution is still conventional and lacks originality—an imitation of what others do.

There is, behind all things, a divine beauty, a divine harmony: it is with this that we must come into contact; it is this that we must express.¹⁰⁰

For her, the guarantor of expressing this hidden divine beauty in an “original, spontaneous, or direct” way in art is not with the vision of the eyes or the thought of the mind, but with a deeper seeing and thought that allows one to view and feel nature’s most intense longing for the light; for this love and longing is what is supremely beautiful to the Mother and what inspires what she considers truly innovative artwork.

The Mother counsels her artists not only to commune with nature, but to become one with the creative process as well. This involves taking joy in it, as she says to one student, “You must feel what you paint and do it with joy.”¹⁰¹ The Mother further clarifies,

When a painter paints a picture, if he observes himself painting the picture, the picture will never be good, it will always be a kind of projection of the painter’s personality; it will be without life, without force, without beauty. But if, all of a sudden, he becomes the thing he wants to express, if he becomes the brushes, the painting, the canvas, the subject, the image, the colours, the value, the whole thing, and is entirely inside it and lives it, he will make something magnificent.¹⁰²

Becoming one with the creative process as the Mother describes has resonance with her experience with the cherry tree. Both describe an active surrender of the ego and its thinking mind. (What Sri Aurobindo calls the *ahankāra* and *mānasa buddhi*). It is a surrender of the ego’s preferences and the mind’s authority, for the mind is still used in the process, but as a servant and not the master. “If you surrender you have to give up effort, but that does not mean that you have to abandon also willed action.”¹⁰³

¹⁰⁰ The Mother, *The Mother: Paintings and Drawings*, 180-1.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 181.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 182.

The Mother recognizes that there is the temptation to think one's way through the creative process, or to try and mentally control it. The latter is what the Mother seems to mean by "effort." Effort in the Mother's view, as opposed to "willed action," brings with it "this feeling of tension, ... of counting only on oneself."¹⁰⁴ One loses any sense of joy in this notion of effort, "that if you do not make an effort at every minute all will be lost."¹⁰⁵ The artwork is negatively effected by this joyless creativity. The Mother wants her artists to get rid of worry in the face of opposition, to see the thinking mind and its efforts to use technique as a falsehood that will never lead to a inspired solution. Joy, however, keeps the consciousness working in the process and connected to the levels of inspiration. Joy avoids the mind and its self-fulfilling prophesies of potential failure, which never fail to block willed action and potential inspired solutions. Her view is that a yogic artist

will not forget that in spite of all his knowledge of technique, in spite of the care he takes to arrange, organize and prepare his colours and the forms of his design, in spite of all that, if he has no inspiration, it will be one picture among a million others and it will not be very interesting. ...There are even some who manage to have a clear, precise vision of what is to be done. But then, day after day, hour after hour, they have this will to work, to study, to do with care all that must be done until they reproduce as perfectly as they can the first inspiration....That person has worked for the Divine, in communion with Him, but not in a passive way, not with a passive surrender; it is with an active surrender, a dynamic will.¹⁰⁶

Effort to do hard work gets in the way of inspiration, because it seeks a result for the personality and its amplification; while working with "a dynamic will" places the artist in what the Mother sees as the right relationship to the source and power of inspiration: the divine.

An art student who wanted to improve her or his artwork but felt stuck, asked the Mother if he or she could go to Paris to gain inspiration. The Mother tells the ashramite to stay in the Ashram, that "I have seen your paintings—they are almost perfect. But what they lack is not technique—it is

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 182-3.

consciousness.”¹⁰⁷ From the Mother’s perspective, the art academies teach techniques, what she calls “tricks,” if one seeks to acquire them as an end in themselves. These institutions do not teach the more important lessons of growth in consciousness (*citta*). For her, using technical skill to create inspired work without growth in consciousness is like someone trying to experience the Divine by “imitating religious ceremonies.”¹⁰⁸ Both technique and consciousness are needed, it would seem, but technique follows consciousness, not vice versa. For the Mother, the artist “must express this contact [with inspiration] in his own way, with his own words, his own colours” to make something, as we saw above, that is “spontaneous, original, and direct.”¹⁰⁹ The paradox, as Sri Aurobindo teaches, is that to make a very personal expression, the personality and its efforts must be surrendered to higher, impersonal authorities to achieve it.

Sincerity is also central to the Mother’s idea of the creative process and the aspiration to gain inspiration. “Above all and always,” she says to her artists, “the most important thing is sincerity. Develop your inner being—find your soul, and at the same time you will find the true artistic expression.”¹¹⁰ The Mother calls the Italian aster flower “Simple Sincerity,” saying that it is “The beginning of all progress.”¹¹¹ Sincerity allows one to progress, in this context of the creative process, from mental effort to willed action, and from drawing from nature to revealing what nature hides. The Mother says that sincerity “means to lift all the movements of the being to the level of the highest consciousness and realisation already attained. Sincerity exacts the unification and harmonisation of the whole being in all its parts and movements around the central Divine Will.”¹¹²

¹⁰⁷ The Mother, *On Education*, 235.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid. 185.

¹¹⁰ The Mother, *On Education*, 235.

¹¹¹ The Mother, *The Spiritual Significance of Flowers, Part 2*, 395.

¹¹² The Mother, *Words of the Mother II* (Pondicherry, SAAP, 2004), 65.

For the Mother, sincerity is a kind of concentrating characteristic in the will to act with one's highest understanding; one's aspiration for the light. Sincerity is very hard work since it is not always easy or comfortable to act with one's highest understanding. Sincerity, the Mother seems to imply, welcomes labor and discomfort, embracing the profound experiences of the dark as opportunities to reach higher levels of brilliance.

2. *Intuition*

The Mother's experience with the cherry tree was a special type of knowledge, which seems to be what she and Sri Aurobindo call "the essential Knowledge, the supramental divine Knowledge, Knowledge by identity."¹¹³ In *Savitri*, Sri Aurobindo poetically expresses this as "A knowledge which became what it perceived, / Replaced the separated sense and heart/ And drew all Nature into its embrace."¹¹⁴ When the Mother describes her experience of joining the consciousness of the cherry tree, she says that she "descended deeper in the consciousness, following a stream of bluish force, I became suddenly the cherry-tree itself." In the thought of the two Gurus, the color blue has a few specific associations with the *cakras* or centers of consciousness depending on the color variation. The editor of *The Spiritual Significance of Flowers* says that in the Mother's and Sri Aurobindo's writings, pale blue "is the color of the higher ranges of the mind up to the Intuition; above it, it begins to become golden with the supramental light."¹¹⁵ It would seem then, that the intuition is what led the Mother to this golden experience of union with all cherry trees and with the Divine.

To describe the intuition in other places for her students, the Mother discusses "drops of light." For her, to contact the intuition, one should first try and make the mind still to reflect that

¹¹³ The Mother, *On Thoughts and Aphorisms*, 4.

¹¹⁴ Sri Aurobindo, *Savitri*, 28. See also "Knowledge by Identity and Separative Knowledge," *The Life Divine*, 553-72.

¹¹⁵ The Mother, "The Symbolism of Colours," in *The Spiritual Significance of Flowers, Part 2* (Pondicherry: SAAP, 2000), 365.

light which is above it. She writes, “When the mind is perfectly silent, pure like a well polished mirror, immobile as a pond on a breezeless day, then, from above, as the light of the stars drops in the motionless waters, so the light of the supermind, of the Truth within, shines in the quieted mind and gives birth to intuition.”¹¹⁶ As we saw above, this practice can be most effectively done in virgin parts of nature and “when the sun sets and all becomes silent,” so that aspiration for this “light of the supermind” is stimulated. In another place, she says, “In the ordinary functioning of the brain, intuition is something which suddenly falls like a drop of light. If one has the faculty, the beginning of a faculty of mental vision, it gives the impression of something coming from outside or above, like a little impact of a drop of light in the brain, absolutely independent of all reasoning.”¹¹⁷

The image seems to be that the mind becomes a servant of the intuition when the light of supermind falls into the person’s consciousness. To have this experience of intuition, the Mother later says, “[t]hat is the real beginning of the intellectual intuition.”¹¹⁸ This image is a vertical one, one where the light from supermind descends into the brain from above; however, there is also a sense in which it then reveals a light from within the artist if one lets the drops go in deeply.¹¹⁹

This experience within or “below” is an embodied one. The Mother gives some advice to another student about the intuition and how to establish it in the body. There are many levels of intuition, she says, but once the mind is stilled and quiet, one will discover that “[b]ehind the emotions, deep within the being, in a consciousness seated somewhere near the level of the solar

¹¹⁶ The Mother, *Words of Long Ago* (Pondicherry: SAAP, 2004), 164. As we have discussed in Chapter Two, stilling the mind is a traditional yogic practice and goal, found classically in the Patañjali’s *Yogasūtras*: योगश्चित्तवृत्तिनिरोधः, *Yogaś cittavṛtti nirodhaḥ*, “Disturbances in thought are stilled by yoga.” For the Mother this achievement is the beginning of the experience of the intuition. (YS 1.2, My translation). Sri Aurobindo mentions the Vedāntic (and Buddhist) practice: *dhyāna* or “meditation” to access the intuition, as we saw in Chapter Two, p. 101.

¹¹⁷ The Mother, *Questions and Answers, 1957-8*, 357.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 358.

¹¹⁹ See Chapter Three, pp. 144-50 where I examine Sri Aurobindo’s notion of the intuition linking the light from above with the light below.

plexus, there is a sort of prescience, a kind of capacity for foresight, but not in the form of ideas: rather in the form of feelings, almost a perception of sensations.”¹²⁰ For the Mother, making the mind still like a motionless pond (“going dark” as discussed above) is part of this process, as it leads to these deeper feelings of the solar plexus and its influence on the “psychic being” in the heart. She writes, “And then, if one can receive this light coming from above without entering immediately into a whirl of activity, receive it in calm and silence and let it penetrate deep into the being, then after a while it expresses itself either as a luminous thought or as a very precise indication here (Mother indicates the heart), in this other centre.”¹²¹ In this description, she seems to get at the original meaning of “aesthetics,” which Alexander Baumgarten defined as “sensory perception,” as opposed to logic or “conceptual perception.”¹²² However, her version of aesthetics is a description of the physical senses that are amplified by intuitive contacts with reality; by interior senses of the heart (*hrd*).

V. CONCLUSION

The Mother is the spiritual director of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram. She can be critically compared to Hindu gurus in India; however, she is not a Hindu, any more than the Integral Yoga is a form of Hinduism. She innovates on Hindu teaching and practice, however, creating with her spiritual consort, a new religious movement (that I call a descendant form of non-sectarian spiritual discipline) that can be studied in her use of visual culture. In the Ashram, the interplay of the artist, the heart, the intuition, and the Mother is an experiment in aspiration, negation, and surrender. The artist aspires for perfect consciousness, while negating the lower nature, and surrenders to the

¹²⁰ The Mother, *Questions and Answers, 1957-1958*, 356.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 358.

¹²² Alexander Baumgarten, *Reflections on Poetry*, trans., Karl Aschenbrenner and William B. Holther (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1954), 78.

Mother for inspiration and guidance towards perfection. In this creative context, the Mother embodies the artist's higher nature and supports his or her intuition. Often in a conflict of wills, the student tests the reliability of this support, and finds that surrender to the Mother is more possible, and life more meaningful; or not in some cases, as we will see next chapter. In all cases, however, this collaboration between the Mother and her students is an attempt to penetrate and lift basic consciousness (*citta*) into the physical, the vital, the intellectual, and the intuition, expanding the potentials of consciousness to become infinite and perfect (*Cit*); and with the fruits of this internal perfection, to confront matter and transform its resistances to the force of *Cit*.

The Mother lived a very active and vital creative life in the center of luxury and culture in Paris at the turn of the twentieth century, which prepared her well for her later work as a descendant spiritual guru who uses art, beauty, and love of the world in her form of yoga. In her own life, she engaged in creative work in the arts, not for occupation or fame, but for the enjoyment that practice and trying to master it provided her, which fed her spiritual aspirations. Ultimately, the arts were a means to an end to discover, develop, and express progressively higher stages of consciousness that she sought to bring to the Earth by integrating them with physical matter. Comparing herself to the great Parisian artists of her day, she says, "Well I was much more advanced in their own field—not in what I was producing (I was a perfectly ordinary artist), but from the viewpoint of consciousness: observations, experiences, studies."¹²³

Later, as a guru, who could elevate the consciousness of others by the force or "weight" of her own advanced consciousness, she sought to instill this same perspective and experience of the creative process in her students. She counsels that this involves concentrating one's artistic labor on perfecting the consciousness through "observations, experiences and studies" of nature and the world, not in the effort to perfect technical innovation or skill for the sake of itself. To this end, the

¹²³ The Mother, *The Mother's Agenda III*, July 25, 1962.

Mother gives them a general program of proceeding from mere technical mastery of nature's external forms in art to creating something more that manifests the hidden potential of perfect form (beauty) from nature. She says, "In the physical world, of all things it is beauty that expresses best the Divine. The physical world is the world of form and the perfection of form is beauty." If this perfection of form is achieved in art, it does more than inspire contemplation, but potentially aids the perfection of the basic consciousness in the beholding. Her work with the visual culture of flowers models and enacts this perspective. She discovered with her own spiritual teacher and collaborator, Alma, that flowers are highly receptive and capable of transmitting the pressure of consciousness from herself to her students. Exchanging these flowers with them is one of the crucial ways she shapes the descendant and non-sectarian gaze of her Yoga. This gaze is created by training the physical senses to fully grasp the beautiful form of the flower, yet also by training the intuition to more fully identify and merge with the inner spirit of beauty in the flower. This gaze, therefore, combines an outward sacred gaze with an internal sacred gaze. The Mother says that the inner spirit of the flower is "aspiration:" the love and longing for the sun and the attendant desire to share its light with others in their unique blooms. Flowers aspire to become like the sun and universally offer their beauty without condition.

The Mother's principle that "oppositions and contraries are a stimulus to progress" is inspired by her experience of nature. Although the sun helps plants to maintain normal levels of growth, it is when the sun is hidden in an experience of darkness that it helps them to progress to supernormal levels of perfection. The Mother recommends communing with nature in the dark and in places that are untouched by civilization to contact this spirit of aspiration, potential for progressive perfection, and drive to sacrifice in beauty. It is then and there that nature's aspiration for light is more fully expressed, since its object so unmanifest. In her experience, darkness stimulates "a yearning so pure and intense that if you can feel the movement in the trees, your own

being too will go up in an ardent prayer for the peace and light and love that are unmanifested here.”¹²⁴

As one reads the many varied comments to her artists about the creative process and using it as a means for spiritual growth, we see that the Mother also councils her students to let the mind “go dark” to access the intuition; for the artist to become one with the creative process and to do it with joy so that contact with inspiration, aspiration, and the intuition remains; to replace mental “effort” with “willed action”; to subordinate technique to the growth of consciousness; and to cultivate the all-important virtue of sincerity to keep faithful in the difficult labor of aspiration for the divine and its beautiful expression in matter.

In our next chapter, we will focus on the Golconde Dormitory in the Ashram as a study of sacred architecture as a means for spiritual growth. Among other concerns, we will focus on two very different workers on this project owing to their cultural backgrounds: one American and the other Indian. We will see how the natural opposition of these two workers assisted the Mother’s work as she nurtured and supported their development. Like the union of masculine and feminine, bringing together two very different men from two different hemispheres of the Earth while they built the Mother’s architectural beauty is foundational for the new consciousness of the supramental being and the new creation.

¹²⁴ The Mother, *Flowers and Their Messages*, i.

Chapter Five

The Golconde Dormitory: From Darkness into Dawn



Figure 5.1. The northeast corner of the Golconde Dormitory. Photo by the author.

As for me, you know, I don't believe in external
decisions. Simply, I believe in only one thing: the force
of Consciousness exerting a PRESSURE like this
(*crushing gesture*). And the Pressure keeps increasing...
Which means it's going to sift people.
– The Mother¹

I. INTRODUCTION

In the last chapter, I introduced the Mother's work with the creative process and her understanding of beauty, art, and spiritual progress. She notes if one wants to pressure a flower to progress beyond normal size, it is important to put the plant "in a place where there is no sunlight," for there "you see it always growing up and up and up, trying, making an effort to reach the sunlight."² In the same way, she often places her aspirants "in the dark" to awaken more intense aspiration for divine light. Therefore, the Integral Yoga requires that the aspirant negotiate the confusing places of conflict in one's personal life as they surface in relationship to the Mother. These difficulties are quite important in the Yoga. As the darkness stimulates the plant's aspiration for the sun, these conflicts are the stimulus, if wisely used, to power the ashramite's progress towards greater harmony.

This growth dynamic exists within a larger relationship of care and love, as well as trust and surrender to the Gurus. This trust and surrender is not given outside of a process, but tested and discovered as the Mother and Sri Aurobindo assigned work for their students to do that often enough opposed the student's nature. Sometimes the trust was strengthened in this process and sometimes not, which led to either staying with or leaving the teacher; temporarily or permanently. Like the pressure of a cocoon on the larva to catalyze a process of transformation, the Gurus

¹ The Mother, *Agenda XI*, (Paris: Institut de Recherches Évolutives, 1981), January 17, 1970.

² The Mother, *Flowers and Their Messages*, i.

specifically designed difficult, and oftentimes, impossible circumstances tailored for each ashramite for the purpose of applying individually appropriate pressure to strengthen their growing consciousness. As we will critically explore in this chapter, the Golconde Dormitory is such a container for this complex dynamic of pressure and care in the Ashram.

The attitude that the student has in this process is the other side of the dynamic, for it is the potential counter-pressure that aids it. It is the attitude of the larva to willingly stay within the cocoon, to sincerely want to stay within that tight squeeze knowing that to do so will invite death, but also new life in a future form that the guru embodies as a kind of guide post, or promise of future fulfillment and perfection of form. In reading about this experience in the lives of ashramites, the hallmark of this willingness to remain in the cocoon, this counter pressure, is joy. Udar Pinto (1907-2001), an Ashram Engineer (among many other roles), mentions this attitude.³ He says, “It is your attitude that is spiritual, the work is not spiritual. You give the work as an offering to the Divine and you do it with great joy. That is the way of doing the work. But the work itself is not spiritual. It’s ordinary work. Whatever work....you do it with an attitude of an offering.”⁴

Under the Mother’s direction and in the context of her pressure, the *sādhana* is a self-selecting process, where the “force of Consciousness exerting a PRESSURE,” “sifts” the aspirant from the non-aspirant. The *sādhana* and membership in the community depends, not on adherence to external standards of belief, ritual, or practice, but upon self-motivated resolve to gain more resilience for evermore pressures in the crucible of the Ashram. The Mother writes, “People who feel miserable here and find that they have not the comfort they require ought not to stay. We are not in a position to do more than we do, and after all our aim is not to give to people a comfortable

³ Udar finished much of the work on Golconde Dormitory in the 1950s and 60s and his wife Mona, was its first caretaker. Their daughter, Gauri, is still alive and very active in the Ashram.

⁴ Unpublished video interview with Mona, Udar and Gauri Pinto, produced by Laure Poinsoot and Michael Keren Cooper, Shyamal Maitra Productions, 1997. Mona added, “And the Mother said ‘and work done in the right attitude is the body’s prayer.’ That’s the Yoga perhaps.” I am grateful to Gauri Pinto for giving me a copy of this video.

life, but to prepare them for the Divine Life which is quite a different affair.”⁵ As Huta describes in her experience of living in the Golconde Dormitory, “There is in the Ashram no exterior discipline and no visible test. But the inner test is severe and constant, one must be very sincere in the aspiration to surmount all egoism and to conquer all vanity in order to be able to stay.”⁶

The Golconde Dormitory, which was designed and built in the late 1930s and 1940s under the direction of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo, is a salient example of art as *sādhana*, or art as a means and context to “joyfully offer” one’s best while doing it in circumstances of great pressure.⁷ To assess this spiritual creativity, I will use some elements of Lindsay Jones’s hermeneutical strategy of sacred architecture, introduced in Chapter Two, which focuses on the “reception” of built forms, or what he calls the “ritual-architectural event.” I will use his method to discern some important meanings in the experience of Golconde, both in its building and in its built form.⁸ As I hope to show, the Golconde dormitory demonstrates an architectural experiment in a descendant spiritual practice that uses opposition as a stimulus for progress to the supramental ideal of the Integral Yoga.

I agree with Jones that the interpretation of ritual-architectural events is more productive than trying to interpret architectural objects, as though such sacred objects had a putatively “universal” significance, and one that exists apart from their reception in history. This is to say that to render as accurate an interpretation as possible, one must focus on the complex *experiences* of the architecture by those who are willing ritual participants in it. Jones notes that this involves the

⁵ The Mother, *Words of the Mother I* (Pondicherry: SAAP, 2004), 127.

⁶ Huta, *The Story of a Soul 1956, Volume Two Part Two* (Pondicherry: SAAP, 2009), 82.

⁷ The construction work began in October 1938 and finished in the late 40s. The last furnishings like the lamps and fittings for the wall louvers were all finally installed sometime in early 1960.

⁸ See Chapter Two, pp. 100-103 and Lindsay Jones, *The Hermeneutics of Sacred Architecture*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000). For this chapter of my dissertation, I will note the page number after each quotation from Jones’ work, from his second volume entitled *The Hermeneutics of Sacred Architecture: Hermeneutical Calisthenics: A Morphology of Ritual-Architectural Priorities*.

delicate task of making sure not to make one's experience and/or interpretation of that experience the measure of all other possibilities; to be open to other experiences beyond the scope of one's own imagination.

Jones' method is intersubjective in that it honors the alterity of who it studies, which includes a critical consideration of the other's own self-understandings. In this approach, the other is not an object, but a subject with whom I am in conversation.⁹ His method, therefore, presumes a carefully crafted ethnography. I therefore, became a participant-observer for two and half months from November 2012 to January 2013 in the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, living in the Golconde Dormitory. In my participation, I tried to follow the advice of religious studies scholar David Morgan who advised me that

[w]hat you do have to scrutinize very, very carefully are subtle assumptions about putative "universality" or "transparency" of such participation. Some things will be the same, but many, indeed, most won't be. Still, there are significant meeting points in the event where you will learn to see things that you would not have seen before. And THAT is the point: honing perception and expanding scope. The aim, finally, is understanding, not identification. Understanding is more than knowledge acquisition. It implies joining and sharing and it involves an exchange of wisdom and affection. But it also means understanding yourself anew, which means understanding your difference, limitations, lack of sympathy, and so forth.¹⁰

Jones's aim is the same as Morgan's, which I tried to make my own in my ethnography:

"understanding, not identification." To me this means to discover my own meanings for myself in as accurate a way as I could, even as that self which is doing the interpretation is changing (hopefully widening and honing in Morgan's words) in the process.

In Jones's articulation of how to proceed in a game of interpretation, he suggests three elements that can be interpreted for any ritual-architecture event, which I found useful: 1.

"Architecture as Orientation: the *Instigation* of Ritual-Architecture Events," 2. "Architecture as

⁹ See the Preface, pp. xiv-xvii where I explain my alignment with Rita D. Sherma's "A Hermeneutics of Intersubjectivity," *Woman and Goddess in Hinduism*, ed. Tracy Pintchman and Rita D. Sherma (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 1-16.

¹⁰ Email to me from David Morgan, dated July 30, 2010.

Commemoration: The *Content* of Ritual-Architecture Events,” and 3. “Architecture as Ritual Context: The *Presentation* of Ritual-Architecture Events” (3, my emphasis). As I see it, built into these elements is what Rudolf Otto calls the experience of the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, his expression of Ultimate Reality.¹¹ While experiencing sacred architecture, there is the potential to encounter this reality in both its alluring and terrifying aspects. The ritual-architecture event may be at once something that can arrest the senses and imagination, offering a sense of stability and belonging—a place in the world, and at the same time (or maybe afterwards), the experience can unsettle by destabilizing one’s orientation in the world, demanding a change in lifestyle, communicating a new set of responsibilities that require a new role or path in life. As I see it, Jones’s notion of the ritual-architecture event as Orientation is related to the *fascinans* aspect of Otto’s famous description. This is what Jones calls the “front half” of the experience, where one is first allured into the work of art or architecture in order to change one’s status as a “spoilsport” into a willing participant of the game that the architecture invites one to play. Jones’s notion of ritual-architecture event as Commemoration is related to the *tremendum* side of Otto’s phrase, what Jones calls the “back half” of the experience, where one is discomforted as the experience of architecture works to form the participant in some new and potentially uncomfortable way.

The third element in Jones’ hermeneutical analysis is the Ritual Context, which is how the participant may be choreographed through the two halves of Orientation and Commemoration. How does one goes into the *fascinans* and through the *tremendum*, from the “instigation” to the “content” of the experience? In Jones’s view, there are no “right” answers for any examination of sacred architecture since any successfully designed and built example will most likely inspire a variety of (possibly competing) interpretations. There are only more or less accurate interpretations, in Jones’s view, ones that are sincere in describing what is real and true for the willing ritual participant.

¹¹ See Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* 1917 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958).

What is alluring to one is terrifying for another. What, for one is satisfying and worth sacrificing one's life, is fearful or a waste of time for another. Jones's method makes room for a recognition of opposing experiences as we will see in my examination of the Golconde Dormitory.

II. THE AQUATIC AND DIAMOND ALLURE OF GOLCONDE

How does Golconde function to orient the ritual-architectural participant "with respect to time, society, self, and presumably, with sacred reality? As its most basic," Jones writes, "orientation involves finding, both literally and metaphorically, one's place in the world – or, in the case of sacred architecture, actually *constructing* one's place in the world (26)." With Golconde, the Mother and Sri Aurobindo constructed descendant spiritual practice in architectural form. It is an attempt to supramentalize architecture and through it, the consciousness of those who built it and those who might live in it. Even today, Golconde is a unique residence in the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, where a clear orientation of self takes place in the way that Jones describes. Though it is a finished building, the spaces invite a way of living that feels like one's self is not ever finished being built. It is modern and yet ancient in its forms, housing a pattern of shared living, where conscious and careful use of all materials and objects are expected because they are regarded as divine. The many other buildings of the Ashram are also taken care of in a very conscious way, and when compared to the buildings of the city of Pondicherry and the country of India, the Ashram campus stands out by its cleanliness and simple beauty of early French colonial architecture. Golconde, however, is like a gem that is more radiantly conspicuous in the Ashram. It is an early twentieth-century Modernist building, built for an even more intense kind of lifestyle than other buildings in the Ashram. Though one may be wooed into this structure and its lifestyle to treat all of reality as divine, it is not always easy or comfortable to do so. After the allure comes the weight of a potentially new responsibility and self-construction for the resident.

Upon arrival, each resident is given an orientation that includes some reading materials. One of the items is a booklet of guidelines that one is asked to follow. It begins by saying,

Dear Resident,

You should be aware that being a resident at Golconde is a privilege, a responsibility and opportunity.

Golconde is not a guest house as it is often called by some people, in error. It is Mother's house, a place on which Mother has placed a great working of Her Conscious Force and that is why generally there is a selection of people to stay here, and also on those who work here. Hence the privilege.

This naturally implies a responsibility on all of us who stay and work here to be worthy of the privilege. But the responsibility is not onerous, it is and should be a joy and so opens to all of us an opportunity.

In order to use this opportunity as much as possible and to fulfill the responsibility we give some recommendations.¹²

The rest of the booklet gives twenty-nine "recommendations" for living. Abiding by these recommendations is, the *sādhaks* would say, coming up against the Mother's "Conscious Force," the pressure of her consciousness to join it.

How is one oriented by the space of Golconde for this "privilege, responsibility and opportunity?" I will focus on what Jones calls an orienting experience of homology, which is "Sacred Architecture that presents a miniaturized replica of the universe and/or conforms to a celestial archetype."¹³

1. Mythological Archetypes

Mircea Eliade, the scholar who made homologous interpretations of sacred art and architecture so influential (and too much to the exclusion of other interpretations, as Jones notes), uses three well-known categories to speak about the way sacred architecture orients in a homologous

¹² Golconde *Recommendations*, (Pondicherry: SAAP, no year printed), 1-2.

¹³ Jones offers two other priorities in orientation, which do not figure importantly for the Dormitory in my view: *Convention*: "Sacred Architecture that conforms to standardized rules and/or prestigious mythicohistoic precedents," and *Astronomy*: "Sacred Architecture that is aligned or referenced with respect to celestial bodies or phenomena (3)."

fashion: architecture as *imago mundi*, as expressing mythical archetypes, and as an *axis mundi*. I will explore the latter two given limitations of space.¹⁴

In terms of expressing a mythical archetype, the Mother says, “Golconde is not a guest house. It is,” she continues,

a dormitory (*dortoir*) in which those who reside there can meditate and do [their] sadhana in beautiful surroundings, in very fine rooms and with many of the little daily jobs done for them, to keep them more free for their sadhana...In the old days, the Rishis used to live in the mountains and their disciples lived in caves in these mountains. Golconde is the modern equivalent of the caves for the Integral Yoga of Sri Aurobindo.¹⁵

There is a kind of repetition of mythological patterns of sacred space and yogic practice in this statement. On the surface, the Mother seems to make the “little daily jobs” of caring for the building and the *sādhana* mutually exclusive, which may express privileging spirit over matter (contemplation over action). However, in the Integral Yoga, there is not a “nostalgia for paradise” and an attendant drive to escape “the terror of history” that is so much a part of Eliade’s hermeneutical framework of sacred art and architecture. The Ashram operates on a kind of reciprocity of work needed. Though the staff at Golconde who supervise and work with the servants do not all live at Golconde, they are members of the Ashram, doing this work as part of their *sādhana*.¹⁶ The ashramites, who are permanent residents of Golconde and do not share in this household work, are free to work in other departments to accomplish part of their *sādhana*. Many are teachers in the Ashram school and some are researchers at the Archives, for example. Others even work in Auroville, the nearby civic experiment of the Mother that she founded in 1968. Just like the Golconde work, these other roles take all of one’s day to accomplish. In fact, all members of

¹⁴ Golconde, and in fact, the entire campus of the Ashram can be thought of as an *imago mundi* or a “microcosm of the world,” since it seeks to be a laboratory to experimentally build “the new supramental creation.” These issues will be indirectly addressed in this and in the next two chapters.

¹⁵ The Mother, *Mother India* 40, no. 10 (October 1987): 620.

¹⁶ The one exception is the Caretaker of Golconde who is a resident.

the Ashram are expected to work in one or more of the over eighty Ashram departments for at least six hours a day as part of their *sādhana*.¹⁷

To permanently withdraw to mountain caves for the purposes of spiritual growth as Eliade understands it is more related to the discipline of Ramana Maharshi (1879-1950). Sri Aurobindo contrasts his metaphysics with this sage, who typifies ascendant spirituality, a drive to escape the “terror of matter” for the “paradise of spirit.” Sri Aurobindo writes,

I am reminded of Ramana Maharshi’s logical objection to my idea of the descent of the Divine into us or into the world on the ground, as he put it, that “the Divine is here, from where is He to descend?” My answer is that obviously the Divine is here, although very much concealed; but He is here in essence and He has not chosen to manifest all His powers or His full power in Matter, in Life, in Mind; He has not even made them fit by themselves for some future manifestation of all that, whereas on higher planes there is already that manifestation and by a descent from them the full manifestation can be brought here. All the planes have their own power, beauty, some kind of perfection realised even among their imperfections; God is everywhere in some power of Himself though not everywhere in His full power.¹⁸

The Mother also contrasted her Ashram and its descendant spiritual practice with Ramana Maharshi’s. She said that the work of growing one’s consciousness in fact, requires scaling a more difficult mountain than one used for secluded meditation.

And when a certain level of consciousness has been reached, when this consciousness has been realised in the material world and you have transformed the material world in the image of this consciousness, well, you will climb yet one more rung and go to another consciousness—and you will begin again. *Voilà*.

But this is not for lazy folk. It’s for people who like progress. Not for those who come and say, “Oh! I have worked hard in my life, now I want to rest, will you please give me a place in the Ashram?” I tell them, “Not here. This is not a place for rest because you have worked hard, this is a place for working even harder than before.” So, formerly, I used to send them to Ramana Maharshi: “Go there, you will enter into meditation and you will get rest.” Now it is not possible, so I send them to

¹⁷ The Mother used to assign each person to a department and this became a rule in the 1965 “Conditions for Admission to the Ashram.” Now, the Trustees assign roles “according to individual cases and the needs of the Ashram.” *Rules of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram* (Pondicherry: SAAP, 2003), 25. I was in Pondicherry in the Winter and I actually found that six hours in that tropical heat was very taxing, and I am used to 12-15 hour work days.

¹⁸ Sri Aurobindo, *Letters on Poetry and Art* (Pondicherry: SAAP, 2004), 71.

the Himalayas; I tell them, “Go and sit before the eternal snows! That will do you good.”¹⁹

The hard work of this descendant spiritual practice is summed up in this description: “And when a certain level of consciousness has been reached, ... well, you will climb yet one more rung and go to another consciousness—and you will begin again.” This is an continual endurance test: welcoming the endless challenges that exist on the material plane without giving up their potential transformation in every detail.

It is significant that the Mother and Sri Aurobindo built Golconde in the rather large city of Pondicherry, not in a mountain retreat situated above metropolitan noise like Ramana Maharshi’s Mt. Arunachala in Thiruvannamalai (See Figure 5.2). Its residents do not live as hermits in a cave or monastery doing lengthy meditations to accomplish *samādhi*, but as members of a dynamic Ashram with many busy departments trying to accomplish a transformation of their consciousness and bodies.²⁰

In fact, methods in meditation that seek to direct one’s gaze inward and upward are quite optional, individual, and varied in style and length in the Sri Aurobindo Ashram. It is not even mentioned as a necessary part of any of the ten rules of the Ashram that have been promulgated from the 1920s to 2003. Further, the Modernist style of Golconde is one that is taken from a secular context, not a sacred precedent. The Mother demonstrates in her choice of architects, Antonin Raymond—a modernist and secular atheist from the West—a preference for what is happening

¹⁹ The Mother, *Questions and Answers 1956* (Pondicherry: SAAP, 2004), 21. Ramana Maharshi died 6 years before this statement in 1950, the same year as Sri Aurobindo. Of course, this quotation could be used to support the idea that the Ashram is an *imago mundi*, “transforming the material world in the image of this [progressive] consciousness.”

²⁰ This is not to say that there is not a monastic quality to the life and atmosphere of Golconde or the Ashram in general, for there is. Owing to limitations of space I cannot explore the ways in which the experience of Golconde commemorates “Sanctuary” or “Contemplation” in Lindsay Jones’s morphology of the “back half” of the experience, which would help to explore these priorities in hermeneutics. Because I am highlighting the method of welcoming opposition as the key to understanding this descendant Yoga, I am concentrating on other priorities, which take precedence over the monastic and ascendant qualities of this particular yoga. The ascendant approach is not rejected in the Integral Yoga nor in this architecture, it must be stated, but placed within a broader descendant approach and goal.



Figure 5.2. My wife, Audrey, and I hiking up to Ramana Maharshi's caves on Mt. Arunachala overlooking the Annamalaiyar temple to Śiva in the city of Thiruvannamalai. Photo by our ashramite tour guide.

“here and now” in history over what is happening *in illo tempore*, at that mythic time of the cosmic beginning to express the field of spiritual experiment that she values. Her descendant spiritual experiment in architecture is also seen in the following consideration of Golconde as the *axis mundi*.

2. *The Axis Mundi*

Considering the geology under Golconde, there is evidence that would support an architectural preoccupation with centering the dormitory in the *axis mundi* (“the hub of the world”). Further, as *axis mundi*, a sacred structure *is* the center between two worlds. *Axis mundis* are imaged as sacred mountains, waterfalls, rivers, or cosmic trees that link the high with the low, the divine with the universe, surface with the depths, and the sacred with the profane. Lawrence Sullivan notes that images of an *axis mundi* are not static; “They are all places of active passage and transition. As places of dynamic union where beings of quite different natures come together or pass into one another, the images of axis mundi may be associated with the coincidence of opposites—that is, the

resolution of contradictions by their progress onto a more spiritual plane.”²¹ *Axis mundis* are excellent homologous symbols for orientation in an ascendant spiritual practice, since they can take a person’s gaze upwards to the heavens, but as the Golconde Dormitory proves, they can be used in a descendant approach, as well; concentrating one’s awareness downwards to the Earth. Golconde explicitly uses water, and implicitly lignite and the diamond for this earthward orientation. As such, Golconde centers itself between the surface and the depths of water, and the weakness and strength of lignite and diamond, inviting the resident to make an active transition from one to the other.

A. Water

Water is symbolically ambiguous as it often communicates a meaning of chaos as well as cosmic order in sacred architecture. It can signal life or death, blessing or punishment, salvation or damnation. In the case of Golconde, we can see evidence of how “Waters can also help define the center of the world,” and how they “help define cosmic order.”²² However, its spaces also carry messages of movement and disruption of order.

Both Gurus use water to signify the intuition, which Sri Aurobindo says is symbolized by the “life-giving waters” of Indra in the *Vedas*. The Mother describes the intuition as liquid drops of light that bring their transformation of consciousness in the waters of the mind when they are still. In another place, the Mother says that water “signifies many things such as fluidity, plasticity, suppleness, the purifying principle. It is the driving force and marks the beginning of organised life. Water corresponds to the vital, air to mind, fire to the psychic, earth to matter and ether to the spirit.”²³ Sri Aurobindo expands on water’s meanings when seen in dreams and visions, and says that

²¹ Lawrence E. Sullivan, “Axis Mundi,” *Encyclopedia of Religion* 2 (2005): 713.

²² Jean Rudhardt, “Water,” *Encyclopedia of Religion* 14, trans. Erica Meltzer (2005): 9701.

²³ The Mother, *Words of the Mother III* (Pondicherry: SAAP, 2004), 40.

in these instances water “is the symbol of a state of consciousness or a plane.”²⁴ He also says that the larger the body in the dream or vision the more universal the state of consciousness.

The ponds that surround Golconde as seen in Figures 5.3, 5.4 and 5.6 are a kind of proto-moat, evoking a castle, although it does not surround the structure like a defense, but repeats the rhythm of form in the building’s footprint, adding charm and invitation to the landscaping and pathways. Noah’s Ark is another image that this building evokes for me, an image of a vessel that moves along the *axis mundi*, from the supramental realms to the physical plane. This interpretation was confirmed by a long-time resident. She told me that in the morning, when all the louvers are opened during house cleaning, it looks to her like a ship with its sails flying (See Figures 5.1 at the beginning of the chapter and 5.6-5.7 below). “It’s the supramental ship!” she exclaimed. This is significant because the Mother had vivid inner visions of what the supramental world looked like and how in the realms between ours and it, there are beings preparing to bring this new world here led by Sri Aurobindo. They are working on what looked to the Mother like a huge ship, an ark as large as a city to bring the matter and the creatures of the supramental realms to Earth.

Huta, who lived in Golconde from 1955-58 used to work late at night on projects for the Mother and describes another element of this Noah’s Ark. She writes that often in these hours “suddenly the frogs from the water canal which ran round the garden of Golconde began to sing their chorus, seeming to vary from tenor to alto and baritone to bass. The shrill singing of crickets added to the orchestra.”²⁵ While researching this chapter for many hours in Golconde, I too found these songs a welcome presence at my desk, reminding me that I was not alone in this large ark of a building. In fact, the amount of creatures that share space in this building is seemingly endless owing to all the openings in its walls and ceilings. The Mother says that the supramental ark that she saw in

²⁴ Sri Aurobindo, *Letters on Yoga: Part II* (Pondicherry: SAAP, 1970), 969.

²⁵ Huta, *The Story of a Soul 1956, Volume Two Part Two* (Pondicherry: SAAP, 2009), 55-6.



Figures 5.3 and 5.4. Waterlily ponds on the Northeast side and Northwest side of Golconde. The waterlilies were not in bloom at this time of the year. Photos by the author.

her visions is “the symbol of the yoga.”²⁶ Golconde seems to be a manifestation of this ark, in the words of its residents, and therefore participates in this maritime symbol of the Integral Yoga. It is a stationary building that invites its residents to experience movement, movement on a ship that is ferrying the precious cargo between the realms of the supramental worlds and the Earth to build a new creation.

The walls in the rooms of Golconde are also evocative of Noah’s Ark. They are made of “*chunum* egg-lime plaster” (See Figure 5.5), which combine human breath with animal products,

²⁶ The Mother, *The Mother’s Agenda IV*, (Paris: Institut de Recherches Évolutives, 1979), June 29, 1963.



Figure 5.5. The *chumum* plaster wall at Golconde.
Photo: Vijay Erasala.

minerals, plant and sea life, and water.²⁷ It makes for a very durable and beautiful eggshell white or even a pearl-like finish. It also looks like milk. The plaster is created by first heating seashells, which is an inactive material of calcium carbonate. The high heat frees CO₂ from the calcium carbonate and yields calcium oxide (“quicklime”). Water is then added to the calcium oxide, which turns it into calcium hydroxide (“slaked lime”). The other ingredients like egg whites, milk, and jaggery are added. It now becomes an active plaster material that can be smoothed over the surface of the wall. Once fully applied in many thin layers, smoothed with flat stones and dried, over time the walls absorb CO₂ from the breath of human beings and animals and it becomes inactive calcium carbonate again. In other words, the material turns back to the basic mineral of the seashell yet in

²⁷ Specifically, this plaster is comprised of shell lime made from *sangu* (Tamil for “conch”) and *kilinjai* (“clam”) shells, powdered limestone (hydraulic lime), egg whites, water, sand, curd water, milk and jaggery (brown sugar evaporated from palm tree sap). This material and process, which is native to the Chettinad district of Southern Tamil Nadu, is currently no longer in general use, though the last generation that used it is still living. See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=36AVxigD290> for a video of an attempt to revive this process for renovating and finishing walls in Indian architecture; accessed March 3, 2016. I am grateful to one of the Golconde staff for her knowledge about this material and process.

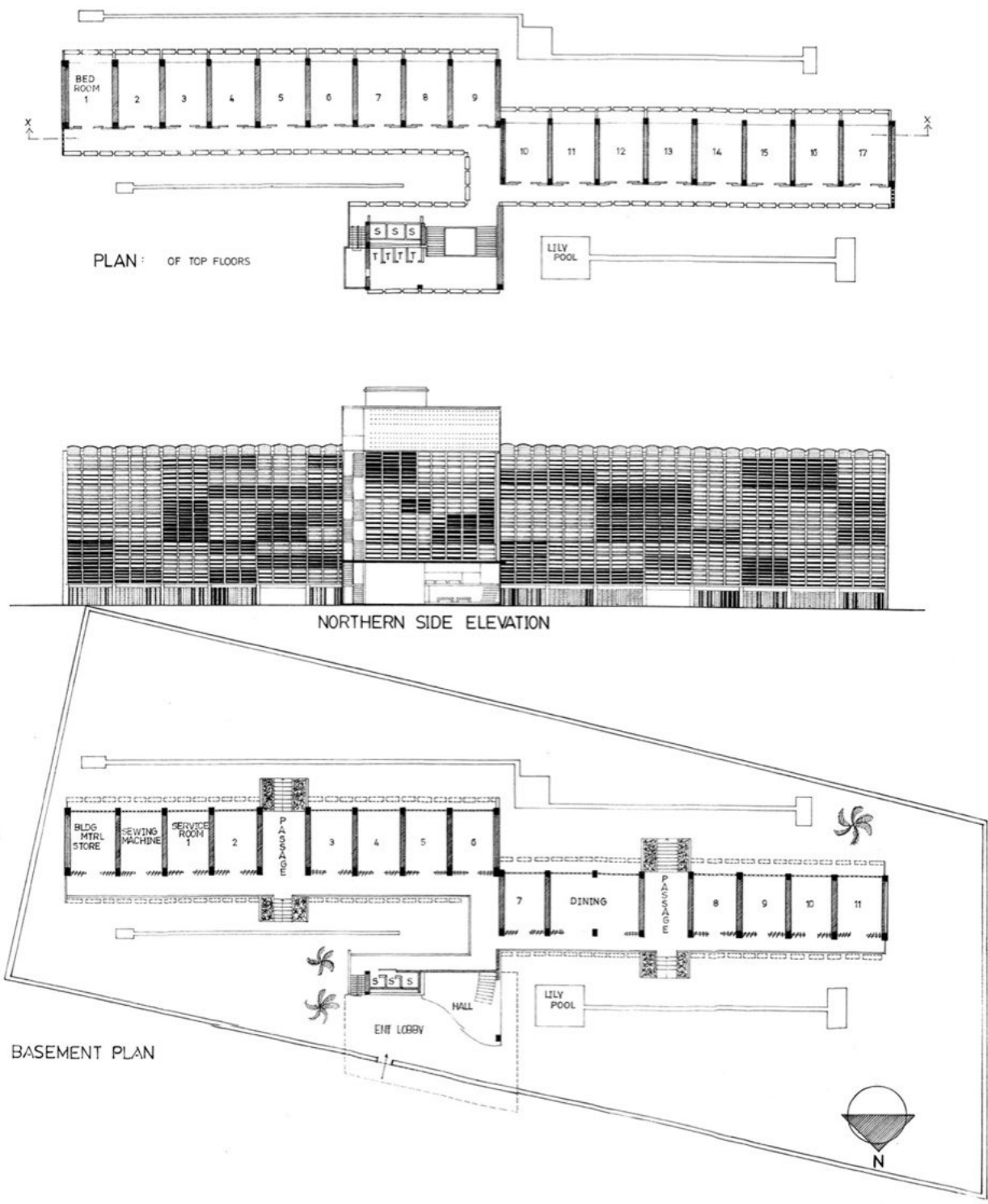


Figure 5.6. Plan and elevation of actual dormitory.

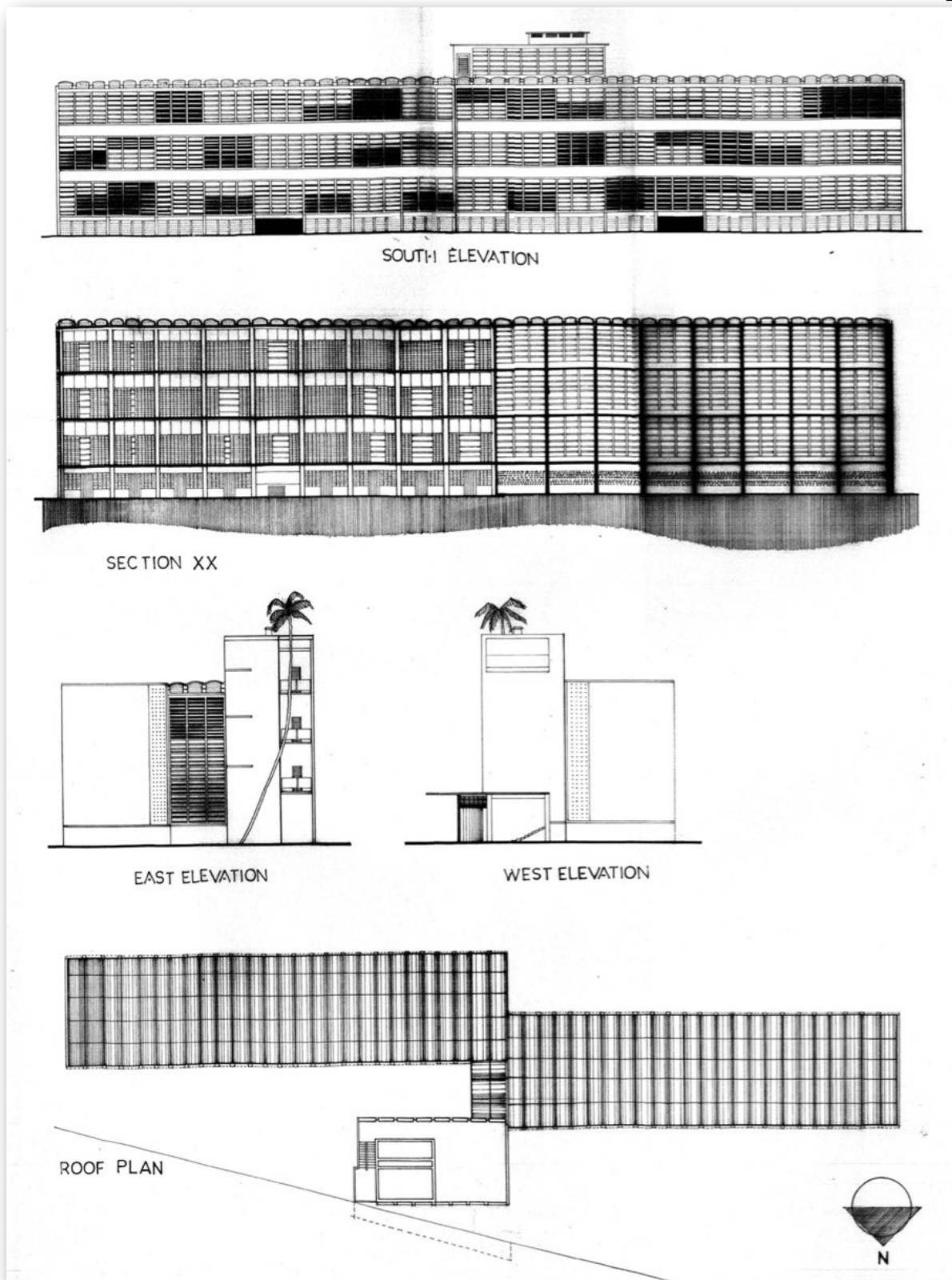


Figure 5.7. Plan and elevation of actual dormitory.

wall-form aided by inhalation and exhalation, the very rhythm of physical life.

B. Lignite Coal and the Diamond

One of the engineers of the Ashram, Udar Pinto discovered lignite under Golconde sometime in the 1940s, which is an organic substance between the consistency of coal and peat. It is currently mined commercially for fuel by the nearby Neyveli Lignite Corporation in Neyveli Township in Tamil Nadu. The Mother asked Udar (in his words),

to drill an artesian [*sic.*] tube/well and She indicated where this had to be done. When we were drilling this well, generally clay and sand are extracted; but once some black material came up which was quite intriguing. As I had free access to Sri Aurobindo I took a handful of this stuff to show Him and He asked me what it was. I said that it looked to me like half formed coal and hearing this, Sri Aurobindo smiled so sweetly and said: “Ah then! You want to pull down Golconde and have a coal mine there.” It was truly wonderful to hear Him joke and smile so sweetly [See Figures 5.8 and 5.9].²⁸

Sri Aurobindo’s joke makes an association to the *Golkonda* diamond mine near Hyderabad. As Golconde is named after this mine, pulling down the dormitory in order to start a coal mine would have taken things quite backwards, geologically speaking.²⁹

The transformation of coal into a diamond is a very apt symbol of the descendant nature of the Integral Yoga, and Golconde is a space and a name that communicates its alluring message. A diamond is an allotrope of carbon that has survived titanic heat and pressure.³⁰ This heat and

²⁸ Udar Pinto in Shraddhavan, “Golconde: A Look Behind,” *Mother India* (January 1990): 15. The groundwater that was located in the contained aquifer underneath this artesian well has since been syphoned off to another part of the Tamil Nadu when the Neyveli Corporation dug their mines, which are connected. When the mines were dug, the water pressure was released. The Golconde well, therefore, dried up and no longer exists on the property.

²⁹ Golconde is French for the diamond mine of Golkonda, (from *Golla Konda*, Telugu for “Shepherd’s Hill”) located in south central India near Hyderabad. Though coal can sometimes form into diamond, it is very rare. Diamonds are usually much older than the plant life which fossilized to form coal, so diamonds mostly form from carbon, not coal. See: <http://geology.com/articles/diamonds-from-coal/> for a helpful explanation; accessed March 3, 2016. I thank my wife Audrey, who is a geologist, for this research.

³⁰ An allotrope is a mineral that has the same atoms as another mineral, but they are bonded together in a different geometric pattern.



Figure 5.8. Amra, one of the staff at Golconde, points to the place where Udar discovered the lignite. The well was dug where a small tree now grows. It is located near the center of the plot of land and the center of where the two wings of the building come together. Photo: author.



Figure 5.9. The spot of the artesian well seen from the third floor. Photo: author.

pressure makes what once was an unstable, soft, and dark material, into a super-stable, super-hard and brilliantly transparent mineral owing to the forceful covalent bonds between the atoms that are geometrically latticed in a rigid and stable pattern. Scientists say that these remarkable minerals took 1-3.3 billion years to grow beneath 87-120 miles (140-190km) of the Earth's mantle. This means that the oldest diamonds are almost three-quarters the age of the planet. Diamonds are sometimes brought to the surface by means of magma that cool into igneous rock called kimberlites. In India, these kimberlites shot up into the Himalayas and then were eroded over millions of years. Melting snow then brought the diamonds down to central India. This is where it is thought that the first diamonds on Earth were discovered and mined near the Penner, Krishna, and Godavari rivers, which are all located in south central India on the Deccan plateau. Golkonda diamonds, being from this region, hold the very history of this growth in the earth, located in a kind of *axis mundi* of Mother India.

The Mother connects the meaning of the diamond to the white light of divine consciousness and describes it in the following way: "The diamond is the symbol of pure spiritual light. No hostile force can cross it. If you put that light on a hostile force, he simply melts away. But the diamond light cannot be used indiscriminately in all cases, because human beings who shelter these adverse forces get very dangerously affected. Of course I am not speaking of material diamonds."³¹ Diamond, or *adâmas*, which means "not-damageable" or "unbreakable" is therefore an apt symbol of this "pure spiritual light" that the Mother and her students seek to embody in consciousness.³² It is a light that turns what it pressures, into itself, by transforming what was a liability in a past form, into an unbreakable asset in a new one. Owing to creation's fragility, the

³¹ The Mother, *Words of the Mother III* (Pondicherry: SAAP, 2004), 40.

³² OED, s.v. "diamond."

Mother says that this light cannot come to the Earth all at once, but in stages. With Sri Aurobindo and after his death, she tracked its descent over many decades.

After midnight on January 1, 1969, the Mother experienced “in the Earth’s atmosphere” what she called “the new Consciousness.” In its initial stages, it is the “superman consciousness” as she calls it later.

I woke up at two in the morning, surrounded by a consciousness, so concrete and **new**, in the sense that I had never felt it before. And it lasted, absolutely concrete, present during two or three hours, and afterwards it spread out and went about to find out people who could receive ... And I knew that it was the consciousness of the superman, that is to say, the intermediary between man and the supramental being.³³

The Mother describes this new Consciousness a year later in terms of pressure, in a way that is reminiscent of the process of growth in a diamond.

And this pressure of the Consciousness is a pressure for things as they were – so miserable and so petty and so obscure and so ... apparently inescapable at the same time – all of it was ... (*Mother gestures above her shoulder*) behind, like an antiquated past. So then, I really saw—saw, understood—that the work of this Consciousness (which is PITILESS, it’s not concerned whether it’s difficult or not, probably not even much concerned about apparent damage) is for the normal state to cease to be this thing which is so heavy, so obscure, so ugly—so low—and for the dawn to come ... you know, something dawning on the horizon: a new Consciousness. That something truer and more luminous.³⁴

The Mother’s view is that the pressure of this new Consciousness is only felt as pressure by the parts of the being that resist it, the “old” parts of the being that are “miserable, petty, obscure, heavy, ugly and low.” Like coal or carbon, packed within these old parts are packs of powerful energy that when put under the Consciousness’s “pressure and heat,” rearrange their interior configuration to become luminous and strong, like a diamond, “a new allotrope of Consciousness.”

The difficulty is that one has to be willing to use this pressure to gain the new inner configuration of consciousness. Sri Aurobindo says to a student, who was troubled by the pressure

³³ The Mother, *Bulletin* (April 1969), 77. Her emphasis.

³⁴ *The Mother’s Agenda XI*, March 14, 1970.

he or she felt in the Ashram: “If the pressure is too great, the remedy is to widen the consciousness. With the peace and silence there should come a wideness that can receive any amount of Force without any reactions.”³⁵ With the name Golconde, the Mother orients her aspiring *sādhaks*, who live in the Dormitory, along a slow and pressure-filled path of progress that is communicated in the growth of a diamond; and not any diamond, but the Earth’s oldest diamonds that come from the center of Mother India.

Though this diamond orientation in Golconde is quite alluring, it can be very disorienting, quite threatening in fact, such that one would not want to take Sri Aurobindo’s advice “to widen the consciousness” within its ritual architectural game. To me, the symbolic use of water in the landscaping and the architecture, as well as the diamond name and nature of Golconde can also constitute what Jones says is the “back half” of a ritual-architectural event: “Commemoration.”

III. GOLCONDE AS THE COMMEMORATION OF THE DAWN

The diamond could have easily been a part of this next analysis, since the way that one is meant to live and behave in this building brings a willing participant through a formation process that is not at all easy. To me this formation process in Golconde feels like negotiating the traffic in India. In Pondicherry there are no traffic lanes, traffic lights, stop signs, or even yield signs. Further, there are no signs that direct pedestrians or drivers to watch out for each other. People walk in the street among the bicycles, the motor scooters, the motorcycles, the cars, the buses, and the rickshaws. The sidewalks are mostly unusable because they are usually fenced in by the owners of the houses, or crowded with trees growing in the middle of them; they are sometimes lined with sleeping cab drivers, crowded with groups of talking women servants, resting stray dogs, or during the months of my visit, covered with stacks of cement bricks, piles of sand or rocks that have been

³⁵ Sri Aurobindo, *Letters on Yoga: Part III* (Pondicherry: SAAP, 2014), 473.

dug up from the surface of the street for new waterlines to be installed underneath. (See Figures 5.10 and 5.11). The drivers drive with a very intuitive kind of choreography in which each person in converging traffic honks or rings a bell as a warning to unseen drivers and pedestrians, and they feel their way through streets and intersections—each with an attitude of having the right-of-way. Traffic boundaries are fluid and permeable in India, and yet there is a kind of rhythm to the way they are negotiated even as there is sometimes anger, frustration, fear, and discomfort, at least on my part.

These ways of coping with traffic boundaries on the streets of Pondicherry illustrate the second general priority of ritual-architectural events, what Lindsay Jones calls “Commemoration.” Sacred architecture not only seduces the participant into playing its ritual game, but expands or limits one’s world by commemorating in clear and not so clear ways the rights, responsibilities, and obligations of the one who would stay to play the game. In this function of Commemoration, sacred architecture visually and spatially prescribes by giving “information that compels people to change. Not only the way they think, but also how they act and interact with others (86).” In this “back half” of the ritual-architectural event, sacred architecture establishes new boundaries that must be honored, boundaries that define who the gods or God is/is not and who the ritual participant is/is not. Like Indian traffic, there is a kind of rhythm to the way these boundaries are dealt with even as there is possibly anger, frustration, fear, and discomfort.

Jones offers four ways that might be used to describe how the sacred art and architecture of Golconde commemorates these boundaries. The first is architecture as “Divinity,” which “commemorates, houses, and/or represents a deity, divine presence, or conception of ultimate reality (303).” For my purposes, I will limit my remarks to this one way of Commemoration.³⁶

³⁶ The other three could be considered: architecture as “Sacred History,” which commemorates some kind of mythological story or episode; architecture as “Politics,” which commemorates or “challenges socioeconomic hierarchy and/or temporal authority, and finally architecture as “The Dead,” which commemorates ancestors or others who have passed away (Jones, 308).



Figure 5.10. Typical intersection in Pondicherry during my stay. It could be weeks or months before these are repaired leaving narrow lanes for all travelers. Photo by author.

1. The Rules to Form the Sacred Gaze of the Integral Yoga

The experience of Golconde commemorates an experience of divinity as “the Dawn.” Any dawn is quite beautiful and alluring, so this image can easily belong in the “front-half” of my analysis. However, in this context of the “back-half,” it engenders a way of seeing divinity as a pressure to live in between light and dark; the known and the unknown; the past and the future; or the old and the new. This commemorates a God that desires growth into the new by using the opposition of the old to stabilize consciousness in the new. This is quite uncomfortable if one is a willing participant.

This battle between light and dark can be seen in terms of how one is meant to live in the dormitory according the following general principle of the Mother: “Not to take care of material things which one uses is a sign of inconstancy and ignorance. You have no right to use any material object whatsoever if you do not take care of it. You must take care of it not because you are



Figure 5.11. Maids who are taking a siesta outside Golconde on the sidewalk. Photo: author.

attached to it, but because it manifests something of the Divine Consciousness.”³⁷ Based on this principle, there are many Golconde rules or recommendations, mentioned above. One of the early *sādhaks*, Dilip Roy, complained about them to Sri Aurobindo. For the Guru, the rules were crafted by the Mother to give the residents practical direction for a descendant spirituality.

As regards Golconde and its rules—they are not imposed elsewhere—there is a reason for them and they are not imposed for nothing. In Golconde Mother has worked out her own idea through ...others. First Mother believes in beauty as a part of spirituality and divine living; secondly, she believes that physical things have the Divine Consciousness underlying them as much as living things; and thirdly that they have an individuality of their own and ought to be properly treated, used in the right

³⁷ The Mother, undated printed card in all the rooms at Golconde. Also found in The Mother, *Words of the Mother II* (Pondicherry: SAAP, 2004), 323.

way, not misused or improperly handled or hurt or neglected so that they perish soon or lose their full beauty or value.³⁸

In these rules, the Mother “worked out her own idea” that treating matter as beautiful, conscious, and an end in itself is her notion of “spirituality and divine living.” These rules have a purpose to maintain the harmony of the spaces and to create a sacred gaze or a way of seeing the living quality of all objects and materials. These rules must also be seen within the larger context of the *Rule* for living in the Ashram as a whole, which also implicitly stresses these principles and seeks to shape this gaze.³⁹ Golconde expects and requires a more intense living of these principles, owing to the fragile beauty of this building and the discomfort that it first presents.

As I was there to be a willing participant-observer, these rules for caring for the materials of Golconde led me to consider my own belongings and even my own body in a new way. It was more than a written pressure however, but a social one since all the permanent residents lived them quite sincerely.⁴⁰ These social pressures became personal ones and I started to ask: How do I take care of my clothes? How do I take care of my computer and software? My books and writing materials? How do I take care of my body? How might my kind of care be a sign of consciousness or ignorance? How might I resist giving this care?

This interaction with matter, the resultant battle, and possible collaboration with it is found in these rules and other unwritten ways of living that one learns, and also in the attitudes that come

³⁸ Sri Aurobindo, “Golconde: A Letter from Sri Aurobindo,” in Shraddhavan, “Golconde: A Look Behind,” *Mother India* (February 1990): 90.

³⁹ There are 17 general rules in the current iteration of the Ashram *Rule*, and nos. 4-6 address caring for one’s accommodations. “4. An inmate must abide by the rules of residence of his or her place of accommodation. 5. The accommodation given to an inmate is intended for his or her use alone. Others may visit the room of an inmate during the day, but no one is allowed to stay overnight in an inmate’s room without the permission of the Board of Trustees. 6. All furniture, equipment, vehicles and other items of utility provided by the Ashram to an inmate for personal or departmental use are the property of the Ashram and are not to be sold, lent or disposed of by an inmate. They are not to be used by him or her for any purpose other than the one for which they have been given.” *Rules of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram* (Pondicherry: SAAP, 2003), 25.

⁴⁰ The many guests who came through did not always do this and often caused disruptions in the pattern of life there, which is a source of tension for the permanent residents, as I saw it.

up when one first encounters these explicit or implicit guidelines. One's ego and its preferences rear their head and one has to do something with them in a constructive way if one wants to stay. For example, in Golconde, there are shared bathrooms, so it is necessary to keep one's toiletries together and walk down the hall to the sink and showers, oftentimes in the dark. Huta describes this inconvenience. Once, while working all night on a project that the Mother needed the next morning, Huta had to keep walking to the bathroom in the dark to splash her face to keep awake. She describes unease in the darkness of Golconde as well, which I also felt, though I would not have described it in the same way: "Now I was not afraid of ghosts as made known to me by some people with their fertile brains. The Mother assured me that there was no ghost in Golconde."⁴¹

Overall, Huta found living in the quiet and still environment of Golconde (of the 1950s) helpful, as she "was not used to any kind of noise."⁴² She once described "an American lady," who stayed near her room who often slid her room doors in a way that she found disrupting. "It was awfully irritating. ...It disturbed my sleep, my reading or anything else I was doing."⁴³ Because all the floors are stone and the furniture is wood, everything is potentially noisy. I do not know if it has anything to do with being American—though I can well understand an Indian view of this—being asked to be quiet in Golconde is like being asked to dive into a pool without getting wet. Huta reported her difficulty to the Mother after enduring this disturbance for a while. The Mother released this pressure and said "I heard, indeed, that Golconde is a rather noisy place, and that is why I had thought of removing you to another house."⁴⁴

⁴¹ Huta, *The Story of a Soul 1956, Volume Two Part Two*, 55.

⁴² Huta, *The Story of a Soul 1954-1955, Volume One* (Pondicherry: SAAP, 1999), 80.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

2. *The Shaping of My Own Gaze: My Participation/Observation*

Not just anyone can live or stay in Golconde. Today, the dormitory houses twelve residents and the rest of the thirty or so rooms are open for visitors.⁴⁵ Visitors are usually known by the staff or someone within the Ashram community. Even after a lot of due diligence, I arrived in Pondicherry for my research without permission to stay in the dormitory. For a few years prior, I cultivated relationships over email with *sādhaks* in the Dormitory, who helped me in the first days to approach the proper authorities in the latest possible moment to get permission. It was given to me with the expectation that I would help around the building by the caretaker of the Dormitory. I was happy to take on these tasks as I was hoping to make them part of my research. Even this was not enough, however, to secure a place for the full length of my stay because of two factors: 1) the time of the year was a busy one for the Ashram so that many rooms were booked;⁴⁶ and 2) the caretaker did not trust my reasons for being there as he thought I might seek to dishonor his gurus and their spiritual path in my research owing to the current conflict that grips the community.⁴⁷ Even after many attempts to reassure him, he remained concerned. This seemed reasonable to me so I did what I could to be kind and accommodating.

Because of my being suspect, I was never sure if I would be allowed to stay in Golconde for the whole time that I had given myself in India. Because of the busy season of pilgrims, I was also not sure if I could find another place to stay, which would mean I would have to abbreviate my trip and return home. I was forced to live in a liminal way, between days of rich discovery and nagging

⁴⁵ Not all the rooms are filled with ashramites. There are some rooms that are used for storage and other reasons that keep them unavailable for rent. It may be that there are not enough people in the Ashram who would want to live in Golconde, given how much it demands of one's effort to do daily tasks, though I could not substantiate this.

⁴⁶ I was present for the following important days in the life of the Ashram: November 17th, the Mother's Mahasamadhi day (day of her passing); November 24th, Siddhi day (Foundation of the Ashram); December 2nd, the founding of the Mother's school for children; December 5th, Sri Aurobindo's Mahasamadhi day; Christmas (which is celebrated in the Ashram); and January 1st, New Year's day, a celebration of the "new Consciousness" when the Mother would typically give a special message.

⁴⁷ See the Preface for a description of this conflict.

anxiety. I was assured that I could stay in Golconde for the first three weeks. When that time came due, fortunately, I was told, there was a cancellation, so I could stay another two weeks. The last days of this period approached and I was told that I would need to find another place. With the help of friends, I found another room in an Ashram guest house, even though it was Christmas time. Right before I moved, I was then told I could stay in Golconde, but in a room without a bureau for a few more days. A few more days later, I was told I could stay until the first part of January. A few days later still, I was told I could stay until the 12th, when my planned flight took me back to the States. I happily stayed in that second room, living out of my suitcase until I left on Vivekananda's 150th birthday, January 12th.

Since my research so depended upon my living in Golconde and the Ashram, I was not sure I could justify staying in India if I could not stay there. However, as the weeks became months, I felt I was getting the necessary experience of the spaces, the people, and the research. If I had to leave earlier than I had planned, I reasoned that I had enough material to finish my chapter. Early on, it dawned on me that my precarious stay was a central part of my experience and research of Golconde. I was forced to confront squarely the uncomfortable state of uncertainty. The caretaker of Golconde unknowingly gave me my own individual experience of the Integral Yoga that I described at the start of this chapter: the chance to negotiate the pressure of consciousness in the work of life with the counter pressure of joy and to see if I could endure the process. I had my own experience of divinity as the Dawn while living in Golconde.⁴⁸

Because of this situation, I was made to face my own insecurities about material supports. I was made to face my own (in)ability to trust and surrender to something higher within myself. What actually helped me was something the Mother says in the previous chapter concerning "active or dynamic will" versus "effort" to face opposition. I was inspired to try to live with a "dynamic will"

⁴⁸ As I allude to in the Preface, my own spiritual practice values this same descendant approach that welcomes opposition as a means for growth, so this experience was also an important part of my own practice.

in the way that the Mother suggests and to reject any “personal effort” on my part to secure the material supports I desired. Instead of making an appeal to the caretaker and those in Golconde to help me, I simply accomplished my chores and tasks with as much care as I could muster. Without trying to sway anyone to allow me to stay, I simply made it known in any way I could to the Staff and residents, when they asked, that I hoped it worked out, but if it did not I was content to go back to the United States. I was grateful for the days I had been given and the people I had met. More than words, it seemed to me that the sincerest way to prove myself was to try and actively support the life and values of the community I came to study. I could only do this in a limited way, but I could show that I tried within my limitations of time and commitment. This also achieved the goal of getting my hands on the materials of the building, of trying to experience what caring for this place might mean “because it manifests something of the Divine Consciousness.” Without this chain of events that *opposed* my preference for more comfort every step of the way, I would not have grown in understanding of myself and of Golconde, which included the Caretaker, who felt threatened by a scholar like myself.

One of the ways that I was given the chance to contribute to the material care of Golconde was to hang and then fold laundry. There is a specific science to folding and hanging laundry, which was created by Mona Pinto, the first Caretaker of Golconde under the Mother. If one does it incorrectly, as I did many times, the scolding is swift and direct. The amount of laundry that is cleaned and processed everyday can be great, so the staff needs the help and needs it to be done properly. The laundry includes all the resident’s clothes, the bed and bath linens, and mosquito nets. Each item has a particular way that it must be hung on the line to maximize the effect of the sun and wind, and each item has a particular way it must be folded, whether that be a bed sheet, a bra, a dhoti, a pair of slacks. The goal for the final result of the folded piece of clothing is that it fit within an 18” square with the bedroom number showing (marked on the tag) so that the sifters can quickly

group the item and deliver it back to the resident. The bedsheets are a particular case as they come out of the washing machines damp and wrinkled. They must first be folded wet in a very specific way so that the wrinkles are reduced as much as possible. They are then piled into five-gallon buckets and carried up to the roof. Each bed sheet is hung on the line so that the corners are parallel but not equal to the ground so that the wind can get some uplift into the cloth. One becomes good at doing this job quickly and in silence. I particularly enjoyed the time on the roof of Golconde where the clothes lines are located. Looking out to all the neighborhoods and to the Bay of Bengal as the wind blows was very satisfying.

I also volunteered to help with the sanding in preparation of shellacking the teak doors at each room (see Figures 5.12-5.15). This is a very large job in which I could only make a small contribution. It was tedious and a bit risky as the teak wood is increasingly exposed to water, and every time it is sanded and sealed, it becomes thinner. The wood does look vigorous, however, after all these decades of tropical weather. There are hundreds of doors, with countless slats. I was directed to first sand the surface and then take a blunt blade and carve out the old shellack from the larger grooves in the wood. Once that was finished, I sanded the surface again with a finer grit and then cleaned the surfaces with a rag. The last step was to shellack the surfaces with as many coats as possible. Amra, my supervisor, ended up averaging about three coats.

I found this task to be a similar experience to making art. In fact, both the folding and the sanding were just another process that matched the creative experience I have in making sculpture. The goal always is to make sure to do the job at hand the “right way.” The right way is usually a moving target and discovered after many failed attempts. But once a method is found that works well and is efficient, the work goes on in a very ordinary and yet meditative manner, concentrating the mind and body for a time. One can get lost in this process and time passes with great speed. My experience of Golconde was like this as I folded laundry and sanded doors. I also imagined the



Figure 5.12 and 5.13: The author sanding the teak doors and the supplies used for the job.
Photos: Sue Crothers and the author.



Figures 5.14 and 5.15: The teak doors before and then after sanding and some layers of shellac.
Photos: author.

many workers who built these doors and other parts of the building. The craftsmanship is beautiful and the design is elegant. I wanted to make sure that I brought all of my own skill in the maintenance of these materials to skills of the people that originally designed and constructed them.

In terms of participating in the larger life of the Ashram, I also worked every morning for an hour or two with the Ashram Archives to document the Golconde architectural drawings, which are in need of conservation. I got an even more refined sense of how ashramites take care of material reality in this important archival work. Keeping a record of what the drawings look like before treatment and keeping a detailed inventory of their condition and their content are important for the conservation process. This huge ongoing project includes about 400 drawings made by all the architects and engineers and is being completed by Barbie Dailey and her team. The plan is that once all the drawings are repaired, they will be placed in the Ashram Archives' cold storage facility where all the original manuscripts of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo are kept, as well as many other cherished documents and memorabilia.

3. The Permeable Nature of Space in Golconde

The implied rules of being quiet and the explicit rules given in the orientation booklet define very clear boundaries for behavior that in the end, do more than oppose the ego's preferences. For some, they actually open a door to another kind of silent world that the building seems to contain in the open spaces of the architecture. One ashramite says Golconde is a building "whose lines and dimensions were like works of art. ... To live in that space was to be bathed in a sea of beauty."⁴⁹ There is a circulation of life in Golconde's open spaces that is like the sea. Yet there is a wall that surrounds Golconde, which may give an initial impression that it is meant to be a kind of convent or monastery. There is some truth to this in my experience, but what overrides this experience for me is

⁴⁹ Chitra Sen, "The Story of Golconde" *Mother India* (May 2007): 385.

the way in which this wall contributes to keeping the pressure of Consciousness contained. It is like the cocoon for the chrysalis; although there are relief valves. Golconde's spaces are permeable. The experience of permeability in fact, is the most important way that Golconde physically commemorates the divine Dawn that is both open and closed to the full force of the light.

Golconde is a stable unity of many and diverse architectural meatuses.⁵⁰ There are meatuses that ferry one's awareness between the natural and the built; the open and the closed; the dark and the light; the cool and the hot; the comfortable and the uncomfortable; the private and the public; and even the masculine and the feminine. The building breathes air, light, smells, and sounds as any body does and circulates them with the residents. At every turn one sees a set of straight lines and flat planes that are louvered, slotted, perforated, grilled, slitted, slatted, opened, niched, recessed, folding or sliding. To me, this combination of geometric forms with permeable characteristics is androgynous.⁵¹ The hard geometry feels like a masculine expression and the permeability, feminine. The architecture both shields with stable strength in its geometric forms not unlike a protective father, but remains open and receptive to new life not unlike a mother's womb. Outside and inside, nature and culture, masculine and feminine merge into one another. This experience of space makes sense as an architectural expression of the Integral Yoga and the kind of sacred gaze that it engenders, which aspires to integrate all opposites in a new supramental life and consciousness.

This permeability is evocative, but sometimes annoying. The surrounding walls that enclose the building and its landscaping are tall enough to create a slight sound barrier at street level but would not stop an athletic person from scaling them to enter (or *escape* as one of the residents told me has happened!), and certainly these surrounding walls do not stop the noises of the city from

⁵⁰ Meatus is taken from the Latin word *meare* (to go or pass), and means "a channel, a passage;" it is also defined as "a tubular passage or opening leading to the interior of the body; the external orifice of such a passage. Formally also: a pore (obs.) Freq. with distinguishing word." Examples of this last definition are: auditory, nasal, olfactory, urethral, urinary meatus. *OED*, s.v. "meatus."

⁵¹ See Günther Feuerstein, *Androgynous: The Male-Female in Art and Architecture* (Stuttgart: Edition Axel Meiges, 1997).

reaching the ears of the residences at any level of the building. The firecrackers of Diwali during my first night in Golconde proved this! Even the daily noises of horns from rickshaws, motorbikes, and cars, car lights at night, the barking dogs on the streets, the cats in heat, the cawing crows in the trees, the chirping of other kinds of birds, and the bells from Lakshmi the elephant from the local Ganesha temple, who frequently walks by (see Figure 5.16), all come into the room in fuller ways than might otherwise if there were less openings in the walls, ceilings, staircases, and floors. The Mother intended Golconde to have artist's studios, but "one would have to be a most exceptionally orderly kind of genius to be able to paint, sculpt, or even draw, while still respecting the rules which provide for the material care of the building and its furniture and fittings. To make music is clearly out of the question."⁵² Loud noise is allowed to enter the spaces of Golconde, but not allowed to exit in the same measure, owing to the rules for living.

Permeability might conventionally imply something porous or weak, connoting boundaries that are unstable and therefore susceptible to outside threats or hostilities. There are many threats to the material life of Golconde because of its permeability, which force one to be aware of the materials in even deeper ways. These threats gave me the desire to strengthen its boundaries for the sake of its continued survival and beauty. This bears upon the kind of divinity that Golconde commemorates. This is a vulnerable God that houses itself in the ordinary and in the fragile. It demands that one take the time personally or through the work of servants, to daily clean, straighten, arrange, and maintain these spaces and materials. The work needed to protect Golconde is a strenuous one. What are some of the threats?

Water, dirt, dust, pollution, salt air, and UV rays from the sunlight are all enemies of these spaces, and from a conservator's perspective, the cloth embroidered cushions, the wooden furniture, the cuddapah stone floors, and the handmade electrical and brass fixtures, are all quite vulnerable to

⁵² Shraddhavan, "Golconde: A Look Behind," *Mother India* (February 1989): 117.



Figure 5.16. Lakshmi the elephant walking in front of the wall at Golconde. Notice bells around her neck. Photo by author.

deterioration from these elements (See Figure 5.17). At the entrance to the building, there is an acrylic painted mural by the longtime ashramite Krishnalal Bhatt (1905-1990) that is especially susceptible to weather, insects, and animals. The Ashram commissioned a condition assessment/cost estimate for the conservation of the mural which outlines its deterioration. It states:

The painting has been executed on [non-archival] marine plywood, no base layer has been applied to prime the surface. Instead it would appear that some medium was applied to saturate the wooden surface. Also the colour application in different areas is uneven.

As is obvious the painting presents several conservation challenges with extensive cracking and flaking over large areas. The potential for the losses to increase exponentially is real as the paint layer is getting detached from the plywood support.⁵³

Besides these threats of weather, in certain seasons on this “Noah’s Ark,” there are monkeys that live in the trees next to the windows. One of the residents told me that a monkey came into his

⁵³ Sanjay Dhar, “Condition Assessment/Cost Estimates for the Conservation of Mother Extending Her Blessings,” Gurgaon, Haryana, August 2012, 2.



Figure 5.17. View of my room, with bed, chair, covered fan, and Kuja jar. Embroidered bed covering made by Sudeshna, one of the staff at Golconde. Notice the milky *chunam*

room many times to steal his alarm clock. He finally caught it in the act and told him to drop it. The monkey did so, but out of the louvered window! There are cats, lizards, bats, crows, small moths, and the occasional fly. There are of course mosquitos, which are really only a threat to a person's health if the proper medications are not taken and one does not sleep with a mosquito net.

Finally, there are the openings underneath the large teak bannisters that line the main staircase, which is the most salient example of permeability in Golconde. It is a large esophagus in the body of this building that breathes the inhabitants in and out and through her form (See Figure 5.18). Golconde has a rule not to allow small children to enter the building as there is no protection should one crawl underneath these and accidentally fall to the ground floor.



Figure 5.18. Golconde entrance looking up through the staircase to top floor ceiling, all made with rebar enforced concrete with teak guardrails. One can see the imprint of the wood grains from wooden formwork that molded the concrete. The surfaces were smoothed over with a carborundum (silicone carbide) stones. Photo by author.

All of these vulnerabilities of Golconde exist because the architect, Antonin Raymond designed them. According to Udar and his memory about the design phase, chief architect Antonin Raymond

designed the building very strictly, east to west-with all the openings only on the North and South- and he designed that both faces should be openable fully, so that it could get the fullest current of air, which is south to north in the summer and north to south in the winter. He also arranged that the sunlight should not enter any room directly and bring its heat directly with it. So the rooms were always cool.⁵⁴

In the tropics of India, “cool” is a relative term, so it is true that Golconde on the inside is typically cooler than Golconde on the outside. Raymond also designed the landscaping so that on the south

⁵⁴ Udar Pinto, “More Notes on Golconde and other bits-connected and unconnected,” November 18, 1986, SAA Archives. See Figures 5.6 and 5.7 above.

side there would be less vegetation than on the north. The south side would therefore be hotter and with its thermal energy, pull the cooler air through the building from the north as it rose up the side, creating a convection air current within.⁵⁵

Raymond used reinforced concrete as the primary building material, a first in Indian architecture. Further, he used it paradoxically: this dense and opaque material aesthetically diminishes an experience of concretization in Golconde's permeable spaces. The Mother describes the parallel spiritual experience later in her life,

It's a very odd phenomenon: the sense of the "concrete" fades away – it fades farther and farther away. "Concrete" vision, "concrete" sense of smell, "concrete" taste, "concrete" hearing, it all seems far away – far behind in a ... an unreal past. And that kind of dry and lifeless "concrete" is replaced by something that's very supple (*round, global gesture*), very complete in that all the senses function together, and VERY INTIMATE WITH EVERYTHING.

And I see very well that if we let ourselves be carried along instead of having that absurd resistance of habit, if we let ourselves be carried along, there would come a sort of very ... (*same round, global gesture*) very soft thing, in the sense of *smooth*, very soft, very complete, very living, and with a very intimate perception of things.⁵⁶

Throughout the *The Mother's Agenda*, the Mother moves between the world that to her is "concrete," "separate, divided" and the one which is "soft," "smooth," "supple," "complete" and "intimate."

The same could be said of Golconde.

The concrete forms of this dormitory invite one to move between these two worlds, and each resident is to work out how to do this for herself using the intuition and the guidance of the Gurus. Paradoxically, Golconde has rules that provide a kind of external boundary for an internal way that has no known rules. It commemorates an experience of divinity in the Dawn, where the pressure of the "new Consciousness" is constantly present, keeping one battling between an old way of being and a new. As we will see in the next section, that battle and "pressure of Consciousness" was even central to the creative process of building the structure.

⁵⁵ See Aditya Bhatt, "Golconde: Architecture, Climate, and Comfort" (undergraduate thesis, School of Architecture, CEPT University, Ahmedabad, 2011) for a very thorough study of this phenomenon.

⁵⁶ *The Mother's Agenda IV*, August 31, 1963. Her emphasis.

IV. GOLCONDE AS RITUAL CONTEXT

The third and last hermeneutical priority that Jones discusses in the “eventfulness” of sacred architecture is in what he calls the “Ritual Context,” the way in which a participant is choreographed through the Orientation and Commemoration of a building to shape her way of seeing reality. In what way is a willing resident of Golconde choreographed through the aquatic and diamond allure of Golconde and then through her commemoration of a dawn-like divinity? Jones gives four ritual contexts that have been important in his research: *theater*, where the architecture acts a backdrop or stage for ritual performance; *contemplation*, where the architecture is a prop for the devotion of the participant; *propitiation*, where the process of constructing the building takes on a character of ritual or devotion; and *sanctuary*, where the architecture becomes a refuge of order and sacrality. I can focus only on the third possibility in this chapter, though Golconde as contemplation and sanctuary could be productively analyzed.

1. *Propitiation*

Jones’s hermeneutical endeavor includes the creative *process* of building architecture, which he suggests can be covered in a category that he calls “Propitiation.” This is a loaded term, which he admits is “encumbered by especially thick Jewish and Christian valances,” but he tries to use this term more broadly to include non-Western experiences of propitiation, where it “is usually in the service of cultivating, maintaining, or restoring some sort of favorable inclination or condition of harmony” between the person and Ultimate Reality (237). Therefore, for Jones, this category covers many kinds of ritual practice of Propitiation, which he groups into three categories: building architecture for periodic renewal, building as a demonstration of devotion, and lastly building as a strategic investment or petition of divine favor.

The second kind, building as a demonstration of devotion, is most related to how the *sādhaks* and others built Golconde under the Mother's guidance. The work was done, in the words of Udar, "as an offering" to the Mother so that they could experience growth in their consciousness. We can see in the journals of some of the *sādhaks*, that this work was a demonstration of what Jones calls "a commitment to, in some sense, 'give one's best to God (251).'" However, if giving one's best is done "in the service of cultivating, maintaining, or restoring a condition of harmony" between the *sādhak* and the Mother, the harmony is reached often though an experience its very opposite.

2. *The Construction Phase*

The design phase of Golconde is difficult to construct historically, though it is not too important for my limited purposes. We know that some time after Antonin Raymond agreed to design the project, Sri Aurobindo requested his photograph. After he received it, Raymond writes that Sri Aurobindo "apparently formed a judgement of my character." He then

sent me a considerable amount of money for expenses to cover the transportation of my wife, son and myself to India.... I found out later that it did not matter how long the job took, nor did it matter very much what it cost. What was important was that the process of building should be a means of learning and experience in the life of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, where not only the spiritual but all other aspects of man's nature must be developed and perfected.⁵⁷

⁵⁷ Antonin Raymond, *Antonin Raymond, An Autobiography* (Rutland, VT: C.E. Tuttle, 1973), 159.

The Mother says that the architect Antonin Raymond and his wife, Noémi, were “the best of the human stuff.”⁵⁸ Though admired by the Gurus and given a lot of freedom and money to complete the job, Raymond was not her student and did not build this project in devotion to her.⁵⁹

The main source of documentation for the construction phase of Golconde that I will focus on is found in daily diary reports, which workers submitted to the Mother for her comment. In these diaries they asked the Mother’s advice about everything from engineering issues, organizational challenges of personnel, material costs, and personal conflicts, all of which were set in a context of each *sādhak*’s aspiration for spiritual growth in the Yoga with her. When one reads these accounts, Sri Aurobindo’s maxim for his spiritual practice that “All life is Yoga” becomes quite living.⁶⁰ The form of life that becomes Yoga in this case, is the life of building Golconde. Further, it seems to me that it is not what the Mother necessarily says to these *sādhaks* that is valuable, but what she does not say that takes on the most weight. Her pedagogical method is one that silently encourages growth through the natural application of “the pressure of the new Consciousness.”

How can we describe this method? We can see it in how she dealt with cultural conflicts in her civic experiment called Auroville as she described them to her disciple Satprem in *The Mother’s Agenda*. There were different national factions in Auroville who wrote to the Mother asking her to take their sides in a dispute. She remained silent about it for a while. When they pressed her, she finally wrote back and reminded them that “the true consciousness needed to live in Auroville is to

⁵⁸ Mrityunjay, “Golconde: A Look Behind,” *Mother India* (April 1989): 240.

⁵⁹ Raymond was a friend of the Mother’s French student, Philip Barbier de St. Hilaire (later named Pavitra by Sri Aurobindo). I should note that the Raymonds had a very positive view of the Ashram and the Gurus, and seemed to have been deeply effected by them, though they silently returned to America after their work was finished in 1938. They wrote to the Mother thirty-one years later in 1969. The Mother comments, “Have you seen the Raymonds’ letter? ... They’ve written a very sweet letter. In their letter, they write something I didn’t know, which Pavitra [the Mother’s assistant from France who knew Raymond] had never told me; they say that when Pavitra put them in contact with here [*sic.*], it completely changed their lives, the aim of their lives and everything.” The Mother, *The Mother’s Agenda X* (Paris: Institut de Recherches Évolutives, 1981), June 11, 1969.

⁶⁰ Sri Aurobindo, *Synthesis of Yoga*, epigraph.

look at one's own faults first, before complaining about others' faults, and to mend one's ways before demanding others should mend theirs."⁶¹ She sent the letter and got no response. "Since then, silence, complete silence: I no longer exist – I don't go and give support to all their little quarrels, so I no longer exist."⁶² In this case, her silence which is meant to bring "the pressure of Consciousness" and the potential for a new growth in the person was rebuffed with "the silent treatment" by the Aurovilians. "But that's a way of kneading the dough," she says,

.... They will have either to change or to go—without telling them anything, without having to tell them anything, with the pressure of the Consciousness alone. Either they will have to change, or they will be compelled to go. It's not a method particular to this person (*Mother points to herself*): it's the method of this [new] Consciousness. I very clearly see the way in which it works: it puts a pressure for all that resists in someone's nature to come to the surface and manifest, and so the ridiculous or wrong side of the thing becomes conspicuous, and it has either to go or to ... I've noticed that. It's its way of working. But in fact, with this pressure, you realize that people are always ten times more stupid than you thought—they themselves know nothing about it (but that's the habit: one is generally very unconscious of one's own stupidity), but even when you thought you were conscious of what they're like, you weren't even remotely aware of what they're like!⁶³

This difficult method of "kneading the dough" is one that the Mother uses with her intercultural workers at the construction site of Golconde, as well.

George Nakashima (1905-1990), the construction supervisor of the project, and Chandulal Mathurdas Shah (1898-1945), one of the Ashram structural engineers, worked very closely together with Raymond's partner, François Sammer on Golconde for more than a year. Nakashima and Chandulal both give accounts in their diaries that from my perspective deal quite squarely with the Mother's method of encouraging growth and *progrès* through the creative process with the "pressure of the Consciousness." Nakashima was born in Washington State, earned his BA in architecture from the University of Washington and later his masters in architecture from MIT. He traveled to

⁶¹ *The Mother's Agenda X*, August 23, 1969.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ *Ibid.*

Europe, Africa, and finally in 1934 to Japan, where he was able to find a job in Tokyo working for the renowned architect Antonin Raymond, student of Frank Lloyd Wright. Nakashima was 32 when he arrived in Pondicherry for the first time in 1937 to do survey work for a few weeks on behalf of Raymond. He then came back to Pondicherry for his longer stay in 1938. He even became a temporary ashramite, and Sri Aurobindo gave him the name Sunderananda, meaning, “the one who delights in beauty.”⁶⁴ Nakashima wrote, “Since I felt I was receiving more than I was able to give—the answer to all my searches, finally conferring meaning on my life—I refused a salary and joined the community.”⁶⁵ He later said that in the Mother and Sri Aurobindo “was a meeting of two extraordinary psychic spirits, the most perfect in our age.”⁶⁶ According to Mrityunjay Mukherjee, an Indian ashramite who worked with Nakashima, he fit right in with everyone in the Ashram. Mrityunjay thought that Nakashima had a “childlike lovable nature,” and “felt his contact very nice and very simple and enjoyable without any unnecessary fuss.”⁶⁷ Further, “the contact of this foreigner and his concentration and careful handling and management of the whole field, was an unique opportunity for us Indians to learn exactly what Mother wanted us to learn....he never became angry or rebuked [the Tamil workmen], as we always did.”⁶⁸ In all, Mrityunjay thought that in the construction phase of Golconde, “a harmonious collaboration was more solid than it is found in the present days.”⁶⁹ Nakashima looked back with similar idealism. He writes later, “In a sense, I participated in life at the Sri Aurobindo Ashram during its golden age, when all of the disciples were in close touch with both the Mother and Sri Aurobindo. It was, in a way, an ideal existence on earth,

⁶⁴ I will refer to him as George Nakashima as he did not keep this name after this year in the Ashram.

⁶⁵ George Nakashima, *The Soul of a Tree: A Woodworker's Reflections* (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1981), 61.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 62.

⁶⁷ Mrityunjay Mukherjee in Shraddhavan, “Golconde: A Look Behind” *Mother India* (October 1989): 648.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Mrityunjay, January 1980, “A Look Behind: The How and Why of Golconde,” unpublished manuscript, Sri Aurobindo Ashram Archives, Pondicherry, India.

without a trace of ranchor or harsh words, arguments, egotism, but with all in concert in search of a divine consciousness.”⁷⁰ We get a more complicated picture of Nakashima’s personality and the way in which he and Chandulal related to each other in the diaries than these descriptions made in hindsight. It is telling that Nakashima does not mention Chandulal at all in his published reminiscences.

Chandulal Shah was in charge of the Building Service Department for the Ashram. He had been an ashramite for many years at this point, working for the Mother as an engineer without any formal training. He came in 1928 at the age of 30, with his sister Vasudha from the state of Gujarat. By all accounts, he lived to please the Mother in anything she asked. He and Nakashima seemed to work together well when they made the first trial model room for Golconde. Antonin Raymond was involved with this project, and said that since “I had to depend entirely on the local labor, who had neither any modern tools nor any know-how in their use, I decided to build a working model first.”⁷¹ Nakashima said of constructing the model room, “We had to work together on it. It was a teamwork. We got going on the building. The three of us supervised [Chandulal, Jotindranath Baul and Nakashima]. Everyone pitched in and it was a wonderful kind of feeling.”⁷²

The feeling did not last, however. Nakashima’s diary entries to the Mother are filled with complaints about Chandulal, which the Mother minimally address on the page or oftentimes does not comment. Nakashima’s main complaint is about a power struggle between the two; that Chandulal simply had ill-will towards him and challenged his authority. Nakashima writes in one entry, “With his associates, with his menials, in his general attitude and indulgence of authority, Chandulal seems to show many of the characteristics of a spoiled rich boy—a rich boy he indeed is

⁷⁰ George Nakashima, *The Soul of a Tree*, 67.

⁷¹ Raymond, *Antonin Raymond, An Autobiography*, 159.

⁷² “Sundarananda: an interview with George Nakashima,” *Collaboration* 13, no. 1 (Fall, 1986): 47.

to be in Thy grace.”⁷³ The Mother answers quite definitively by writing in the margin below, “It is well deserved grace gained by many years of faithful, devoted and obedient service and consecration. There are titles that must not be overlooked; but they can be gained with time and perseverance by all who choose to acquire them.”⁷⁴ Nakashima was basically told to bear it courageously, to work in spite of all, to earn Chandulal’s recognition of his authority. Quite a high bar of behavior for this cultured, well-educated, and competitive American who was most likely used to having unquestioned authority on job sites. With other complaints, the Mother skirts Nakashima’s expressed issue by offering a solution that avoids any kind of blame or dramatic characterization of the situation which might expand or oppose his opinion.

When reading these accounts, the Mother generally encourages Nakashima and Chandulal to work out their differences without either party avoiding the difficult work of finding a harmonious solution. The Mother once responded to Nakashima’s complaint of the issue of definition of roles on the worksite by saying, “We are all old enough to come to the point and not play hide and seek with each other.”⁷⁵

In February 1939, Nakashima and Chandulal finally came to blows: Nakashima slapped Chandulal in the face over a disagreement. At some point, I suppose in a verbal conversation, the Mother called this action a “brutality.” Nakashima references this in his diary, “Just what is meant by ‘brutality.’ I don’t quite understand.”⁷⁶ The letter is filled with justifications and admits no wrong. The Mother writes in the margins, “I meant physical brutality. As for the ‘mental or moral’ [implications of what happened] it is long since I have resolved not to interfere in quarrels as

⁷³ Diary entry from George Nakashima to the Mother, Saturday, September 24, 1938, “Golconde Notebook,” Sri Aurobindo Ashram Archives. The Mother’s emphasis. I will use the title “Nakashima Diary” for the rest of the footnotes.

⁷⁴ Nakashima Diary, September 24, 1938.

⁷⁵ Ibid., December 16, 1938.

⁷⁶ Ibid., February 1939.

I am convinced that always both sides are in the wrong.”⁷⁷ Nakashima does not mention any other quarrels for the rest of the year—until he left the Ashram permanently on October 4, 1939 for America.

The Mother seemed to allow the fire of this conflict exist at a low flame, which had, I would argue, a potential salutary effect to stimulate growth in each person. We can see in Chandulal’s diary to the Mother that unlike Nakashima, who had the problem of an assertive personality that sought to dominate and criticize, Chandulal had an overly insecure personality that sought to relinquish control or even sabotage his and other’s roles in order to divert attention from his performance. Instead of encouraging him to be humble, in this case, the Mother encouraged him to face the responsibility of his role and to assert his power.

One can see in Chandulal’s correspondence with the Mother a constant attempt to make a recognition of his mistakes, faults, and bad attitudes. There are many examples of this kind and the Mother always encourages him with remarks that first agree with his frank self-assessments while cautioning him to avoid these faults in the future. Her main criticism is that he attaches “too much importance to the way all people behave with you. It is this hypersensitivity which is the cause of most of the misunderstandings.”⁷⁸ In a deeper way, he understands, at least in what he writes to the Mother, the benefit of her opposition to his lower nature for his growth, which he calls her “scolding.” We can see in one particular entry just how much he welcomes her opposition and pressure:

Oh Sweet and Divine Mother

1. I had the best day today. My heart is filled with a sense of gratitude and it makes me cry. The joy I feel is greater than when You kiss my forehead. I repent now for all the occasions that I lost when, not being open, you “scolded” me—what we call to scold [*gronder*]⁷⁹—in the past.

⁷⁷ Ibid., February 18, 1939.

⁷⁸ The Mother to Chandulal, no date but it comes two entries after the March 1, 1939 entry, page 267 of Chandulal’s diary, Sri Aurobindo Ashram Archives. The Mother’s emphasis. This text is mostly in French, and all the translations are my own.

I rejoice that today I became conscious of my incorrect attitude, and as soon as my Sweet Mother corrected me, I accepted it instantly.

...

It is the Divine Grace that makes the effort to chase away the impurity. If you stay attached to the impurity then you feel it as an unbearable slap. Detach yourself from this impurity. Let it be washed away by one slap of the brush and you'll feel you have taken a bath. The joy, the lightness, the tranquility you feel after this bath surpasses all expression.

Scold me always, Sweet Mother. By thinking retrospectively, I open myself to all the occasions where you have "scolded" me in order to increase my joy.⁷⁹

The Mother, in simple approval of his insights, writes in the margin simply, "C'est bien" and her ubiquitous signature phrase, "Mes bénédictions" with her signature.⁸⁰

With her English speaking students, she would sign "My Blessings." *Blessier* in French means "to wound," which is related to how the Mother characterizes blessings. "My blessings are very dangerous," she says.

They cannot be for this one or for that one or against this person or against that thing. It is for... or, well, I will put it in a mystic way: It is for the Will of the Lord to be done, with full force and power. So it is not necessary that there should always be a success. There might be a failure also, if such is the Will of the Lord. And the Will is for the progress, I mean the inner progress. So whatever will happen will be for the best.⁸¹

Chandulal, whether he was able to behave this way or not, expressed in his diary what seems to me to be the ideal attitude of a student working with the Mother, which is to view either a caress or a scold from the Mother as a blessing, if received without resistance and used for insight and progress on the Path.

Was Chandulal the best man for the job of engineer? According to Mrityunjay, another ashramite named Jotindranath Baul was the best Ashram engineer, who studied in England and worked three years with reinforced concrete with a Tata company project in Bombay, whereas

⁷⁹ Chandulal to the Mother, no date but it comes two entries after the November 2, 1938 entry, pages 244-46 of Chandulal's diary, Sri Aurobindo Ashram Archives.

⁸⁰ Ibid., The Mother to Chandulal.

⁸¹ The Mother, *Words of the Mother I* (Pondicherry: SAAP, 2004), 60-61.

Chandulal did not have any experience with concrete. In fact, the Mother eventually took Chandulal off the job. Ultimately, Mrityunjoy states, “It [was Jotindranath] who saved the Mother’s work in Golconde.”⁸² Why then did she allow him to stay in this position for so long if he caused so much discord? I think this dynamic can only be explained if we consider that the Mother was not interested in strengthening the student’s personality to accomplish external products of success, but dissolving the personality into a larger structure of the “divine consciousness.” As she says above, “There might be a failure also, if such is the Will of the Lord. And the Will is for the progress, I mean the inner progress. So whatever will happen will be for the best.”

Chandulal died a few years after the Mother finally took him off the Golconde project in the early 40s. In fact, his portrait is painted behind the Mother in the Golconde mural, which is an honored position with some other beloved ashramites who had passed away. This commemoration and the Mother’s notes to Chandulal seem to indicate that the question of his being or not being the best man for the job is out-shined by his growth in devotion to carrying out what was very uncomfortable work as an offering to the Mother. Though he understandably struggled to do it in harmony and with cheerfulness with others, his aspiration to reach that state in the work pleased his guru and inspired his companions in the Ashram to place him with her in the Golconde mural.

Nakashima, on the other hand, was an effective worker, but did not stay with the Mother to finish the work at Golconde or live in the Ashram for other work. Mrityunjoy notes that he left because he got “into the Engineer’s bad books;” however, Mrityunjoy “did not know what defect [Nakashima] had privately.”⁸³ In the margins of his manuscript, Mrityunjoy writes that Nakashima did have the defect of taking sole credit for designing Golconde in a later published interview.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Mrityunjoy, January 1980, “A Look Behind: The How and Why of Golconde,” unpublished manuscript, SAA Archives, Pondicherry, India.

Though he was certainly head of construction and the architect of record on site, he was by no means its head designer.⁸⁴

In his diary, in June 1939, Nakashima tells the Mother that he wants to leave India, “Although my parents make no demands they are anxious to see me as it has been some years I have been home.”⁸⁵ Familial ties were never the highest priority to the Mother and Sri Aurobindo, but they did not stand in his way. Nakashima later writes, with some degree of idealism, that it “became a question of living a life of great beauty in isolation, or going out again into the world. I think there was within me an instinctive resistance to withdrawing from life as I’d known it. I concluded I would have to fight for truth outside the ashram’s protective environment. It was a most difficult decision.”⁸⁶ Though his words may be bromidic, his motivations for leaving in 1939 may have been influenced by military actions that were leading up to WWII: the Nazis invaded Czechoslovakia in March and Poland in September, while the Empire of Japan was invading China in the Second Sino-Japanese War. Being a Japanese-American, who had ties to Japan, he must have been very distressed. However, Nakashima’s difficult experience with Chandulal seems partially responsible, for there was no threat to India, much less, southern India.

From the point of view of the Mother and her typical way of working with her students, it seems that Nakashima was “sifted” from the community, not wanting to withstand any more of the pressure that the life with the Mother demanded. I doubt that this “sifting” was only external, that indeed, there must have been some internal sifting within this young 34 year-old that helped him to

⁸⁴ Ibid. Many years after the completion of Golconde, in a letter dated Oct. 1972, François Sammer wrote to his wife Agnes, “I had a letter from Antonin Raymond about an article of Nakashima, in some architectural magazine, where he claims sole authorship of Golconde—strange, but it looks like him. Antonin wanted to know my opinion, so I have sent him a copy of the ‘Golconde: a letter from Sri Aurobindo’ which I have from you and wrote to him that the authorship was collective under his (A.R.’s) leadership and that it was executed under the auspices of the Mother.” SAA Archives. In this letter Sri Aurobindo gives proper credit for the design, “In Golconde Mother has worked out her idea through Raymond, Sammer and others.” Letter dated Feb. 25, 1945, Pondicherry: SAAP.

⁸⁵ Nakashima Diary, June 4, 1939.

⁸⁶ Nakashima, *The Soul of a Tree*, 67.

mature in ways that saw him through the later experience of being interned with other Japanese-Americans in Hunt, Idaho after the bombing at Pearl Harbor. This difficult experience of opposition led to meeting Japanese carpenters in the internment camp who trained him in their methods of Japanese hand tools and joinery. He later built a successful career as a furniture maker and woodworker that lasted the rest of his life.⁸⁷

V. CONCLUSION

In critically analyzing the Golconde Dormitory using Lindsay Jones' intersubjective methodology, I discovered some valuable meanings in the experience of the building that the Mother and Sri Aurobindo had designed and built for some of their students in the Ashram. Jones' method asks how a building orients, commemorates, and provides a ritual context for meaning and identity formation. I found that Golconde is a place that cares for the physical needs of the residents, but does not provide the kind of comforts that fulfill preferences that potentially block opportunities for *progrès*. The Mother writes, "our aim is not to give to people a comfortable life, but to prepare them for the Divine Life which is quite a different affair." Like the Mother, this building makes very difficult demands of the resident to progress in a context of basic care and nourishment.

Turning the lens on how Golconde can be an experience of "Orientation," I focused on the homologous way this building allures one to participate in its spaces. Though Golconde possesses and communicates mythological archetypes, it does so in limited ways when compared to Mircea Eliade's ideals, which are more compatible with an ascendant spiritual practice, like Ramana Maharshi's in nearby Mt. Arunachala in Thiruvannamilai. However, by examining the elements used at Golconde, the geology underneath its plot, and the naming of the building, I found that Golconde becomes an experience of the *axis mundi* in a way that amplifies the descendant spiritual

⁸⁷ See <http://www.nakashimawoodworker.com/> for his website. His business is still thriving and is now run by his daughter, Mira, in New Hope, PA; accessed March 3, 2016.

approach of this Yoga. The first way I found Golconde to be an *axis mundi* can be found in the use of water. The artesian well, the fountain, the strip ponds, and even the *chunum* plaster walls all communicate a complex experience that conveys the resident between aquatic order and dissolution. This architectural use of water evokes the intuition if we remember the Guru's writings that describe this faculty in terms of drops of liquid light dropping into consciousness. The water landscape design with the ark-like form of the building also reminds me of Noah's Ark, which for some of its current residents resonates in a similar way. Golconde is like "the supramental ship," as one resident told me, which shuttles one's experience from the supramental realms to Earth and back again. The Mother describes in her later visions a ship as large as a city, which is bringing the supramental world and its creatures safely to Earth.

Secondly, the *axis mundi* is a "hub" between coal and diamond. It seems to me that the sedimentary rock lignite, coupled with naming the building after the Golkonda diamond mine, communicates a pattern of growth in geology that amplifies the central principle of the Integral Yoga, which is that "opposition and contraries are a stimulus for progress." As a diamond is formed by application of tremendous heat and pressure on carbon over great spans of time and in deep locations of the Earth, so the spiritual transformation of one's "dark," lower nature is meant to be achieved in Golconde with the pressure and heat of the Yoga lived there. This process may not be very welcoming to some and so it seems not only an orientation, but a disorientation as well.

Turning the lens more fully on how Golconde can be an experience of disorientation, which Jones places under a priority called "Commemoration," we focused on the way Golconde commemorates an experience of the divine as "the Dawn." This divine character summons its residents to live in the uncomfortable state between light and dark. The rules of living in Golconde are one of the external ways this summons is achieved, which invite one to take care of the physical materials of the building. These rules awaken the residents, if they are sensitive, to be more fully

conscious of material reality in all of its beauty and yet its fragility. In fact, as one becomes aware of the fragility of all the materials of the Dormitory, it awakens the aspiration to take care of them so that they remain beautiful. In Golconde, matter *matters*. There are threats to these materials of the building that come from the natural world, the weather, and city life. My own participation in caring for Golconde was in hanging and folding laundry, as well as sanding teak doors in preparation for recoating them in shellac. My experience in helping the Ashram Archive in their conservation efforts of the Golconde drawings also directed my gaze on the value of matter in the Ashram practice.

It seems to me that the rules of Golconde and the Ashram are also designed to help one reach a kind of “ruleless” internal state of being. This experience has to do with becoming more conscious and welcoming of liminality and permeability, which the building itself expresses in its spacial dimensions and its innovative use of concrete. In Golconde, one lives within the pressure-filled state of a threshold that is not fully closed yet not wholly open; not quite dark yet not entirely light; not completely “concrete” yet not exactly soft. My own experience of this was amplified by the precarious permission I had to stay in the Dormitory. Since I was perceived as a potential threat to the community by the Caretaker because I am a Western scholar doing research on the Integral Yoga, I was forced into another form of pressure where I was given a room, but I was not quite welcome. This liminal episode turned out to be the field for my own experiment in using opposition for growth, which included growth in knowledge of this community. I was stimulated to understand what motivated the Caretaker in his view of the Integral Yoga, and why did he and others quarrel with Western scholarship? I gained some insight into these issues, in fact, by analyzing a related cultural quarrel that characterized the construction phase of Golconde. I found that both quarrels shed light on each other.

By turning the focus on the construction phase, I was able to examine the “Ritual Context” of Golconde that choreographs one from “the supramental ark” that sails into the “Diamond-

Light” of “the Dawn.” I focused on the ritual context of what Jones calls “Propitiation,” which studies how the building *process* might be an offering to Ultimate Reality, which in this case, is personified by the Mother. I therefore examined the working relationships between the Mother and George Nakashima, her construction supervisor; between the Mother and Chandulal, one of the Ashram structural engineers; and finally between Nakashima and Chandulal, who worked intimately together on the construction site. If the Integral Yoga can be likened to the experience of a chrysalis, of trying to remain joyful and willing while offering one’s best in circumstances of great pressure, Nakashima and Chandulal demonstrate just how difficult this can be. In the diaries that each submitted to the Mother on the work they did for her at Golconde, we see how she silently, and sometimes with words, applied the “force of Consciousness” to invite each to sincerely face their own limitations, weaknesses, and ignorance, and then to try and surrender them to her. The younger, self-confident, experienced, critical, and well-educated American nature of Nakashima pressured the older, capable, sensitive, and devoted Indian nature of Chandulal, who felt inadequate and anxious about how others perceived him, given his lack of experience and training compared to others. Chandulal’s coping mechanisms sometimes sabotaged his working relationships and often challenged Nakashima’s authority. Nakashima used psychological and even physical “brutality” to exert his authority. The Mother did not interfere with these quarrels, as she says, “I am convinced that always both sides are in the wrong.” It seems to me that in pairing these two together, the Mother placed her students “in the dark” to awaken more intense aspiration for light. Given his personality, she stimulated Chandulal to be more like Nakashima and aspire to take more responsibility for his roles in life. Likewise, she stimulated Nakashima to be more like Chandulal to aspire for humility and willingness to align himself with her, given his personality. The Mother tried to shape each man’s sacred gaze in a more universal way.

Their different sacred gazes are culturally influenced. Chandulal's gift for devotion to the Mother represents an interior, spiritual gaze of consciousness. Nakashima's gift for physical mastery in architecture and project management that he put in service to the Mother represents an exterior, material way of seeing and behaving. The Mother used the creation of the Golconde Dormitory as a difficult experiment to reconcile these two sacred gazes to achieve her and her consort's goal, which has to do with first breaking cultural habits that privilege one's own proficiency and gaze over another's.

In 1949 Sri Aurobindo wrote "A Message to America" to his followers there in which he speaks about the habits of culture that might be released if seen from a more integral viewpoint. He writes,

There has been a tendency in some minds to dwell on the spirituality or mysticism of the East and the materialism of the West; but the West has had no less than the East in spiritual seeking and, though not in such profusion, its saints and sages and mystics, the East has had its materialistic tendencies, its material splendours, its similar or identical dealings with life and Matter and the world in which we live.⁸⁸

While each cultural hemisphere may have concentrated on the one above the other, even leading to mutual distrust and fear, he challenges both to imagine that "both [spiritual and material mastery] are truths and can be regarded as part of the intention of the Spirit in world-nature; they are not incompatible with each other: rather their divergence has to be healed and both have to be included and reconciled in our view of the future."⁸⁹ Sri Aurobindo wants his audience to imagine a consciousness above these dualities, which is "truth-consciousness as it is called in the Veda, a supermind, as I have termed it," with which we "could speak of a divine life on earth" where "East and West could be reconciled in the pursuit of the highest and largest ideal, Spirit embrace Matter

⁸⁸ Sri Aurobindo, "A Message to America," in *Autobiographical Notes and Other Writings of Historical Interest* (Pondicherry: SAAP, 2006), 551.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 552.

and Matter find its own true reality and the hidden Reality in all things in the Spirit.”⁹⁰ In support of this, the Mother says beauty joins spirit and matter: “In the physical world, of all things it is beauty that expresses best the Divine. The physical world is the world of form and the perfection of form is beauty.”⁹¹ As we have seen in her experiment to perfect the form of architecture and express the divine in matter, beauty is very hard work, for it demands at the same time an attempt to perfect the consciousness of the one’s involved, letting go of cultural biases.

The next and final chapter on the work of the Mother will focus on her efforts to create what she calls “the future painting.” This medium is personally significant to the Mother as she was a painter. Just as Sri Aurobindo tried to perfect the form of poetry as a means to perfect his consciousness, the Mother did the same with painting. As we have seen so far in each guru, their understanding is that the supramental world is a reconciliation of light and dark, masculine and feminine, spiritual and material mastery, and internal and external cultural gazes as exemplified by the United States and India. In the next chapter I will examine how this reconciliation has specific colors and forms that painting can express as sacrifices of beauty for growth in consciousness.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 553.

⁹¹ The Mother, *On Education*, 232.

Chapter Six

The Mother's Yoga: Creating the Future Artist

I saw them cross the twilight of an age,
The sun-eyed children of a marvellous dawn
—Sri Aurobindo¹

[My friend] and I used to go for our early morning walk
which was very pleasant. The sea crooned away at the foot
of the boulders. It was nice to see the dawn-light breaking
over the sea and spreading in the sky with gold-pink
glorious colours, the promise of a new day.
—Huta²

I. INTRODUCTION

Though the Mother rarely painted after she arrived in Pondicherry in 1920, she drew and collaborated with other painters until 1972, a year before she died. For those fifty-two years she aspired to use painting in the same way that Sri Aurobindo used poetry: as a means to perfect the basic consciousness (*citta*) and to see how far that growth could refine and even perfect the art form itself in the process.³ Sri Aurobindo writes of his process, “In fact *Savitri* has not been regarded by me as a poem to be written and finished, but as a field of experimentation to see how far poetry could be written from one’s own yogic consciousness and how that could be made creative.”⁴ Just as

¹ Sri Aurobindo, *Savitri*, 343.

² Huta, *The Story of a Soul 1956, Volume Two Part Two* (Pondicherry: SAAP, 2009), 8.

³ A publication just emerged by Clifford Gibson, *Sunil: The Mother's Musician* (Pondicherry: SAAP, 2014), which is a collection of letters between the Mother and her student Sunil, who she worked with to create what she says is “the ‘music of the future.’” (Back cover). One could study the ways in which the Mother’s Yoga endeavored in music as well as paint, since she was a musician who composed on the organ. Given the limitations of space and my lack of expertise in this area, we will not cover this important part of her spiritual aesthetics.

⁴ Sri Aurobindo, “Letters on ‘Savitri,’” in *Savitri* (Pondicherry: SAAP, 1995), 728.

Sri Aurobindo experimented with a “Future Poetry” in *Savitri* for this project, the Mother wanted “to express the Divine Light without shadow in the Future Painting.”⁵

Given the Mother’s role as a guru who actively administrated the complex and various activities of the entire Ashram, this project was not possible to physically complete on her own. She revealed to her chief painting collaborator, Savita “Huta” Hindocha (1931-2011) that “[h]ere in the Ashram I encouraged several people [in painting the ‘Future Painting’] before you were born but without avail. Now you will fulfill my wish. Since physically I have no time, I will use only your hands. Substantially the whole creation will be mine.”⁶ This “whole creation” by the Mother became a very large series of 472 oil paintings called *Meditations on Savitri*. She told Huta the goal of this painting project, “Yes, we are going towards a painting that will be able to express the supramental truth of things.”⁷ In another place she told Huta, “Child, the Lord wants you to do the new things—the new creation.”⁸ Huta describes the collaboration this way: “But really speaking, the paintings of the whole of *Savitri* are the Mother’s own creation, based not only on her series of visions but also on her own guiding sketches: they are a reflection of her own Yoga.”⁹ Given this collaboration, it is also possible that Huta herself, not just her artwork, is a reflection of the Mother’s own Yoga. Hence, not only was the Mother trying to create the future painting, but possibly also the future artist.

Like her method in creating sacred architecture, the Mother collaborated with many others in the Ashram to perfect the form of painting and the role of the artist. This is the same goal of Sri Aurobindo in poetry, which is to accomplish a “perfect perfection” in verse, something he mentions

⁵ Huta, “My *Savitri* Work with the Mother,” *Invocation* 12 (August 2001): 8.

⁶ Huta, *The Story of a Soul 1956, Volume Two Part Two* (Pondicherry: SAAP, 2009), 96.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ DVD jacket, *Pictures of Sri Aurobindo’s Poems*, directed by Huta, Pondicherry, India, Havyavāhana Trust, 1972.

⁹ Huta, “My *Savitri* Work with the Mother,” *Invocation* 13 (November 2001): 12.

ten times in his *Letters on Art and Poetry*. He writes, “The mark of this inevitability or perfect perfection is the saying of a thing that has to be said with such a felicity of phrase and rhythm that it seems as if it could not be better or otherwise said in the highest poetic way, it sounds final and irrevocable.”¹⁰ To explore this goal in painting, in this chapter I will compare two different Ashram painters to analyze the ways that the Mother worked with them to create what she thinks is a new artistic ideal of perfection based on the sacred gaze she wants them to value. We will also see how this particular spiritual teacher worked, amplifying the descriptions that we discussed in Chapter Four regarding Hindu or Hindu-influenced gurus. Finally, we will also see in a more specific way how the Mother taught the sacred gaze that is characteristic of the Integral Yoga: a non-sectarian way of seeing the unity of all life based on a descendant spiritual discipline.

II. THE MOTHER AND KRISHNALAL BHATT

The Mother encouraged many painters in the Ashram that I could compare with Huta. The editor of the work *The Mother: Paintings and Drawings*, writes that “[t]he Mother demonstrated the technique of oil painting to Barin, Sri Aurobindo’s brother, in the 1920’s, to Sanjiban in the 1930’s and to Huta in the 1950’s.”¹¹ There were also others, like Champaklal (1903-1992), who was the personal attendant to both the Mother and Sri Aurobindo.¹² Jayantilal Parekh (1913-1999) and Krishnalal Bhatt (1905-1990) were considered senior artists in the Ashram. They both used oil paint and were academically trained in the arts before joining the community in the early 1930s, and both worked closely with the Mother in their creative and personal growth. Along with all the previous artists that the Mother worked with, Krishnalal’s collaboration with the Mother is an important stage

¹⁰ Sri Aurobindo, *Letters on Art and Poetry* (Pondicherry: SAAP, 2004), 194.

¹¹ *The Mother: Paintings and Drawings* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Press), 173.

¹² See a website devoted to Champaklal’s work: <http://www.searchforlight.org/Srijan/srijan,Vol2no3/Srijan,paintings%20and%20drawings,champaklal,e-zine,Vol2no3,index.htm>; accessed March 3, 2016.

in her effort to create the future painting and the future artist. Further, because Huta influenced Krishnalal, as we will see, I will compare these two artists of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram.

1. Krishnalal's Paintings

Krishnalal was a Gujarati Vaishnava and as a young person he worshipped *Kṛṣṇa*, which inspired his early artwork and his philosophy of art. He also studied intermittently under Promode Kuman Chatterji and Nandulal Bose at Viśva-Bharati University in Bengal in the 1930s. He was married and became a freedom fighter in the Gandhian *swadeshi* movement. Krishnalal eventually left his family and career as an artist, art teacher, and freedom fighter for the Ashram in 1933 and immediately began to seek guidance from the Mother about his artwork. He painted many subjects including nature scenes, flowers, and animals. He often had symbolic dreams and even spiritual visions that he described to the Gurus. He would sometimes paint these visions for them to critique.

Krishnalal is known in the Ashram for having a more refined understanding of the plant kingdom and natural world than human anatomy and the human character (See Figure 6.1). Jayantilal writes that from “the body of his paintings of visionary themes, however, only a few are successful, while his figure drawings lack inner life and are stereotyped.”¹³ The Mother and Sri Aurobindo critiqued his early figurative work in a similar fashion yet connected this to his spiritual growth. Sri Aurobindo writes to Krishnalal in 1934 after he first arrived to the Ashram:

Your relation with Nature has been much more psychic than your relation with human beings. You must have met the latter mainly in the vital plane and not come in close contact with the eternal Beauty behind. In Nature you have felt the touch of the eternal and infinite and entered therefore into a true relation with her.

The influence that comes in the human figure is a force of disharmony and ugliness—a manifestation of ignorance in form.¹⁴

¹³ S.V. Bhatt, “Painting as Sadhana,” *Mother India* (January 2006): 32.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, (March 2006): 200.



Figure 6.1. *Krishna's Ananda* (the Mother's name for the flower Cape Leadwort or *Plumbago auricular*), Krishnalal, 1957, Pondicherry, India.

Though this art critique is quite blunt, compared to his renderings of nature, Krishnalal's early figurative work does seem to lack an aspiration for the "eternal Beauty" (See Figures 6.2–6.3). To me, this "ignorance in form" might be seen in his awkward renderings of the limbs and bodily proportions, overall graceless gesture of the figure, and mostly a blank feeling or even melancholy in the face. The figures express a *tamasic* resignation that pulls consciousness down in the viewing.¹⁵

What about his later figurative work? In the early 1980s, a few years before Krishnalal passed away, in weak health and using a medium that was new to him (acrylic paint), he painted a mural for the Golconde Dormitory entitled *Mother Extending Her Blessings* (See Figure 6.4). The Mother originally envisioned a mural with this theme in the 1930s and 40s when the building was made,

¹⁵ *Tamas* is one of the three *gūṇas* (qualities or attributes) described in *Saṃkhya* philosophy, which is the principle of inertia, indolence, obscurity, and inactivity found in nature (*prakṛti*).



Figure 6.2. *Dozing Shepherd*, Krishnalal, 1932, Pondicherry, India.



Figure 6.3. *Wood Cutter*, Krishnalal, 1926-27, Pondicherry, India.

which François Sammer worked on, but it was not realized at that time. Krishnalal's figure of the Mother in the mural is somewhat imprecise compared to the others in the scene. The two things that mark her form as special are her size, as she is painted in a much larger scale compared to all the other figures, and her dais of flowers, which elevates her above everyone and everything else. Otherwise she does not inspire a prolonged gaze in my view. The figures that are worshipping the Mother in the painting carry a certain intense level of aspiration in their devotion to the Mother, however. Had they seen this work, would the Mother and Sri Aurobindo have said "a force of disharmony and ugliness" is in this figure of the Mother or that it was "a manifestation in ignorance in form"? I doubt this, as it is painted in a way more closely related to how Huta painted under the Mother's direction. The Mother had Huta use a much lighter, pastel palette of saturated colors with



Figure 6.4. Golconde Mural, *Mother Extending Her Blessings*, Krishnalal, 1984 at the entrance of the building, Pondicherry, India. 9.5 x 24 ft. Acrylic on marine plyboard. Photo by Sanjay Dhar.

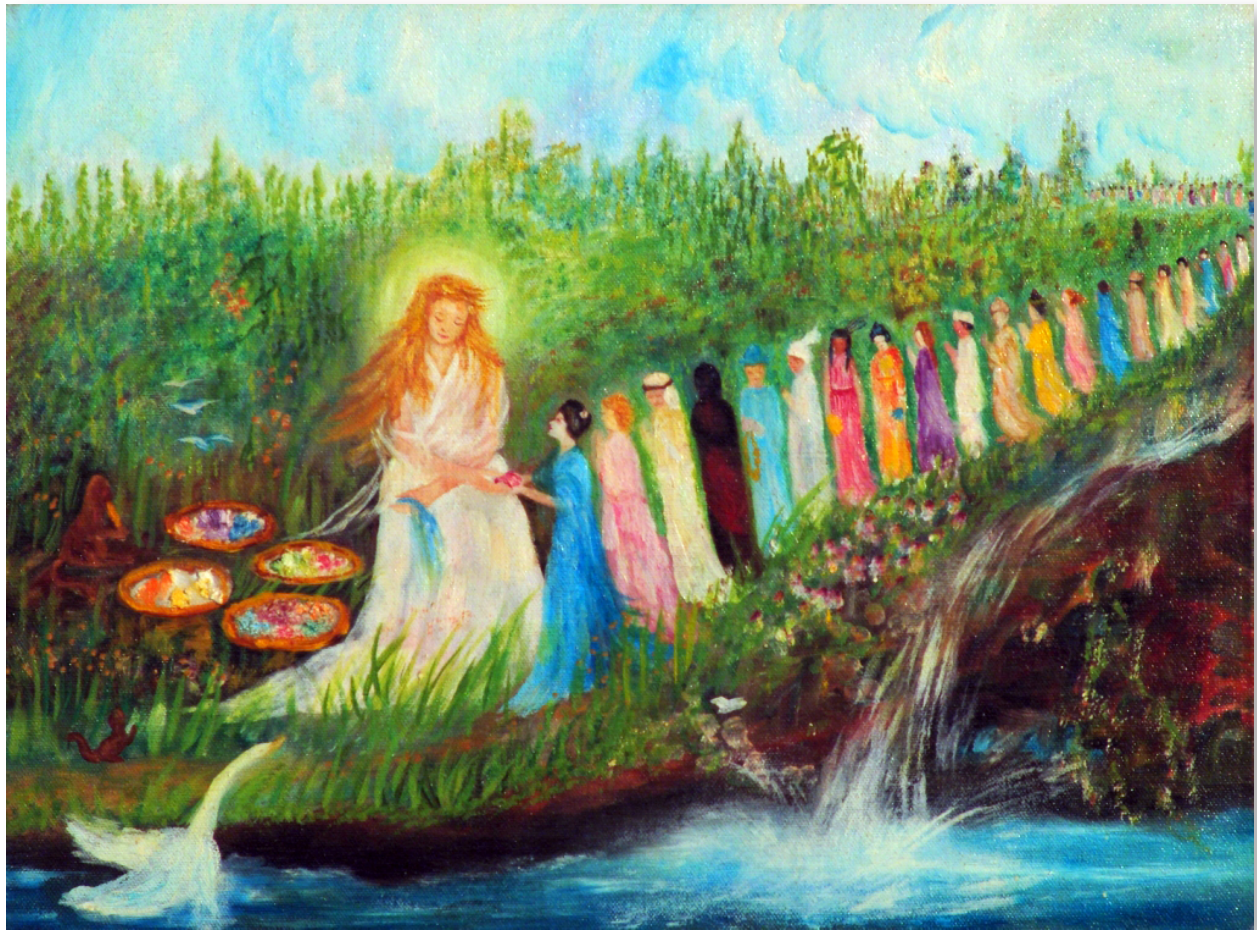


Figure 6.5. *Bande Mataram*, Huta. Oil on board. Photo by the Havyavāhana Trust, used with permission.

a kind of buoyancy in the human form, which Krishnalal's figures in the mural seem to share. We can see this in Huta's painting "Bande Mataram," which shows a divine mother figure handing out flowers to people of different races, much like Krishnalal's version (See Figure 6.5 above). Huta's painted faces and figures are not rendered realistically, but impressionistically, expressing a kindhearted devotion to the divine mother figure. The spirit of their aspiration comes forward more than Huta's technical skill in rendering the human form, however. Similarly, in the Golconde mural, there is a greater sense of lightness in Krishnalal's figures compared to his early work, even if he was not able to use the acrylics to their best effect. The faces of the ashramites behind the Mother, for instance, express a peaceful joy that his earlier work does not (See Figure 6.6).

We know that the Mother and Sri Aurobindo critiqued an earlier attempt Krishnalal made to render the Mother, which is now lost.¹⁶ In 1933, he made a drawing of the Mother that he asked her to consider. Sri Aurobindo wrote back to him saying that the eyes, nose, and mouth were not positioned correctly which made her look other than herself, and further, to him the overall "inner" character was not in keeping with the Mother's character. Sri Aurobindo writes "there is something introduced here from the vital world—undivine—which is not part of the Mother's vital. It has come in through that Influence of which the Mother spoke—it throws its own shadow and so changes the inner vision of the thing to be done, the face to be portrayed."¹⁷

Krishnalal later painted an image of Sri Aurobindo called "The Golden Purusha" that seems to show an improvement according to the Gurus' standards. Instead of "disharmony and ugliness," there seems to be a certain level of harmony and beauty in this image, a sense of union with the eternal presence of beauty (See Figure 6.7). The image has some interior feeling of emotional depth and stillness in the face with its trancelike inward-turned gaze. It seems also to have satisfied the

¹⁶ According to Samata Bhatt (a relation of Krishnalal) in the Ashram Art Studio, Krishnalal seems to have thrown this early sketch of the Mother away, given that the Mother and Sri Aurobindo found it to be a failure.

¹⁷ S.V. Bhatt, "Painting as Sadhana," *Mother India* (January 2006): 8.

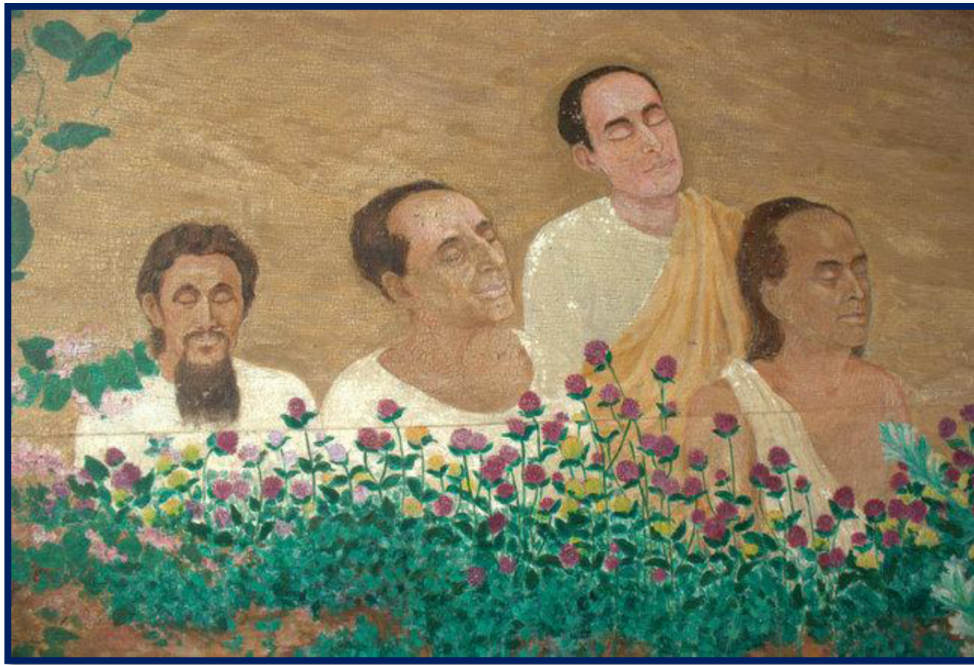


Figure 6.6. Golconde Mural *Mother Extending Her Blessings* by Krishnalal, detail of deceased members of the Ashram at the time of the painting, located behind the Mother. Chandulal Shah, the Ashram engineer we discussed last chapter is depicted to the far left. Photo by Sanjay Dhar.

Mother's taste for capturing the "psychic" qualities and not the vital, since she had it reproduced and used as a card for her other students. Sri Aurobindo said of it, "It gives the impression of the power of the expressed consciousness caught from the unexpressed (and, therefore, apparently dark) Supreme."¹⁸ As I look on it, this face expresses a deeply interior gaze of meditation as the eyes roll back and the head disappears into or emerges from a cloud. The face of this Purusha is also made of dawn colors, the kinds that are related to the palette of Huta. The theme of the dawn is, of course, the central symbol in *Savitri*, and as we saw last chapter, a way to speak about the way divinity is commemorated by the Golconde Dormitory.

2. *Painting and Growth of Consciousness*

¹⁸ Email from Samata at the Ashram Art Studio to the author, November 25, 2015.



Mastering the human form was difficult for Krishnalal, though he persevered in its study. In

Figure 6.7. *The Golden Purusha*, Krishnalal, 1934, Pondicherry, India.

1934, he wrote to the Mother that the “human figures that I draw are not expressive, on the contrary they open the way for evil influence. It is like that from the very beginning.”¹⁹ In 1935, Krishnalal asked Sri Aurobindo if he could use a live model. The Yogi approved but directed Krishnalal to find his own creative technique in studying the model, and most importantly, “what you must find is a way to express the psychic instead of the vital. At present it is the vital you bring out. The psychic is the eternal character, the vital brings out only transient movements.”²⁰

How does one express in art the psychic and avoid bringing out only the vital? In this case, Krishnalal’s experiments in art school and those made when he first arrived at the Ashram revealed

¹⁹ S.V. Bhatt, “Painting as Sadhana,” *Mother India* (March 2006): 200.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, (September 2006): 736.

his own vital attachments. The challenge was then to somehow further reveal what this vital nature hid: his own “eternal character,” his own aspiration for the divine and express *that* in the painting as well as in life. We get a glimpse of this struggle in the following set of correspondence with the Gurus. Krishnalal writes,

Now-a-days I am trying to reject the unquiet ideas and impulses due to which I am disagreeable sometimes with others. In doing it I find that I am successful, I get Mother's presence and quiet and am much relieved from the disturbed condition. But that lasts for three, four days and again the former condition comes—perhaps in the same intensity and it lasts also for some days and again I am quiet and in Mother's presence.

I would request Mother to explain to me where I may be wrong. Why I get the disturbance after having Mother's presence and quiet? ...

Sri Aurobindo: ... When one tries to change something in the vital, then, due to the nature's habit of persisting in a movement to which it has been accustomed, there is usually an alternation like this; the new condition persists for some days, then the old forces its way for some time to the surface. If one persists, the old movement begins to lose its force and die out and the new permanently replaces it.²¹

As I see it, Sri Aurobindo here briefly explains the dynamic of spiritual growth in the Yoga. The Mother's “presence and quiet” awoke Krishnalal's awareness to a new potential within himself, in this case, an ability to be agreeable with others in a sincere way that was not yet stabilized. His habitual way of being, motivated by “unquiet ideas and impulses,” now became an “old” way of being; something weak, limited, or ignorant in comparison with the new potential. Even though he made a choice to reject this old pattern, it eventually rose up to fight for survival. According to Sri Aurobindo, it is “nature's habit” to protect, maintain, and fight off the new potential for progress that Krishnalal saw in the light of the Mother's presence and quiet. Paradoxically, the arousal of weaknesses, limitations, or errors in the Mother's presence is not cause for alarm in the Integral Yoga, but an indication that it is beginning to function. So too, the explicit expression of the vital in his art when painting the human form is not a cause for alarm in his creativity, but the necessary first

²¹ Ibid., (October 2006): 829.

step in revealing what nature hides. First, the vital opposition is *exposed* in the creative attempt to express beauty. Next, the psychic being may be *revealed*, if one can persist in transforming the vital opposition.

One may ask, from the outside looking in, how were the Mother's students certain that *she* always embodied the "new" or the psychic, and that the student's habitual movements embodied the "old" or the vital nature? I would suggest that it is a question of faith, trust, and obedience earned through experience. In reading different accounts of *sādhaks* relations with their gurus and speaking with current ones, it seems that the experience of the student is the final authority in this matter, in that the proof of the value of the Guru's guidance and authenticity is in what the student experiences (or not) as an expansion in their life and welfare. If the Guru's guidance and presence leads to greater fulfillment in the student's life according to the reckoning of the student, greater trust and surrender will be given. If the student does not experience positive expansion, understandably, surrender will not be given.

In Krishnalal's case, trust in the Mother and Sri Aurobindo was strengthened. Many decades later, Krishnalal looked back at his life and writes,

I managed to accept the new lifestyle of the Ashram within, but to bring out its influence in my art took a long time. The *sanskaras* ["impressions" of the lower nature left by past experience and past lifetimes that are thought to veil the soul], thoughts, techniques, etc. with which I begun my training had established themselves inside and kept swallowing up whatever new things were coming in. How much of an obstacle the narrow viewpoints and methods one has learned can then become, can be known only by one who has to go through this experience. Things that had made a home in my nature refused to leave. But under the influence of the new Force, it has been finally possible, and my pictures have, thanks to it, acquired a new element.²²

Krishnalal's aspiration to win this "new element" in his later works demonstrates the central theme of this Yoga and its aesthetic theory: spiritual growth is achieved through processes of opposition between the lower nature, which is experienced as "narrow," "old," and "unwilling to change," with

²² Ibid., (January 2006) 31.

the higher force of the divine embodied by the guru and her consciousness, which is experienced as “broad, new, and supple,” we might say. The “old movement” of the vital nature, which at first seems to leave when one makes a commitment to reject it, comes back even stronger than before; and the “new” one, which has yet to be proven, must battle the old in a consistent way until “the old movement begins to lose its force and die out and the new permanently replaces it.”

Staying within the Dawn experience, between dark and light, the old and the new, the vital and the psychic seems to be waged in the small details of one’s life, details like capturing the true inner and outer character of aspiration in one’s subject matter in art. Sri Aurobindo wrote to Krishnalal about this and said, “In Yoga what may seem to the mind a detail may yet open the door to things that have strong effects on the consciousness, disturb its harmony or interfere with the sources of inspiration, vision and experience.”²³ The Mother, in one of her early “meditations” to God from 1912 wrote about the same idea,

So long as one element of the being, one movement of the thought is still subjected to outside influences, not solely under Thine, it cannot be said that the true Union is realised; there is still the horrible mixture without order and light,—for that element, that movement is a world, a world of disorder and darkness, as is the entire earth in the material world, as is the material world in the entire universe.²⁴

For the Mother, the arts are valuable to the Integral Yoga because they can identify and uncover these small elements or details that potentially block one’s progress. They can also unveil a new element of aspiration in one’s heart to free the obstacle. Whether “old” or “new,” of the psychic or the vital, these elements indeed are whole worlds, whose gravity pulls the rest of the artwork into a chaotic interference of intent and formal relationships, or choreographs the composition toward a unifying center, potentially nourishing a more harmonious life in the viewer. In his experience, Krishnalal tried to unlearn the vital influences from his art education so that he

²³ Ibid., (March 2006): 198.

²⁴ The Mother, *Prayers and Meditations* (Pondicherry: SAAP, 2003), 8.

might be free to express the psychic in his art and in life. Huta, on the other hand, came as a completely untrained artist, which was an asset in this case. However, she had other struggles, as we will see, that became her opportunities for progress.

III. THE MOTHER AND HER WORK WITH HUTA

When one compares Krishnalal's artistic development with Huta's, we can see that this older, more experienced, and more educated painter moved towards her style, color palette, facial features, and figure types, and not vice versa. Huta confirms this when she writes, "Here I may recall that Krishnalal and Jayantilal used to come to my studio to see how I mixed various colours to make pictures according to the Mother's guidance. Much later Krishnalal remarked, 'Huta, it took me a long time to adopt your style and technique.' I marveled at his modesty."²⁵ In fact, most people in the Ashram did not typically view Huta's work with high regard. In the words of Shraddhavan, who cares for Huta's paintings at Savitri Bhavan in Auroville where they are currently housed, "Many felt that the Mother was using this method to work with an individual who had a particularly difficult psychological formation, and that the outputs were mediocre and of a very secondary importance."²⁶

However, it was the untrained, untalented artist, with "a particularly difficult psychological formation" that the Mother said "fulfilled her wish" of being a pliable medium of consciousness to

²⁵ Huta, *The Story of a Soul 1956, Volume Two Part Two*, 96.

²⁶ Email from Shraddhavan to me, November 7, 2014. As Huta's work became important to my research only after I returned from India in 2013, I feel that I need to return to Pondicherry to gather more data to accurately characterize the reception of her paintings in the Ashram community today. It is clear that there are those in the Ashram who do not value her work as Huta would have liked. I am not yet sure why this is so beyond their "mediocre" quality. I currently have an incomplete picture partially based on emails from those who care for her paintings in the Savitri Bhavan in Auroville. They value the work in very special ways, while the Ashram Art Studio, which would have been the obvious place to hold, care, and display them, seems to hold a different view. As we will see below, Huta's diaries and the editor of *The Mother: Paintings and Drawings* of the Mother also hint at this difference of opinion since they disagree about the Mother's degree of involvement in their creation.

create her future painting. The Mother later writes, “Huta is the painter.”²⁷ As a comparison, in another place the Mother also declared, “Champaklal is an artist.”²⁸ The definite article in Huta’s case carries more weight than the indefinite article in Champaklal’s, elevating Huta as an ideal. This statement seems to be the Mother’s attempt to communicate to the Ashram Huta’s unique role for the Guru’s yogic work in the visual arts.

It is not entirely clear from Huta’s writings, but her family somehow had ties to the Sri Aurobindo Ashram. She writes that disciples of the Ashram used to visit her home in Africa on occasion. Huta, a name the Mother gave her, which means “the offered one,” came from a wealthy Indian Vaishnava family in Kenya, who owned many sugar mills. As a young person, she traveled to many parts of the world, including Europe, the Middle East, and Asia. Eventually her family arranged her marriage to a man in Bombay, against Huta’s will to stay single.

Although she married, Huta resolved to leave her husband and join the Sri Aurobindo Ashram. When she met the Mother in 1954 for the first time, Huta writes,

I looked at her. It was as if our souls embraced. So deep, so intimate was our meeting that I realized instantly that here was the *One* I had been seeking since childhood, the *One* who could help me, that here was *She* who could release me from the dreadful confusion in which I had been struggling all those years. Then my inner being murmured, “Yes, this is the *Truth* and *Love* I have been seeking and aspiring for.”²⁹

Without telling anyone, Huta left her home permanently a few months later in 1955 at the age of twenty-three. Her family pursued her with the aim to reunite her with her husband, but Huta remained firm. Eventually, the family supported her decision, and even sent her money to begin her new life there, as many of them recognized the Mother’s spiritual status. Her husband even agreed to a divorce. The initial euphoria of being with the Mother, however, was soon spent as she found

²⁷ *The Story of a Soul 1956, Volume Two Part Two*, 98. This was first published in *Meditations on Savitri, Volume 3*.

²⁸ <http://www.searchforlight.org/Srijan/srijan,Vol2no3/Srijan,paintings%20and%20drawings,champaklal,e-zine,Vol2no3,index.htm>; accessed March 3, 2016.

²⁹ Huta, *The Story of a Soul, 1954-1955, Volume One*, 15.

that interior “dreadful confusion” only increased in the exposing environment of the Ashram, even as the intense support and guidance that the Mother provided kept pace with it. Huta writes of this time, “I found everything around me dark, depressing, strange, startling, crushing. My struggle had begun.”³⁰

1. Huta's Transition into Her New Life

Huta harbored many doubts in being able to achieve any progress in the Yoga; she missed her family, endured physical ailments, had thoughts of leaving the Ashram and even suicide, and felt many negative emotions with her fellow ashramites. According to the diary material, the Mother focused Huta's consciousness away from these struggles in many interesting ways by training her gaze to be increasingly more universal, inclusive, generous, and sensitive to the physical world. Firstly, Huta notes that the Mother sent her cards and flowers every day, with a message of encouragement to pique her aspiration for spiritual progress. Most often the Mother sent her a white rose, which she named “Integral love for the Divine,” commenting that it's “Pure, complete, irrevocable, a love that gives itself for ever.”³¹ She also invited Huta almost every evening at the beginning of her stay in the Ashram to hear her talks and to meditate privately and silently with her. Huta did not know any methods of meditation and the Mother did not verbally instruct her, however Huta enjoyed relaxing in the Mother's presence and beholding her face. The Mother called these encounters “daily concentrations.” One might say it was a private *darśan* program in which Huta beheld her guru with loving worship.

The Mother also distracted Huta from her struggles by inviting her to work on creative projects and to learn to take care of physical items in the Mother's apartment. Since Huta liked to

³⁰ Ibid., 36.

³¹ The Mother, *The Spiritual Significance of Flowers, Part 1*, 49.

sew, they would exchange clothing with one another, like handmade saris. Huta also did embroidery, notably a picture of a ship that the Mother asked to be placed in Sri Aurobindo's apartment. The supramental ship that the Mother saw in visions seems tied to this embroidered image, teaching Huta to share her vision of the supramental transformation. Further, the Mother also had Huta clean her cupboards, which were filled with valuable carvings and miniatures. This terrified Huta since these items were so fragile and precious, but she did well and the Mother gave her the "Skill in work" flower when she finished. Huta mused that "[p]erhaps it was because she wanted my hands to be steady and full of consciousness and to handle the most fragile things. She also wanted my mind to be concentrated, stable and keen."³²

As this episode demonstrates, the Mother's continual gifts of flowers to Huta sometimes marked the achievement of growth that she recognized in Huta at that moment. Sometimes Huta was aware of this achievement, yet often enough she was unaware of any progress. Once the Mother gave Huta a card with red flowers that Krishnalal painted called "Matter consenting to be spiritualized." The Mother writes in the card: "Is it not good? We are going fast towards it." Huta writes in her journal, "I was not conscious of my heading fast towards anything. What I really felt was that physically I was unwell—often the nervous tension made things worse. I was frequently in bed—exhausted, weak, pale, unable to stir as if the life-breath had left my body."³³

Huta's internal struggles continued and turned outward as she began to feel hatred for everyone around her, and eventually expressed these feelings to others. The Mother scolded her one evening for this, "I will love you if you love the whole humanity and turn to the earth. Do you understand what I mean?"³⁴ Huta ran away without answering and she wrote, "Now I started hating

³² *The Story of a Soul, 1956, Volume Two Part Two*, 130.

³³ *Ibid.*, 157.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 62.

the Mother.”³⁵ As a corrective to this temptation to give voice to feelings of hatred, the Mother counseled her to learn the virtue of generosity. She later gave Huta a bouquet of *balsamic* flowers, what the Mother simply called “Generosity.”

As their relationship deepened, the Mother increasingly took opportunities to “scold” Huta, as she described it. The Mother assured her that “[o]f one thing you can be sure, if I was not certain that you will reach your goal, I would never scold you, because it would be useless. My scolding is a proof of my conviction that you will succeed.”³⁶ Though she did not think so at first, Huta eventually understood that these scoldings were not personal attacks by the Mother, but helpful stimulations for her growth. She writes, “The Mother speaks or writes much more pointedly and sharply to those whom she wishes to push rapidly on the way because they are capable of it, and they do not resent or suffer but are glad of the pressure and the plainness because they know by experience that it helps them to see their obstacles and change.”³⁷

2. *Revealing Huta's New Identity in the Visual Culture of Dolls*

The Mother also invited Huta to collaborate on another important project of personal and collective visual piety: a doll festival. *Bomma Kolu* is a traditional south Indian doll festival that may have influenced the Mother.³⁸ It is celebrated sometime between September and October for nine days. Young girls and women display dolls of the goddesses in their homes. Similarly, under the Mother's direction, Huta made dolls of gods and goddesses to be included in an exhibition called “Dolls Sacred and Profane” that the Mother designed as part of the *Darsan* celebrations 25-30 November 1956 (See Figures 6.8-6.10). Jayantilal also participated in this by building a small temple

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid., 46.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bommala_Koluvu; accessed March 3, 2016.



Figure 6.8. Part of the exhibit “Dolls Sacred and Profane” that the Mother designed as part of the *Darśan* celebrations 25-30 November 1956. Photo obtained from the Havyavāvahana Trust and used with their permission.



Figure 6.9. The tiered display of the gods and goddesses made by Jayantilal and Huta. Photo obtained from the Havyavāvahana Trust and used with their permission.



Figure 6.10. The dolls of *Kṛṣṇa* and *Rādhā*. Photo obtained from the Havyavāvahana Trust and used with their permission.

for them, which had many tiers for each level of the court. The Mother asked Huta to sew clothing and paint these dolls, which familiarized her with oil paints. She made many dolls: each of the four personalities of the Divine Mother that Sri Aurobindo wrote about in his book *The Mother*; one of the Supreme Mother herself, a doll of *Śiva*, *Viṣṇu*, Buddha, *Gaṇapati*, *Kṛṣṇa* and *Rādhā*, among others. In her diary, Huta quotes Sri Aurobindo as a way to explain to herself the purpose of this project, “The soul of man is a world full of beings, a kingdom in which armies clash to help or hinder a supreme conquest, a house where the gods are our guests and which the demons strive to possess; the fullness of its energies and wideness of its being make a seat of sacrifice spread, arranged and purified for a celestial session.”³⁹

In terms of visual culture, the Mother seemed to use the creative process and the dolls as a way for Huta to share the Mother’s view of the divine. Further, making and displaying the dolls seems to have been a way for Huta to associate them with the Mother and Sri Aurobindo, but more importantly, with Huta’s own spiritual potentials. As Huta was going through the difficult process of changing or dissolving her former identities of daughter, sister, and wife in Kenya and Bombay, this doll display hints at a new identity of being a child of her guru. The Mother told Huta only three days before she completed all the dolls, “You are my adopted child, I have adopted you, and I like to take care of you.”⁴⁰ In fact, that very day, the Mother showed her a new house that she wanted Huta to have after it was renovated. The Mother called it “Huta House.”⁴¹

The Mother further emphasized Huta’s divine potential a few days later during one of their meditations or “concentrations” together. After some time with their eyes closed, the Mother then opened them and drew a picture of what she said was “Huta’s heart” (See Figure 6.11). The Mother told her that during the meditation, “I saw your heart. The outer parts are golden like a sun and pale

³⁹ Sri Aurobindo, *Hymns to the Mystic Fire* (Pondicherry: SAAP, 1972), 34.

⁴⁰ *The Story of a Soul 1956, Volume Two Part Two*, 138.

⁴¹ Huta moved in two years later in 1958.

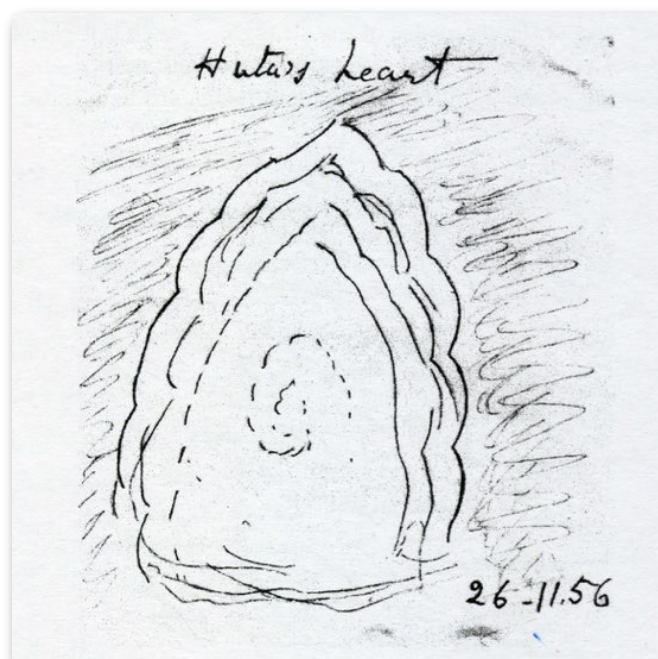


Figure 6.11. Drawing by the Mother of “Huta’s heart.”

pink. In the center there is a white light with a white flame.”⁴² This description is very close to the colors of a sunrise, which relates this vision to the symbol Dawn (See Figure 6.12). As discussed in Chapter Three, the heart (*hṛd*) is traditionally the seat of feelings and emotion in the *Vedas*, and in the understanding of the Integral Yoga, the psychic being is hidden behind this. The heart is therefore a door to the psychic being in this practice and when “opened,” they join. The image that the Mother drew, a sort of disembodied soul shining out through the heart shaped like a *mihrab* (the niche in a mosque that faces Mecca), is more Muslim than Hindu. Unlike the doll exhibit, there are no gods or goddesses in this drawing. What is left is an image of a solitary flame within a niche made of light, rather like the image of divine light in the Quran, “God is the Light of the heavens and the earth: the likeness of His light is as a niche wherein is a lamp (the lamp in a glass, the glass as it were a glittering star) kindled from a Blessed Tree, an olive that is neither of the East nor of the

⁴²*The Story of a Soul 1956, Volume Two Part Two*, 178.



Figure 6.12. Photo of the sunrise in Pondicherry overlooking the Bay of Bengal, <http://photography.worth1000.com/entries/619501/surya-namaskar>; accessed March 3, 2016.

West, whose oil well nigh would shine, even if no fire touched it; Light upon Light; (God guides to His Light whom He will).”⁴³

Not only in the creation of the doll exhibit, but in its dismantling, the Mother invited Huta into her visual regime. After the exhibition was finished, Huta went to collect the dolls. Even though she felt she was being careful and conscious as she was trained in cleaning the Mother’s cupboards, the *Rādhā* doll fell to the floor and it broke (See Figure 6.10 above for the doll before it fell).

Distressed, she told the Mother, who then asked her what time it happened. The Mother revealed to Huta that at that very moment, she had a vision of *Rādhā* battling “evil forces who were coming in

⁴³ *The Koran Interpreted*, trans. A.J. Arberry (New York: George Allen and Unwin, Ltd., 1955), Sura 24:35. Online edition: <https://archive.org/stream/QuranAJArberry/Quran-A%20J%20Arberry#page/n213/mode/2up>; accessed March 3, 2016.

torrents to throw the Divine's love out from this world." She continues, "The whole episode of the image of Radha is symbolic and answers to a truth. You need not be sad about the matter, on the contrary it is *very good* that you became an instrument."⁴⁴ Huta interprets this episode in light of Sri Aurobindo,

The desire of the soul for God is there thrown into symbolic figure in the lyrical love cycle of Radha and Krishna, the Nature soul in man seeking for the Divine Soul through love, seized and mastered by his beauty, attracted by his magical flute, abandoning human cares and duties for this one overpowering passion and in the cadence of its phases passing through first desire to the bliss of union, the pangs of separation, the eternal longing and reunion, the *līlā* of the love of the human spirit for God.⁴⁵

Huta seems to think that she participated in an important spiritual battle in breaking the doll, helping to strengthen the soul's desire for God as symbolized by *Rādhā*. It must have also strengthened the view that the Mother is *Rādhā* come again, and Sri Aurobindo, *Kṛṣṇa*.

3. *Creating the Future Painting*

A. *Huta's Training*

On December 4, 1956, the year of the first "Golden Day" or descent of the supermind in creation, the Mother started preparing Huta for her work on the *Savitri* paintings by first showing her how to paint flowers with oils. The Mother told her that she did not want her to study with anyone else. This training was not only about painting techniques, but about shaping her way of seeing, what she later called "inner vision" of the universal presence of Truth in all of creation. Huta almost jeopardized this at first when she impatiently wanted to learn techniques like perspective and use of color, which she thought would be the foundation for the Mother's painting. The Mother told Huta that she could take lessons from Jayantilal, who was capable of teaching these

⁴⁴ Huta, *The Story of a Soul 1956, Volume Two Part Two*, 188.

⁴⁵ Sri Aurobindo, "Indian Literature," in *The Renaissance and Other Essays on Indian Culture* (Pondicherry: SAAP,), 379.

skills. Huta realized her mistake and said she wanted only the Mother to teach her. In response, the Mother writes that the foundation in painting is not technique, but “growth of consciousness.” She tells Huta,

All the beauty and charm [created in a painting] depend on how you develop your consciousness. With the growth of consciousness, hands and eyes become sharp and skillful, they recognize exactly what can be done in oil painting. Automatically and spontaneously the thing takes shape and becomes vivid and full of radiant vibrations. ... You will learn painting according to my will and vision.⁴⁶

For the Mother, not only must the “inner being” grow in consciousness, but also the “outer being,” or the body. She writes that the growth of each may diverge slightly in ordinary life, but in the Yoga, a disequilibrium may become very acute since the inner being tends to move more rapidly than the body as to risk physical illness or even death. Therefore, training the body to hold as much consciousness as the inner being becomes very important.⁴⁷ The Mother began Huta’s training with these words: “Now let us meditate quietly on the physical body which is to be transformed by the Supramental Light.”⁴⁸ The Mother herself, in fact, first learned about the hands becoming more conscious in her apprenticeship with painting and music. “Well, it is impossible to learn piano or painting unless the consciousness enters into the hand and the hand becomes conscious independently of the head. The head can be busy elsewhere, that has no importance.”⁴⁹

As we have seen in previous chapters in both the writings of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, *dr̥ṣṭi* or “inner vision” is what has utmost importance for spiritual growth in this Yoga. This inner vision might be another way of talking about higher consciousness and it replaces the “head.” According to the Mother it is a vision that potentially resides in all parts of the body, not just the eyes. To avoid blocking this residence of consciousness in the body, the Mother said to Huta,

⁴⁶ Huta, *The Story of a Soul 1956, Volume Two Part Two*, 210.

⁴⁷ See The Mother *Questions and Answers 1929-1931* (Pondicherry: SAAP, 2003), 85-91.

⁴⁸ Huta, *The Story of a Soul 1956, Volume Two Part Two*, 211.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

In the Future Painting, you must not copy blindly the outer appearance without the inner vision. Never let people's ideas influence your mind and impose their advice about the Future Painting. Do not try to adopt the technique either of modern art or of old classical art. But always try to express the true inner vision of your soul and its deep impression behind everything to bring out the Eternal Truth and to express the glory of the Higher Worlds.⁵⁰

The Mother's direction to try and express the inner vision of the soul seems connected to her drawing of Huta's heart, which is the Mother's image of the soul shining out from Huta's heart. More universally it has to do with what the Mother considers to be the divine hidden within all of creation. It is not limited to any period of art history or culture in terms of its expression, so to copy and limit it to one cultural form of excellence in trying to express it would be too exclusive. The Mother says to her, "Truth is behind everything. For the Divine dwells in flowers, trees, animals, birds, and rivers as well as human beings—in fact in every creation of Nature."⁵¹

B. Some Characteristics of the Future Painting

The Mother describes Huta's heart in terms of light composed of colors like the dawn that proceed from transparent white to gold to pale golden pink. Related to these colors, the Mother said to Huta in 1956, "I think of expressing [the Higher Worlds] in painting by various colors—blues, golds, pinks and whites—with certain vibrations of Light—all in harmony forming the New World. I wish to bring down upon earth this New World. Since I have no time physically, I will paint through you."⁵² This experiment in the future painting is the Mother's way of helping the physical world adopt the new creation, by painting it into being using the palette of color that exists in the dawn and in the Mother's visions. Later in 1970, she says in *The Mother's Agenda* that this adoption of the new creation is finally happening in earnest. She notes that she can see not just its colors, but

⁵⁰ Huta, "My *Savitri* Work with the Mother," *Invocation* 12 (August 2001), 8-9.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 13.

also its form, which she describes in terms of fabric or clothing. She writes, “It’s the MATERIAL Nature, ...and she said, ‘I’ve put on the dress, I’ve put on YOUR dress – I’ve put on your dress to tell you that I’ve adopted it.’ It means that material Nature has adopted the new creation.”⁵³ Though the Mother described this in 1970, it would seem that Huta participated in the Mother’s experience of it in 1956: the physical world adopting the “dress” of the new creation fashioned with the colors of the dawn and the heart transparent to the soul.

There is a certain conventional logic to the Mother’s inner vision of the colors of the new creation. The Mother describes the supramental world as increasingly lighter blends of gold. (“Above” this world, the realm of *Brahman*, it is increasingly white and finally transparent like a diamond at its core). When the supramental realm is combined with the physical world, which she says is symbolized by the color red, the result is a kind of bronzy, golden orange or golden pink color, which would indeed be the case if one mixed gold, white, and red pigment, depending on their intensity. The Mother describes supramentalized matter in both ways, but pink-gold more often. In describing the kind of painting that she wanted Huta to do, she trained her gaze to value these colors, white being the most important, which creates pastels when mixed with other hues: “I want you to do something new. You must try to do the Future Painting in the New Light. There is a reason why I ask you to paint mostly on a white background. It is an attempt to express the Divine Light without shadow in the Future Painting.”⁵⁴ For the Mother, this Divine Light has particular color, but also behavior. As Huta writes, the Mother “put stress on ‘White Light without shadow.’ It is the vibration of Light which alone can give life and color to every scene painting.”⁵⁵ It is “without shadow,” which may mean that the light source is not exterior, but interior, causing forms to glow

⁵³ The Mother, *The Mother’s Agenda XI* (Paris: Institute de Recherches Évolutives, 1981), May 9, 1970.

⁵⁴ Huta, “My *Savitri* Work with the Mother,” *Invocation* 12 (August, 2001): 8.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 10.

from within. This seems to be a special pure light indeed, which illuminates all sides of a thing, such that the thing is self-luminous.

In fact, the characteristics of this light and its colors also characterize the supramental bodies that the Mother saw in what she called “the subtle physical” realm, which is a kind of hybrid place that bridges the supramental to the physical. When describing Sri Aurobindo’s supramental body in this realm in the 1960s, she says,

His color is a sort of golden bronze, a color like the coagulation of his supramental gold, of his golden supramental being; as if it were very concentrated and coagulated to fashion his appearance; and it doesn’t reflect light: it seems as if lit from within (but it doesn’t radiate), and it doesn’t cast any shadows. But perfectly natural, it doesn’t surprise you, the most natural thing in the world: that’s the way he is. Ageless; his hair has the same color as his body: he has hair, but you can’t say if it’s hair, it’s the same color; the eyes too: a golden look. Yet it’s perfectly natural, nothing surprising.⁵⁶

She also says his clothing and his form are unique in the vision;

he wasn’t naked, yet he didn’t wear any clothes.... Which means they have a sort of clothing of light. But it doesn’t give the impression of a radiating light or anything of that kind. It’s like an atmosphere. It might rather be the aura: the aura that has become visible; so the transparency doesn’t hide the shape, and at the same time the shape isn’t naked. That must be it, it must be the aura: the aura that has become visible.⁵⁷

Further, his movements are unusual in her descriptions:

My impression is that Sri Aurobindo already has his subtle supramental form. For instance, when he has to move, he doesn’t give the impression of being subject to the same laws as we are; but as it’s subtle, it doesn’t appear surprising. And also a sort of ubiquity: he is in several places at the same time. And a plasticity, an adaptability according to the work he wants to do, the people he meets.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ The Mother, *The Mother’s Agenda IV* (Paris: Institute de Recherches Évolutives, 1979), June 29, 1963.

⁵⁷ The Mother, *The Mother’s Agenda VII*, September 14, 1966.

⁵⁸ The Mother, *The Mother’s Agenda VI*, June 18, 1965.

There are many passages in *The Mother's Agenda* in which the Mother describes the human beings of the new creation as well as the descending supramental world in which they inhabit in much the same way as Sri Aurobindo. Her own body, she says has this same coloring, form, and movement.⁵⁹

Her student, Satprem, also described his visions of these subtle physical realms and the two often compared their experiences, which were similar. In fact, an acquaintance of Satprem discovered some writings of a Tamil saint, Swami Ramalingam (1823-1874), who they thought also independently corroborated their visions of the subtle physical interfacing with the supramental world, though at an individual level.⁶⁰ This saint, according to Satprem's friend, saw the universal potential of this transformation and forecasted "around the year 1870, that the supreme Divine would come soon to the earth for establishing his direct rule of Grace-Light (which the Swami also called as the Truth-Light) when a new race of people would arise defying disease, ageing and death...."⁶¹ Satprem read an excerpt from the Swami's own experience of this "Grace-Light" to the Mother's, which compared very positively in color, form, and behavior to what they knew about the supramental light and its influence on the nature of matter. The Swami writes,

My Love that has entered and unified with me in my heart, so as to transform my body into a golden body. The skin has become supple, the influx of the nervous current all over the body is vibrating, with pauses in between; the bones have become pliable and plastic in their nature; the soft muscles have become truly loosened; the blood has become condensed within; the semen has become concentrated into a single drop and confined in the chest; the petals of the brain have blossomed or expanded; amrita [nectar of immortality] is welling up into

⁵⁹ See *The Mother's Agenda I*, February 3, 1958 for a lengthy description of her own body and those of other beings helping to bring the supramental world increasingly closer to this plane of life. See also The Mother, *Notes on the Way*, (Pondicherry: SAAP, 2002), 238, July 1, 1970; and *Notes on the Way*, 301-2, March 24, 1972 and March 25, 1972 for a small selection of other references.

⁶⁰ See <http://vallalar.org/> for a site devoted to his following. There does not seem to be any scholarship on this figure, though wikipedia has an interesting description of his life and work. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ramalinga_Swamigal; both accessed March 3, 2016.

⁶¹ The Mother, *The Mother's Agenda XI*, July 11, 1970.

springs all over the body and filling it up; the luminous forehead perspires; the luminous face brightens up.⁶²

The “golden body,” the “plastic bones,” the “bright face,” and “supple skin” all sounded familiar to them. They also interpreted Swami’ Ramalingam’s description of the *Avatāra* of this Grace-Light as Sri Aurobindo himself, as he was born only two years after the Swami made this prediction. The Mother says,

Grace-Light.... Oh, I liked that very much in his letter. Grace-Light, that’s what is working, you know: the work being done through this [Mother’s body] is exactly like that, it’s exactly like a Grace-Light. I liked that a lot. It’s exactly that.

You see, it’s a light with several degrees, and in the most material it’s slightly ... it must be the supramental force, because it’s slightly golden, slightly pinkish (you know that light), but very, very pale. One of them (gesture pointing to another, higher layer) is white like milk, opaque – it’s very strong. And there’s another (gesture very high) which is white like ... it’s transparent light. With that one, it’s strange: one drop of it on the hostile forces, and they’re dissolved. They melt like this (gesture before one’s very eyes). I said all that to Sri Aurobindo, he completely confirmed it. That’s essentially the Grace in its ... (gesture very high) supreme state. It’s a Light ... it has no color, you know, it’s transparent, and that Light (I have experienced that, I mention it because I know it), if you put it on a hostile being ... it melts like that. It’s extraordinary.... And then, in its “benevolent” form, as we might call it (that is to say, the Grace helping and assisting and healing), it’s white like milk. And if I want a wholly material action (but this is quite recent – it’s since this new Consciousness came), then in its physical action, on the physical, it’s become slightly colored: it’s luminous, golden with some pink in it, but it’s not pink ... (*Mother takes a hibiscus next to her*). It’s like this.⁶³

As discussed last chapter, the Mother discovered this “new Consciousness” on January 1st, 1969, and she often described the beings she saw in subtle physical realms working to bring it and the new creation to Earth in a supramental ship.⁶⁴ She once called this ship “the symbol of the yoga,” “made of pink clay, and what a pink!” “a warm, golden pink.”⁶⁵ The Yoga, then, of bringing the new Consciousness to Earth through painting, to begin with, had to do with painting it with the correct

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid. The transparent light that Mother describes is the same diamond light that we saw last chapter. See pp. 231-38.

⁶⁴ See The Mother, *The Mother’s Agenda I*, February 3, 1958; *The Mother’s Agenda IV*, June 29, 1963, 194; and *The Mother’s Agenda VI*, June 18, 1965.

⁶⁵ The Mother, *The Mother’s Agenda IV*, June 29, 1963.

colors in the correct relationship to each other and with human figures that expressed some of these “plastic,” “ageless” features, “clothed in a non-radiating, non-shadowed aura.”

These characteristics of the new creation are important in the Mother’s training of Huta’s gaze. She shared certain well-known paintings with Huta that have some of these characteristics, printed on picture cards of the artwork. She often sent Huta the later works of British Romantic painter J.M.W. Turner (1775-1851), known today as the “painter of light.”⁶⁶ It is hard to think of another artist who expresses the central qualities of the Mother’s ideal artist. He aspired for the light with the intensity of a plant, living in circumstances that had their share of darkness and the sublime to stimulate his work. Anticipating the atmospheric innovations of the impressionists of the nineteenth century and even the emotional evocations of color by the abstract expressionist artists of the twentieth, increasingly his work became less depictions of nature, but direct celebrations of color and light, as though drunk with nature’s interactions with the sun. When one sees his mature work in person, one feels as though inside a rainbow that emerges from either darkness or light depending on the example.⁶⁷ As though to punctuate the very reason for his life, his last words before he died were “The sun is God!”⁶⁸ He was also a painter of ships, which must have had meaning for the Mother. For example, she gave Huta a card of one of his favorite oil paintings, *The Fighting Temeraire tugged to her last berth to be broken up*, which depicts a white and golden ship, an artifact of the past that fought against the French and Spanish at the decisive battle of Trafalgar, being brought into bay for decommissioning by a dark red steam tugboat, an emblem of the

⁶⁶ <http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/artists/joseph-mallord-william-turner>; accessed March 3, 2016.

⁶⁷ I recently experienced some of his watercolors and oils at the de Young Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco, California: “J.M.W. Turner: Painting Set Free.” https://deyoung.famsf.org/turner_; accessed March 3, 2016.

⁶⁸ Norman Davies, *Europe: A History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 687. Also see the excellent biographical film *Mr. Turner*, directed by Mike Leigh, Focus Features, 2014.

industrial future (See Figure 6.13).⁶⁹ Interestingly, the colors of gold and pink light figure prominently in this image, much like the Mother's description of Huta's heart and her direction when she says, "I think of expressing [the Higher Worlds] in painting by various colors—blues, golds, pinks and whites."⁷⁰ Huta writes of this process that the Mother "educated me both outwardly and inwardly, knowing that these types of paintings [Huta's and the Mother's] were not of the common kind. This training went on for years with patience and perseverance. Nobody knew of it!"⁷¹

At this time, the Mother gave Huta what to me is a guiding characteristic of her notion of the future art: "where there is a combination of the two—outward charm and inner vision—then they are real and can be considered as true art."⁷² The inner vision of the soul and "the glory of the Higher Worlds" is what the Mother called the "World of Supreme Beauty."⁷³ The poem of *Savitri* expresses this world for the Mother as she experienced it in her visions, and she promised Huta that she would show her student this world as well; not as a way to remain on these planes of consciousness separate from the gross plane, but in order to bring them to the Earth by painting them into being. The poem *Savitri*, painters like Turner, the vision of Huta's heart, and her

⁶⁹ Michael Bockemühl notes that this painting "signifies a climax in Turner's use of colour" and that the artist called it "My Darling," having never lent or sold it. Michael Bockemühl, *J. M. W. Turner: The World of Light and Color* trans. Michael Claridge, ed. Sally Bald (Cologne, Germany: Taschen, 2001), 83. This oil painting is not an effective depiction of destruction nor a realistic depiction of color and their precise relationships in nature, but painted "in accordance with [Turner's] own understanding of the interaction of things in the world as he sees it." (Ibid., 85). Turner was heavily influenced by Goethe's book *Theory of Colours*, who wrote, "If the totality of colour is presented to the eye from the outside in the form of an object, it will be pleasing to the eye, because it thereby encounters the sum of its own activity as reality." In Turner's copy of this book, he wrote in the margin, "this is the object of Paintg [sic]." Quoted in Bockemühl, *J. M. W. Turner: The World of Light and Color*, 84. This seems a generous goal for painting, since Turner seeks to give "the totality of color" to his viewers, "revealing what nature hides" by expressing the fullness of nature drenched by the effects of light.

⁷⁰ Huta, "My *Savitri* Work with the Mother," *Invocation* 12 (August, 2001): 13.

⁷¹ Ibid., 8.

⁷² Ibid., 11.

⁷³ Ibid., 13.



Figure 6.13. *The Fighting Temeraire tugged to her last berth to be broken up* by JMW Turner. 1839, 90.7 cm × 121.6 cm (35.7 in × 47.9 in), National Gallery, London.

experience of the golden pink “World of Supreme Beauty” make up the cocoon that pressed and squeezed the Mother’s new art form and new artist into being. The Mother writes of her work with Huta, “I see the butterfly ready in its cocoon. I do not wish it to come out soon, but gradually. Then after emerging from the chrysalis you will have enough knowledge to reach your goal.”⁷⁴

C. Painting “Meditations of Savitri”

After about five years of increasingly intense training (1956-61), which included what Huta called an in-depth “intellectual and aesthetic” reading of *Savitri* with two experts in the community

⁷⁴ Ibid.

that the Mother assigned, Huta finally began a new kind of reading of the poem with the Mother. It was done through painting in the series called *Meditations on Savitri* under the Guru's direct supervision—472 paintings in all from 1961-65.⁷⁵ The Mother then published many of these artworks in four volumes from 1962-1965. The Mother thought of these series of paintings as experiments, not finished products, presumably because Huta was still learning her craft. At that time, the Mother told Huta, "I did not let you retouch and redo the paintings in the volumes, because I wanted to show to the world how the consciousness is developed."⁷⁶ A year later, the Mother had her completely redo many of the paintings from 1966-67, in preparation for an exhibition on the Mother's birthday February 21, 1967. Though the first and second attempts are not available to the public to compare, Shraddhavan, the director of the Savitri Bhavan where Huta's paintings are stored in Auroville, says that the "difference between the [early] versions ... and the later ones is striking. The Mother attributed this change to 'the working of the Consciousness.'"⁷⁷ On February 25, 1972, the Mother culminated this meditative reading of the epic poem with an exhibition of the "Sister Arts:" a slide presentation of the paintings, accompanied by music, and the Mother's recitations of the poem *Savitri*.⁷⁸ These paintings are not available to the public to examine (only printed copies are on display in the Savitri Bhavan for archival protection), which purport to reveal much about what the Mother meant by her wish "to show to the world how the consciousness is developed." This awaits further study.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 14.

⁷⁶ Huta, *The Story of a Soul 1956, Volume Two Part Two*, 93.

⁷⁷ Email from Shraddhavan to the author, May 7, 2013.

⁷⁸ The term "Sister Arts," for painting, music and poetry has a long history. See Jean H. Hagstrum, *The Sister Arts: The Tradition of Literary Pictorialism and English Poetry from Dryden to Gray* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975). For this presentation in 1972, Huta recorded the Mother reciting passages of *Savitri* that inspired each painting. These recordings were later combined with early recordings of the Mother's compositions on the organ.

Huta's paintings of the *Meditations on Savitri* series express the coloring, form, and movement of the supramental creation and the bodies as the Mother, Sri Aurobindo, Satprem, and Swami Ramalingam report. However, as a visual piety that seeks to display them in a way and in a context that fulfills the vision of the Mother and Huta, the Havyavāhana Trust, who care for Huta's work, did not give me permission to publish any of these images in this document. The Trust wrote to me stating that Huta "gave specific instructions that none of the *Meditations on Savitri* paintings or sketches should be reproduced except in Havyavāhana Trust publications. At present a book covering all the five cantos of Book One [of *Savitri*] is in preparation, and it is planned to publish the rest in three or four volumes before long."⁷⁹ I was given permission, however, to share a few images of a later series of Huta's paintings based on Sri Aurobindo's shorter poems, where one can see the rendering of the figures in ways that expresses the characteristics we have reviewed: orange or pink golden colors in the hair and skin, the value of white and pastel colors, the "ageless," sometimes androgynous figures, bright skin and clothing, among others (See Figures 6.14-6.16).

"A God's Labour" is a poem that expresses very well Sri Aurobindo's descendant spiritual experience to supramentalize matter and the confrontation with opposition that this demands. Huta's painting of this poem uses the colors of gold and blue (read: supramental and intuitional planes) in a figure that walks inside what seems to be a golden symbol of the Earth, longing for God with its head thrown back in ecstasy (See Figure 6.14). Huta's painting seems to respond to the last few stanzas of Sri Aurobindo's poem,

Like flames to the kingdoms of Truth and Bliss:
 Down a gold-red stairway wend
 The radiant children of Paradise
 Clarioning darkness' end.

A little more and the new life's doors

⁷⁹ Letter from the Havyavāhana Trust to the author, October 14, 2014. See Appendix III. There is a DVD collection of all these images with the Mother's organ music and her reading of the poetry that is available from the Ashram and Savitri Bhavan.

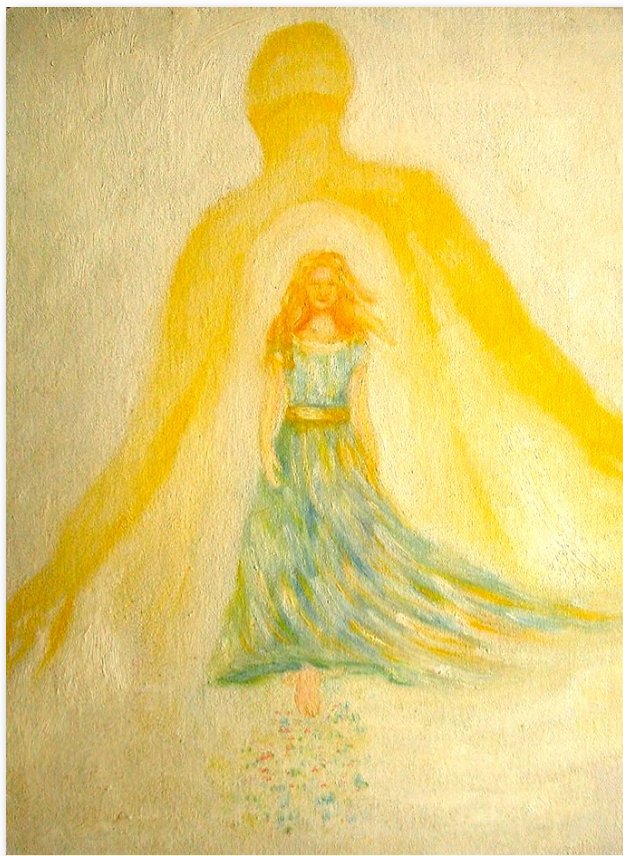


Figure 6.14. “*The Living Truth*” by Huta. Oil on board. Photo by the Havyavāhana Trust, used with permission.

Shall be carved in silver light
With it aureate roof and mosaic floors
In a great world bare and bright.

I shall leave my dreams in their argent air,
For in a raiment of gold and blue
There shall move on the earth embodied and fair
The living truth of you.⁸⁰

As with these paintings of Sri Aurobindo’s shorter poems, to create the *Meditations on Savitri* series, the Mother and Huta first read relevant passages from *Savitri*, and then they spent time together in silence, stilling the mind to see what inspiration came. Shraddhavan comments, “Then the Mother would make a small sketch, explaining the composition of the painting and the colour-

⁸⁰ Sri Aurobindo, “A God’s Labour,” in *Collected Poems*, 538. The Mother’s commentary, “The silver air is the spiritual realm. The gold is the supramental and the blue is the mind.” The Mother, *More Answers from the Mother*, 357.



Figure 6.15. "*The Other Earths*" by Huta. Oil on board. Photo by the Havyavāhana Trust, used with permission. "Calm faces of the gods on backgrounds vast/Bringing the marvel of the infinitudes."



Figure 6.16. "*Musa Spiritus*" by Huta. Oil on board. Photo by the Havyavāhana Trust, used with permission. "Into the gulfs of our nature leap,/Voice of the spaces, call of the Light!/Break the seals of Matter's sleep,/Break the trance of the unseen height."

scheme. Huta then would go to her studio and copy the sketch onto a canvas board in pencil. In the early stages of the project, the Mother would see and correct the sketch before giving Huta permission to start the painting.”⁸¹ One of the more important images of this series on *Savitri* that seems relevant to my research is the eighth picture of Book One, Canto One of the poem, which was begun November 4, 1961.⁸² It is an image of the new being descending/emerging from the Earth, clothed by the colors of the dawn. It depicts a golden colored androgynous figure reclining below a rainbow of color as a dark pall falls from its body. The painting is based on the following passage from *Savitri*:

The darkness failed and slipped like a falling cloak
 From the reclining body of a god.
 Then through the pallid rift that seemed at first
 Hardly enough for a trickle from the suns,
 Outpoured the revelation and the flame.
 The brief perpetual sign recurred above.
 A glamour from unreached transcendences
 Iridescent with the glory of the Unseen,
 A message from the unknown immortal Light
 Ablaze upon Creation’s quivering edge,
 Dawn built her aura of magnificent hues
 And buried its seed of grandeur in the hours.⁸³

After the Mother and Huta meditated together about this passage, the Mother opened her eyes and told Huta about a related experience she had in Paris, “I saw in 1904 the vision of a Spirit when I went into the Inconscient. The form of this Spirit was neither man nor of woman. Nor was it Vishnu or Shiva or Krishna.” She went back into meditation to recall it better and then she instructed Huta, “Child, you must paint a pale gold reclining figure of a God. His right cheek is resting on his right palm. His head with long golden hair is on a white cushion. And in the

⁸¹ Email from Shraddhavan to the author, May 7, 2013.

⁸² Besides seeing Huta and her commentary of this work and hearing the Mother’s own organ playing, one can also see this image on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QGGc4vKVrZ8>; accessed, March 3, 2016. The image can be seen starting on 3:06.

⁸³ Sri Aurobindo, *Savitri: A Legend and a Symbol* (Twin Lakes, WI: Lotus Light Publications, 1995), 3.

background you must show a myriad rainbow hues of opals. Also the black color of the darkness sliding off him.”⁸⁴ Huta went home and tried to paint the picture based on the Mother’s direction but could not finish it. That evening she had an experience which allowed her to join part of the Mother’s vision. It is important to give Huta’s full account, as it specifies the colors and forms that she used for all her painting in this series. She writes,

The shimmering waves of the divine white Light enveloped me as they turned into brilliant multi-colours. They were in gradations—from pale blue to night sky, from shell-pink to deepest crimson, from pale green to Nile green, and the same with the rest of the hues.

Then suddenly they assumed the faces of beautiful beings—but their lower bodies were like trails of different colours. These beings mingled with one another, yet retained their individualities. Their dancing movements were like music, the tinkle, the chime of numerous bells echoing and reechoing through the sweet silence of eternity. My eyes drank in the melody of the vivid, various colours with as much joy as I would have had hearing an ethereal symphony in perfect harmony in the Divine Light.

This was an ecstasy, an indescribable thrill. I was floating upward into a realm of glory beyond anything I had ever beheld or ever known.⁸⁵

Following this auditory vision (of *śruti* and *dhṛṣṭi*), the next morning Huta finished the painting and brought it to the Mother in the afternoon. When Huta brought the image of the pale gold androgynous figure of dawn with darkness sliding off him, the Mother “clasped my hands, looked into my eyes for a moment or two and gave me a kiss on my forehead.”⁸⁶

About two and a half years previous to this painting of the new being of the new creation, Huta recalled that she almost had this inner vision earlier in her life. It happened during an episode of meditating with the Mother, and at this particular time, Huta was bored and not concentrating. The Mother said

Just now I saw in my vision beautiful luminous beings from above bringing precious gifts for you. They wished to enter your whole being with these boons. But unhappily, you were completely shut up and denied them. So they went back to where they had come from.

⁸⁴ Huta, “My *Savitri* Work with the Mother,” *Invocation* 12 (August 2001): 19.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 20.

There were no tears in my eyes—only solid, unutterable despair.

The Mother looked at me and smiled—a sad smile. I had failed to collaborate, to receive, to assimilate. I felt sick, very sick, in my heart, mind and body.

She leaned from her couch, patted my cheeks and affirmed:

The luminous beings will return one day and enter your whole being.

So they came back to me by the Divine's Grace.⁸⁷

D. The Androgynous Form of the New Creation

On the surface, the supramental figure of the new creation seems similar to how Stella Kramrisch describes ancient and medieval Indian figurative sculptures, as we saw in Chapter Two (see Figure 6.17 as an example). Kramrisch writes,

It is as though in Indian art the image [of the human form] is embossed from within by the movement of breath, or circulation, through the vital centers of the living being, unimpeded by the gross matter of the actual physical body. A plastic quality conducted by the smooth channels of the body and limbs. These smooth channels have a pristine glow and a continuity of outline as though what they hold were an equivalent of the breath of God.⁸⁸

In Kramrisch's view, the ancient Indian artist intuited and tried to express in stone or bronze the subtle body (*sūkṣma deha*) living in the subtle world (*sūkṣma loka*)—separate from the physical or gross world (*sthūla loka*). This artist tried to bring the realm of the spirit close to the physical realm through a kind of translation of the subtle body in art. Kramrisch does not mention an attempt to depict the causal body (*kāraṇa deha*), which exists beyond both the gross and subtle worlds in Indian philosophies.⁸⁹ In these early Indian contexts, the ancient or medieval artist assumed that the physical body opposed spiritual transformation since it ages and dies. Seeking a creative solution, the

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Stella Kramrisch, *Exploring India's Sacred Art*, ed. B.S. Miller (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983), 24. Quoted in Dorothy Norman, "Conversations with Stella Kramrisch," *Marg* 6, no. 4 (Deepavali, 1953): 3. See Chapter Three, pp. 104-08.

⁸⁹ According to the Sri Aurobindo Glossary for the *Record on Yoga*, *kāraṇa* is "the Causal Idea which, by supporting and secretly guiding the confused activities of Mind, Life and Body ensures and compels the right arrangement of the Universe,' same as *viññāna*" or supermind. (The Glossary, 89).



Figure 6.17. *Pārvatī* and *Śiva* as the three armed androgynous *Ardhanārīśvara* with *Nandī* the bull in the Gangaikonda Cholapuram temple. Photo by author.

artist sought to somehow transcend the mortal human form, imagining it on the subtle plane to symbolize the flowing life and supple nature of the subtle body, which is somehow capable of holding “the very breath of God” in the art form. This human form had to be rendered differently than what a representational figurative artist would do. The ancient or medieval Indian artist had to make it somehow the very opposite of the nature of the gross body: evocative of immortality, strong, pliable, and supple so that it expressed in its many parts “a plastic quality conducted by the smooth channels of the body and limbs.” In this way the subtle body depicted remains “unimpeded by the gross matter of the actual physical body.”

In their writings, the Mother and Sri Aurobindo look to a future when the physical human body will be capable of becoming supramental, that is—in Vedāntic language—becoming even

more refined than the subtle body, but a causal body somehow living on this gross plane. It will be a body of the nature of Sri Aurobindo's notion of *vijñāna*, his early word for supermind, which he defines as "the large embracing consciousness . . . which takes into itself all truth and idea and object of knowledge and sees them at once in their essence, totality and parts or aspects."⁹⁰ Further, it will be a *vijñāna* body living its divine life, not on the plane of *vijñāna* (*vijñāna loka*), or even on the subtle plane, but on the gross plane, a plane transformed in its very qualities (*guṇas*) by *vijñāna*.

As we considered above, the Mother claims to have seen this kind of body in her visions. The Mother also describes in *The Mother's Agenda* her aspiration to join processes that to her seem now available on Earth for the first time in creation to make her own physical body become supramental before death, to make the very cells of her body wake up to their hidden divinity. She describes how she experiences her cells starting to live in a way that even they spontaneously do the Integral Yoga of aspiration, negation, and surrender, independent of her vital and mental natures. Because of this experience and her visions, corroborated by the nineteenth-century Tamil saint Swami Ramalingam, her student Satprem, and especially Sri Aurobindo, she claims that the physical body is destined to become the very thing that classic sacred Indian sculpture expresses: an immortal, plastic, and flowing form that carries the very breath of God here on Earth.

Sri Aurobindo is sanguine about this possibility as well. In his early writings, in his *Record of Yoga* he records (mainly from 1912-20) his experiments in trying to transform his physical body using four different *siddhis* (occult powers or perfections): 1. *Ānanda* (delight in the body), 2. *Ārogya* (health, freedom from disease), 3. *Uttāpanā* ("raising" or "elevating," by which he means the state of not being subject to the pressure of physical forces like gravity), and 4. *Saundarya* (beauty of the body). The last *siddhi* is associated more overtly to this discussion about aesthetics, though all are related. Sri Aurobindo says that there are three stages of *Saundarya*. These stages are similar to his

⁹⁰ Sri Aurobindo, *Synthesis of Yoga*, 862.

images of the supramental beings he describes in *Savitri*, “the Omnipotent’s flaming pioneers,” “The sun-eyed children of a marvellous dawn,” whose “Bodies [were] made beautiful by the spirit’s light.”⁹¹ Sri Aurobindo writes that the first stage of this *Saundarya siddhi* is that the skin would physically become brighter, the voice more sweet, and the gestures more charming. The second is perpetual youth (something he expresses in *Savitri*: “The architects of immortality”⁹²), and the third is the ability to change physical features on the body to be more harmonious in form. These stages are also similar to Swami Ramalingam’s experience that we saw above: “My Love that has entered and unified with me in my heart, so as to transform my body into a golden body,” and “the bones have become pliable and plastic in their nature; the soft muscles have become truly loosened...the luminous face brightens up.” Sri Aurobindo did not achieve these goals or perfect these *siddhis*, even though he claims to have had some success, and others in his community at the time even remarked at these physical changes. Still, he never lost sight of the goal. At the end of his life, between 1949-50, he writes “A transformation of the body must be the condition for a total transformation of the nature.”⁹³ His notion of transformation includes changes in the physical body’s maintenance and procreativity. In other words, the use of food and the organs for supplying energy in the body, as well as the use of sex and the organs for insuring the future of the species are potential places of transformation. For him, this transformation means a diminishment or even disappearance of the current structure of the gastronomic and digestive systems, as well as the sex organs if a new and supramental instrumentation replaces the operations that current ones fulfill.⁹⁴

⁹¹ Sri Aurobindo, *Savitri*, 343-344.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Sri Aurobindo, “The Divine Body” in *Essays in Philosophy and Yoga* (Pondicherry: SAAP, 1998), 537.

⁹⁴ See the entire chapter “The Divine Body,” 536-57, where he details his view about the potentials supramental changes to the body living a life divine.

After Sri Aurobindo passed away in 1950, the Mother had many visions of this body, as we discussed above in terms of color. In terms of form, structure, and functioning, in one vision in 1953, she echoes her consort's descriptions regarding food and sex,

Transformation implies that all this purely material arrangement is replaced by an arrangement of concentrations of force having certain types of different vibrations substituting each organ by a centre of conscious energy moved by a conscious will and directed by a movement coming from above, from higher regions. No stomach, no heart any longer, no circulation, no lungs, no... All this disappears. But it is replaced by a whole set of vibrations representing what those organs are symbolically. For the organs are only the material symbols of centres of energy; they are not the essential reality; they simply give it a form or a support in certain given circumstances.⁹⁵

In 1954, she says the following about the sex of the divine body, which echoes her vision in 1904 of the new creation:

The supramental body will be unsexed, since the need for animal procreation will no longer exist. The human form will retain only its symbolic beauty, and one can foresee even now the disappearance of certain ungainly protuberances, such as the genital organs of man and the mammary glands of woman.⁹⁶

She claims in 1972 that Sri Aurobindo also described the body in androgynous terms, but it is not written in any of his texts, so it must be something he discussed with her. She says, "Because, according to what Sri Aurobindo said, the supramental body will be immortal and sexless – that is, no procreation."⁹⁷ According to the Mother, "The supramental being as [Sri Aurobindo] conceived of it, *is not at all* formed in the ordinary animal way, but directly, through a process that for the moment still seems occult to us."⁹⁸ Swami Ramalingam experienced something of this sexual

⁹⁵ The Mother, *Questions and Answers*, 1953, 59. Both Gurus explicitly say that the body's organs will be replaced by a direct working of the *cakras*. See The Mother, *On Thoughts and Aphorisms* (Pondicherry: SAAP, 2001), 143-4.

⁹⁶ The Mother, *Words of the Mother III* (Pondicherry: SAAP, 2004), 281-82. If one watches fashion trends and the bodies of models, this comment might seem possible. Androgyny seems a perennial theme in fashion. Just this season, Bill Cunningham noted it as an important trend in men's fashion. See <http://www.nytimes.com/video/fashion/100000004140846/bill-cunningham-free-spirits.html?playlistId=1247463985977®ion=video-grid&version=video-grid-thumbnail&contentCollection=Bill+Cunningham&contentPlacement=4&module=recent-videos&action=click&pgType=Multimedia&eventName=video-grid-click>; accessed March 3, 2016.

⁹⁷ The Mother, *The Mother's Agenda XIII* (Paris: Institute de Recherches Évolutives, 1981), August 9, 1972.

⁹⁸ The Mother, *Questions and Answers*, 1957-58 (Pondicherry, SAAP, 2004), 190.

transformation when he said “the semen has become concentrated into a single drop and confined in the chest.” It seems that the sexual impulse is gathered into the *cakra* of the heart and joined or transformed into this center.

This vision of the sexually undifferentiated human form is one that relates to the second creation account in Genesis and the first ‘*Adam*’ whose nature was androgynous, if we take Phyllis Tribble’s interpretation. In fact, it relates to the mythic narratives, art, and rituals of most cultures in the world.⁹⁹ At first read, the Mother’s and Sri Aurobindo’s descriptions seem to be of a human body that has no gross matter, that on the surface, we have another version of an ancient Indian aesthetic ideal, which negates matter and seeks to capture an *alaukika* (non-worldly) subtle body. However, the Mother tries to counter this thought, as theirs is a negation of all that cannot go forward into the life divine (the limited parts or characteristics of the *sattvic*, *rajasic*, and *tamasic* qualities of gross matter). The new substance of matter will be entirely *sattvic*; the supple, golden-pink material she experienced in her visions. She writes, “[t]his does not mean that there will no longer be any definite and recognisable forms; the form will be built by qualities rather than by solid particles. It will be, if one may say so, a practical or pragmatic form; it will be supple, mobile, light at will, in contrast to the fixity of the gross material form.”¹⁰⁰ Sri Aurobindo defends this perspective as well in his essay on “The Divine Body.” It is an understatement to say that this unsexed human

⁹⁹ See Phyllis Tribble, “Depatriarchalizing in Biblical Interpretation,” *JAAAR* 41, 1 (March 1973): 30-48; and *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988). Tribble used the word “androgynous” in the first article to describe *hā-’ādām*, and then recalled it in the second book, which expanded her research. I doubt she would have recalled this label if she had used Eliade’s and Doniger’s definition of androgyny. Sexual undifferentiation *is* androgyny in their view of its use in religious studies. Though I do not cover this in this dissertation, it is important to understand the ways in which the Mother’s ideal of androgyny fits within the history of androgyny as this has been researched by Mircea Eliade and Wendy Doniger. See Mircea Eliade, *Mephistopheles and the Androgyne*, trans. J. M. Cohen (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1965) and Wendy Doniger, *Women, Androgynes, and Other Mythological Beasts* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980). These two authors co-wrote a helpful summary article on this topic, “Androgynes,” *Encyclopedia of Religion* (2005): 337-342. I have begun this research in my article “The Androgynous Visual Piety of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo and St. Clare and St. Francis” *JHCS* 28 (November 2015): 11-32 which compares an androgynous ideal in the Yoga with that in the spiritual aesthetics of Clare and Francis of Assisi.

¹⁰⁰ The Mother, *Questions and Answers*, 1953, 60.

figure built of qualities rather than solid particles is beyond the imagination, though the three armed androgynous *Ardhanārīśvara* [“the lord who is half female”] in Figure 6.17 seems a limited start.

How do ashramite artists deal with these descriptions of the supramental body? When I compare Krishnalal’s later work and Huta’s work with the Mother, they seem like the Mother’s description of the supramental body that is “supple, mobile, and light at will.” They also possess characteristics that resonate with Sri Aurobindo’s *Saundarya siddhi*: bright skin, youthful appearance, and proportional physical features. It therefore seems logical to conclude that the Mother’s own body and that of her consort as she envisioned them in the subtle physical world, as well as Sri Aurobindo’s brief spiritual practice to master different *siddhis* to create beauty in the body is potentially the ideal of the human figure for the artists of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram. Further, if we remember the fact that the Mother and Sri Aurobindo were spiritual consorts who embody the divine feminine and divine masculine for their disciples, it is clear that together, the two Gurus manifest the androgynous aspect of the new creation for their students in a more pragmatic and explicit way, bringing its reality to their imaginations more concretely and shaping their sacred gaze, since together they are the *Avatāra* of the supramental manifestation, in the view of many followers.

This sacred gaze and aesthetic ideal is based on a unique kind of sacred androgyny, it seems to me. The Mother describes the new supramental species as “unsexed.” I suppose we could say this new species is also “sexful,” as both male and female sexes are a basis upon which the new supramental body might be born. Since the Mother’s and Sri Aurobindo’s vision of the new body does not have gross internal organs or possess “the genital organs of man and the mammary glands of woman,” it seems clear that it is not either one nor the other sex, nor 100% of each stuck together, *pace* Aristophanes in Plato’s *Symposium*, nor half of each like the *Ardhanārīśvara*, who is half *Parvatī* and half *Śiva*. It seems this body is indeed an entirely new species of human being that rests on the fullness of both sexes, integrated in a new wholeness, which is what the Mother and Sri

Aurobindo seem to model together. The two Gurus from Pondicherry could not fully change their bodies individually to embody this wholeness, but they could use them together to explode the paradox of what is “unsexed/sexful” for their students, potentially giving them and especially their artist-students an ideal to aim for in their art and in their lives.

E. Reception of Huta's Paintings

The fact that the Mother calls the paintings that she did with Huta “Meditations” is significant, since they are a different kind of “reading” of the poem than one would make if done “intellectually and aesthetically.” Firstly, as described above, the Mother and Huta meditated together often, and further, the work of consciousness going inward really characterizes the kind of “gaze” that was native to Huta and that the Mother strengthened in her. Yet it was also important to the Mother that Huta not stay there in this internal gaze according to the principles of the descendant Integral Yoga, but to bring the realities of this inner world outward as paint.

The Mother also advises the potential beholder of these paintings in the Ashram to still the mind as well, in order to be able to view them without the bias of the intellect. She writes to the potential viewer, “Concentrate silently your vision behind the apparent form of the picture and you will reach the meaning.”¹⁰¹ Just as the Mother cautioned Huta not to imitate Classical or Modern art or any conventional notion of art in painting the future painting, she also cautions her audience that if they want “to enjoy these ‘meditations,’ you must put aside all conventional notions about art and painting.”¹⁰²

This direction presumes that one must put aside conventional (Western) notions about what it means to be an artist as well. Diane Apostolos-Cappadona notes that the “term *the artist* requires

¹⁰¹ Huta, “My *Savitri* Work with the Mother,” *Invocation* 13 (November 2001), 18.

¹⁰² Ibid.

careful attention” since it means different things in different contexts.¹⁰³ In the West it has been associated with being a craftsman, teacher, genius, rebel, prophet, and even shaman. Artists also have the personality of the salesman and celebrity, if we look to the kind of artist Andy Warhol first modeled in the 1960s and Jeff Koons and Damian Hirst model today. As the Mother’s ideal artist, Huta represents something potentially different from these paradigms. In Huta, the ideal artist is one surrendered to a guru, what Sri Aurobindo defines as “the secret and universal Teacher who is seated in the hearts of all.”¹⁰⁴ As Huta seems to have understood it, she ultimately surrendered not to her ego, but to her heart by surrendering to her guru’s way of making art. The relationship between this kind of artist and one’s higher nature embodied by the guru is therefore, primarily in the heart (*hṛd*) and not where the personal self or ego lives, with its preferences and its use of imagination in the head.¹⁰⁵

Not everyone in the Ashram sees Huta’s work in this way. In the book *The Mother: Paintings and Drawings*, the editor writes that in Huta’s series of paintings *Meditations on Savitri*, “[n]aturally, the actual execution of the paintings represents Huta’s style and ability and cannot be considered identical to what the Mother would have done with her own hands.”¹⁰⁶ Huta takes great issue with this statement, even saying that she has no personal style or ability as belonging solely to herself, since the Mother guided her painting in every particular way. For Huta, these works express the Mother’s style created through Huta’s hands. She writes, “Even if it was ‘Huta’s style,’ there was a

¹⁰³ Diane Apostolos-Cappadona, “Iconoclasm: An Overview,” in *Encyclopedia of Religion* (2005), 6: 4283. See my Appendix II, p. 389.

¹⁰⁴ Sri Aurobindo, *Glossary for the Record of Yoga*, 65.

¹⁰⁵ Recall from Chapter Three that Sri Aurobindo describes the heart in Vedic terms. The heart, he says “in Vedic psychology is not restricted to the seat of the emotions; it includes all that large tract of spontaneous mentality, nearest to the subconscious in us, out of which rise the sensations, emotions, instincts, impulses and all those intuitions and inspirations that travel through these agencies before they arrive at form in the intelligence. This is the “heart” of Veda and Vedanta, *hṛdaya*, *hṛd*, or *brahman*. There in the present state of mankind the Purusha is supposed to be seated centrally.” Sri Aurobindo, *The Secret of the Veda*, 271. See p. 153 of this dissertation.

¹⁰⁶ *The Mother: Paintings and Drawings*, 174.

divine touch in the whole new creation. For, the Mother often concentrated on my hands while holding them.”¹⁰⁷ The Mother’s view that “Substantially the whole creation will be mine” was crucially important to Huta, and therefore she did not consider the work at all her own, even its style. The view of the editor of *The Mother: Paintings and Drawings*, that these paintings “give a hint of the kind of mystical imagery and symbolic expression [the Mother] might have employed if she had taken up painting again in her later years,” is simply incorrect in Huta’s view.¹⁰⁸ If we adopt the sacred gaze of Huta, these paintings are more than a hint, but the very thing the Mother intended to paint *herself*. For both the Mother and Huta, these paintings embody a visual piety that communicates the full impact of the feeling, not just thinking about “Truth” expressed in the poem *Savitri*. The Mother writes about the artworks in 1965, “Behind the appearances there is a subtle reality much closer to Truth; it is that one we are trying to show you.”¹⁰⁹

Paradoxically, though Huta keeps trying to absent her authorship, the Mother responds by pointing out Huta’s value in the creative process, since she is the Mother’s ideal artist, “Huta is the painter.” Both the humility of the artist and the praise of the Muse for the artist seem to be integrated into the potential meaning of these paintings for the rest of the community, even if they are not seen in the same sacred way as Huta and the Mother saw them.

The sacred and revelatory value of Huta’s and the Mother’s work seems to be controversial even within the Ashram community. “The Art Studio,” a department within the Sri Aurobindo Ashram that usually houses Ashram art, refused to store and maintain these paintings after they were completed. After the last exhibit in 1967, Huta’s work resided in the Golconde Dormitory until 1999, and then she took them into her own possession when the caretaker there asked her to take

¹⁰⁷ Huta, *The Story of a Soul 1956, Volume Two Part Two*, 96.

¹⁰⁸ *The Mother: Paintings and Drawings*, 174.

¹⁰⁹ Huta, *The Story of a Soul 1956, Volume Two Part Two*, 99.

them away. Finally beginning in 2001, Savitri Bhavan in Auroville now safely houses, preserves, and occasionally displays these paintings with archival standards.

As I read her diary, Huta claims that the creative process and the final artwork embody one of the goals of the Yoga, which is to transform the *citta* (basic consciousness) into the *Cit* (pure consciousness) of the Mother, and that this transformation embodied by the paintings and Huta herself (as instruments of the Mother) have potential repercussions for all people. Huta writes,

Whatever I have stated in this book is not even a bird's eye view or putting in a nutshell. The Mother has given me so much during my work with her for eighteen years, for the whole of humanity, that the projected many volumes of *The Story of a Soul* on which I have been working are not enough.

She disclosed to me the unknown worlds—both higher and nether worlds. She also taught me how to go out of my body to sojourn in the subtle spheres. She explained to me the mystery of the twelve bodies, their colors and the twelve realms of consciousness—the twelve dimensions of being.¹¹⁰

Huta's and the Mother's characterization of their collaboration in creating the future painting until 1972 seems similar to other moments of revelation in other faith traditions. It reminds me of the story of Allah using an illiterate Prophet to reveal the Quran or that of the Holy Spirit using a virgin to give birth to the Christ. In both cases the medium for the revelation is the exact opposite of what would be expected for the task assigned. In fact, the narrative conceit in these sacred stories is that the impossibility of the outcome because of the inadequacy of the means glorifies the source as divine. Further, the medium in each case is given special place next to the value of the revelation. Trappist monk Thomas Merton could have easily written of Mohammed or Huta when he said of Mary of Nazareth,

When a room is heated by an open fire, surely there is nothing strange in the fact that those who stand closest to the fireplace are the ones who are warmest. And when God comes into the world through the instrumentality of one of His servants,

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 103. For a listing of these twelve colors and their associations with the twelve realms of consciousness, see The Mother, "The Symbolism of Colours," in *The Significance of Flowers*, 365-6; also Sri Aurobindo, "Colours," *Letters on Yoga III* (Pondicherry: SAAP, 2014), 122-34.

then there is nothing surprising about the fact that His chosen instrument should have the greatest and most intimate share in the divine gift.¹¹¹

All of these mediums, Mary, Mohammed, and Huta are like what Merton called “the glass of a very clean window that has no other function than to admit the light of the sun. If we rejoice in that light, we implicitly praise the cleanness of the window. ...The Light has wished to remind us of the window, because He is grateful to her and because He has infinitely tender and personal love for her.”¹¹² I would not equate these three figures in any fundamental way, but functionally they play a similar role in their diverse traditions. *Meditations on Savitri* are the Mother’s revelation of “the Divine Light without shadow in the Future Painting,” emerging from the body of Huta, a person not naturally talented in painting. For the Mother and Huta, the force and energy of these paintings are meant to have an impact that comes entirely from the Mother and the “new Consciousness” through the glass window of Huta to reveal the very “Worlds of the Supreme Beauty” here on this plane of life. Yet the Mother wishes to remind her Ashram that “Huta is the painter,” she is the special window through which the supramental light of the Mother’s Yoga can be shown without impediment.

IV. CONCLUSION

The Mother remained committed to painting from the day she arrived in Pondicherry in 1920 until 1972, and she used this medium as Sri Aurobindo did poetry, to try and perfect the art form while seeking to perfect consciousness, both for herself and universally. During these fifty-two years she tracked not only the development of her own growth, but with Sri Aurobindo, tracked the general growth of consciousness on the Earth from the early 1900s to the end of her life in 1973. This development seemed to occur at internal levels of life at this early stage, not immediately

¹¹¹ Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1972), 171.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 172.

noticeable by the physical senses, but there are important milestones as they witnessed them. On November 24, 1926, they say they experienced the manifestation of the overmind, an intermediary between mind and supermind. On leap year, February 29, 1956, the supramental manifestation began, now called the Golden Day. On January 1, 1969 the Mother experienced another step forward in what she says was the manifestation of a “new superman Consciousness,” now celebrated in the Ashram every New Year’s day as a special *Darśan* Day. As she describes it, the event was more like an encounter with a person with “a smiling benevolence, a peaceful delight and a kind of opening out into delight and light. And it was like a ‘Bonne année,’ like a greeting.”¹¹³ This benevolent person brought a “Grace-Light” that she says aids the growth of a new species of human beings and a new creation with a new Consciousness. She also described this new Consciousness in its first formation as “the consciousness of the superman, that is to say, the intermediary between man and the supramental being.”¹¹⁴ Later she says that “it is unlikely that any human being has yet arrived at this fulfillment, especially since it must be accomplished by a transformation of the physical body, and this has not yet been accomplished.”¹¹⁵ Based on these events, both the Mother and Sri Aurobindo estimate that a new supramental race possessing an androgynous body will become endemic on Earth beginning in the next three hundred years.¹¹⁶ For the Mother and her consort, the arts are an important medium to aid this growth, by painting its

¹¹³ The Mother, *Notes on the Way*, 149.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 153.

¹¹⁵ The Mother, *On Thoughts and Aphorisms*, 246.

¹¹⁶ The Mother writes, “[T]he transformation of the body has never been done by anyone. And it takes a terribly long time. Sri Aurobindo said—one day I asked him: ‘How long will it take to transform the body?’ He did not hesitate, he said: ‘Oh! something like three hundred years.’” (The Mother, *Questions and Answers 1953* [Pondicherry: SAAP, 2003], 58). The Mother comments, “So, if one has resolved to transform the body, well, one must wait with all the necessary patience—three hundred years, five hundred years, a thousand years, it does not matter—the time needed for the change. As for me, I see that three hundred years is a minimum. To tell you the truth, with the experience I have of things, I think it is truly a minimum.” (Ibid.). The Gurus’s view of progressive reincarnation is crucial for this understanding of future growth, that all will participate in this manifestation in future incarnations.

form and character into being, inspiring others to seek and become its potential now and for the future in their *citta*.

The Mother's work with art and other artists is therefore a crucial source of research to understand her spiritual practice and teaching. Krishnalal discovered that if any part of his being remained resistant to the influence of the divine consciousness, this resistance would "interfere with the sources of inspiration, vision and experience," and this would be noticeable in his art. With the help of his gurus and the example of Huta, he discovered that the limitations in his artwork expressed the obstacles in his personal growth that curtailed spiritual growth. It could be said, therefore, that as his creative process matured, so also his aspiration for God and vice versa. Huta describes this same perspective and experience when she writes, "Not only was the Mother teaching me painting, but also giving me lessons of life: how to be modest and persistent in my endeavor to reach perfection and develop into a true artist."¹¹⁷

The sacred gaze that is characteristic of the Integral Yoga is a non-sectarian way of seeing the unity of all life based on a descendant spirituality. This spiritual approach seeks a complete integration of spirit with matter, such that matter is "supramentalized," making possible a new creation and a new species of human being. In the Mother's experience, this new human species has colors that are related to physical light, the dawn. The Mother saw these dawn colors in Huta's heart (*hṛd*) transparent to the soul where the white Light of *Saccidānanda* fades into shadowless golds of the supramental planes combined with the colors of the physical planes to produce, at its most intense, a pale pink gold substance. As Krishnalal and Huta understand it, the inner vision of this transformation is made real for them by painting it under the guidance of their own heart's wisdom, embodied by their guru, the Mother.

¹¹⁷ Huta, "My *Savitri* Work with the Mother," *Invocation* 12 (August 2001): 11.

The collaboration between the Mother and her artists, especially Huta, demonstrates a pattern of growth that is both individual and relational in the Integral Yoga. Just as Sri Aurobindo used poetry and his collaboration with the Mother to perfect his art and his consciousness, the Mother used paint and her collaboration with other artists. Of course, the Mother's collaboration with Sri Aurobindo was as his spiritual consort, and Huta's was as a disciple of the Mother, so the comparison is not equal. However, it seems to me that this pattern of the individual discovering levels of perfection in consciousness in the Integral Yoga is *necessarily* coupled with expressing this perfection for others so that they can advance their *citta* as well. There is no "individual" growth, in other words. This growth pattern can be noted between the two Gurus and between the Gurus and their students. The descendant spirituality of the Integral Yoga aims to bring down the realm of spirit into matter to transform both spirit and matter, which means, I think, offering also the internal achievements of growth in spirit to others so that those achievements might become anchored in their bodies and behavior as well. Therefore, it seems to me that the Mother was not only creating the future painting, but proposing a model of a future artist, with Huta as that paradigm.

The Mother embodies the ideal artist and the ideal mature human being for Krishnalal and Huta. For them, to the extent that they could surrender their lives wholly to her, they might join that ideal and embody it in their own way. Even though many in the Ashram do not recognize the *Savitri* paintings as the fullness of the Mother's work, based on the collaboration described in the evidence we have considered, Huta can be seen as the Mother's future artist painting the Guru's future art in preparation for and in celebration of the supramental being and culture. It would seem, therefore, that this painting project has the same aesthetic and spiritual value as Sri Aurobindo's poem *Savitri*. It might be viewed as a direct expression of the Mother's own spiritual experiments in "perfecting form;" her own experiments in beauty, in other words. Beauty is one of the subjects of the next and final chapter to help summarize this dissertation.

Chapter Seven

*Conclusion:
The Teaching of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo*



Figure 7.1. Street sweeper on the streets of Pondicherry. Photo by author.

I am only realizing what He has conceived. I am only
the protagonist and the continuator of His work.
—The Mother¹

The Truth is not linear but global; it is not successive
but simultaneous. Therefore it cannot be expressed in
words: it has to be lived.
—The Mother²

Pain is the touch of our Mother teaching us how to
bear and grow in rapture. She has three stages of her
schooling, endurance first, next equality of soul, last
ecstasy.
—Sri Aurobindo³

To find highest beauty is to find God; to reveal, to
embody, to create, as we say, highest beauty is to bring
out of our souls the living image and power of God.
—Sri Aurobindo⁴

I. INTRODUCTION

In 1964 Eliot Deutsch made a key insight about Sri Aurobindo studies that William Cenkner summarizes in the following way: “Aurobindo’s metaphysic is more an art than a science and that as such it is less an explanation of reality and more an evocation of it.”⁵ Cenkner sees an important implication of this perspective in terms of the Yogi’s creative practice. He continues, “Another stage of Aurobindo studies will emerge when scholars begin to approach Aurobindo as an aesthetic personality, who articulates a vision of reality from an aesthetic imagination and even an ethic within

¹ The Mother, *The Mother’s Agenda I*, undated 1951.

² The Mother, *Words of the Mother III*, 279.

³ The Mother, *Thoughts and Aphorisms*, 168.

⁴ Sri Aurobindo, *The Human Cycle*, 144.

⁵ William Cenkner, Review of Robert Minor’s book *Sri Aurobindo: The Perfect and the Good*, *Journal of the Academy of Religion* 49, no. 1 (March 1981): 123. Deutsch’s insight is found in “Sri Aurobindo’s Interpretation of Spiritual Experience: A Critique,” *International Philosophical Quarterly* 4, no. 4 (December, 1964): 581-94.

an aesthetic framework. If Aurobindo is primarily a poet, as the role of *Savitri* indicates, his moral thought takes on different meanings and functions.”⁶ Diane Apostolos-Cappadona already began this stage of Sri Aurobindo studies in 1980 and Cenknner contributed to it in 1984, but this approach has mostly remained undeveloped and even ignored.⁷

Since the 1960’s most scholars study Sri Aurobindo from philosophical, social, political, or historical perspectives.⁸ This dissertation has attempted to join and extend the scholarship of Apostolos-Cappadona and Cenknner by treating Sri Aurobindo as a spiritual teacher who is *primarily* an artist, not a political figure or philosopher. As spiritual teacher, Sri Aurobindo is intimately linked to the Mother in terms of status and mission, so this study—in contrast to other approaches which focus on Sri Aurobindo’s writings from various non-artistic perspectives—has correctly positioned the life and work of his spiritual consort, the Mother, as equal to the Yogi, and treated her as essential for an understanding of the Integral Yoga. As mentioned in the Introduction, the Mother’s life and work is almost always overlooked in scholarship, which greatly impoverishes any understanding of their spiritual practice, the Gurus’ work in the Ashram, and their claims for the

⁶ Cenknner, 123.

⁷ See Diane Apostolos-Cappadona, “Poetry as Yoga: The Spiritual Ascent of Sri Aurobindo,” *Horizons* 7, no. 2 (1980): 265-83; and William Cenknner, “Art as Spiritual Discipline in the Lives and Thought of Rabindranath Tagore and Sri Aurobindo Ghose,” in *Ultimate Reality and Spiritual Discipline*, ed. James Duerlinger, 169-86 (New York: Paragon House Publishers, 1984). See also and John Collins, “Savitri: Poetic Expression of Spiritual Experience,” in *Six Pillars: Introduction to the Major works of Sri Aurobindo*, ed. Robert A. McDermott (Chambersburg, PA: Wilson Books, 1974). For short studies that touch on these themes in tangential ways, see Thomas Berry, “The Foundations of Indian Culture: Its Contemporary Significance,” *Six Pillars: Introduction to the Major Works of Sri Aurobindo*, ed. Robert A. McDermott (Chambersburg, PA: Wilson Books, 1974); and Edward T. Ulrich, “Poetic Influences on the Development of Aurobindo’s Spiritual and Nationalistic Convictions,” *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 14, nos. 1-3 (2010): 121-46.

⁸ For example, Beatrice Bruteau describes his philosophy in light of her Catholic philosophical worldview (1971). R. C. Zaehner critically compares the theory of evolution in the thought of the Yogi with that of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1971). June O’Conner analyzes the ethics of Sri Aurobindo’s social political thought and spiritual practice (1977). Robert Minor examines the development of Sri Aurobindo’s ethics in light of his metaphysics (1979). Stephen Phillips critically analyzes the rational coherence of the Yogi’s metaphysics in comparison to traditional Indian schools of philosophical thought (1986). Peter Heehs interprets his life and thought within the history of modern India, as well as the history of Indian philosophy and religion (2008). Michael Stoeber studies the ways in which the Yogi’s spiritual practice is shaped by his understanding of *Tantra* (2009). Ann Gleig and Charles Flores situate the Integral Yoga within the context of modern Yoga traditions and its potential influence on contemporary culture (2014).

supramental manifestation in the new creation. We can apply Cenkner's insight about Sri Aurobindo to the Mother as well. She is a guru who is chiefly an artist, not a political figure or philosopher.

The Gurus' creative projects are central to their own spiritual discipline, and some of the paramount ways that they seek to communicate their teaching to their students. This teaching is not an intellectually packaged product primarily communicated by words, but is found in their creative process and various kinds of experiences of their poetry, painting, music, drama, architecture, and material culture. Their teaching, in fact, is intended to be a transformative experience of growth through beauty. Therefore, their understanding of art, beauty, and of spiritual growth beyond the intellectual faculties are most relevant to a study of their spiritual teaching and practice, and its potential influence on contemporary religion and culture.

As a conclusion I will review and define more fully four interconnected themes as we have encountered them in each chapter: 1) the role of the Mother and what I mean by the term "spiritual consorts" to theorize her relationship with Sri Aurobindo; 2) the role of the intellect in their creative processes and spiritual development; 3) the principle of growth through opposition in their descendant spiritual approach; and 4) the role of beauty as both an aesthetic quality and a lived value in their aesthetics. As will become clear, all of these concerns are integrated and linked to what Sri Aurobindo called the four "powers" or "personalities" of the Divine Mother (*Mahāśakti*) that are essential for the birth of the new creation: wisdom, strength, harmony, and perfection.⁹ For him, this Hindu name for the Divine Mother and her four personalities are embodied by a Jewish woman from Paris.

⁹ See Sri Aurobindo, *The Mother*, especially Chapter VI, 14-26.

II. THE INCARNATION OF THE TWO IN ONE

1. *Spiritual Consorts*

The dissertation outline to treat the life and work of Sri Aurobindo separate from that of the Mother may give the false impression that they did not interact to accomplish their creative and spiritual missions. They actually worked very closely, both publicly and privately starting in 1920 until his death in 1950; and the Mother continued to value his partnership and poetry until her death in 1973. I have used the phrase “spiritual consorts” to theorize this collaboration in religious terms, since they echo a pattern of relationship between Hindu gods and goddesses (*devas* and *devīs*) and their incarnations (*avatāras*), who are often described or symbolized as “consorts” (*svakīya*, *svapati*, or *kalatra*) in Hindu sacred texts, art, and visual culture. The most salient Hindu spiritual consorts that relate to the Mother and Sri Aurobindo are the divine masculine Lord or *Īśvara* and his divine feminine Power or *Śakti* (also called *Īśvari* or *Aditi* by the Gurus and their disciples as we will see below).¹⁰

“Consort” often has a sexual connotation in many Hindu stories of deities and their incarnations, and even in ritual practice like some forms of *Tantra* that seek to enact divine union through sexual intercourse, but this was not the case with the Mother and Sri Aurobindo.

Paraphrasing Sri Aurobindo, Peter Heehs writes, “It was necessary, in the work he was doing, for the masculine and feminine principles to come together, but the union had nothing to do with sex; in fact it was possible in his and Mirra’s case precisely because they had mastered the forces of

¹⁰ *Īśvari* means “divine queen” and *Aditi* is a Vedic name for the divine mother that means “boundless” and “mother of all goddesses.” *Śakti* means “power, ability, strength, might, effort, energy, capability,” but in this context, is “the energy or active power of a deity personified as his wife and worshipped by the *śakta* (q.v.) sect of Hindus under various names.” *Īśvara* means “master, lord, prince, king” or “God” or “the Supreme Being.” (*MMW*, s.vv. “*īśvari*,” “*aditi*,” “*śakti*” and “*īśvara*”). *Īśvara*’s transcendence manifests in the *trimūrti* (triple form) of creator, sustainer, and transformer. In many stories, *Sarasvatī* is the consort or *śakti* of *Brahmā* (creator), *Lakṣmī* is the *śakti* of *Viṣṇu* (sustainer), and *Kālī* or *Pārvatī*—depending on the story—is the *śakti* of *Śiva* (transformer). See the articles and bibliographies of Rachel Fell McDermott, “Goddess Worship: The Hindu Goddess,” *Encyclopedia of Religion* 6 (2005): 3607-3611; Stella Kramrisch, “Iconography: Hindu Iconography,” *Encyclopedia of Religion* 6 (2005): 4323-4327; and David M. Knipe, “Devī,” *Encyclopedia of India* 1 (2006): 319-324.

desire.”¹¹ *Brahmacarya* or celibacy was the rule in their lives and in the Ashram to support the possibility of this spiritual and supramental union.

The term spiritual consort has wider application than its use in Hindu or Hindu-influenced contexts as I have tried to employ it, for as I stated in Chapter Four, it denotes a relationship in which one shares her or his spiritual lot (*sortem*) together (*con*) with another partner; this “lot” being the spiritual work or mission that the two collaborators seek to accomplish. In this case, the goal and mission of the Integral Yoga is the “supramental manifestation” or “the new creation,” the crown of which is the supramental body. In the role of *Īśvara*, Sri Aurobindo primarily did his share of the work from a secluded place of concentrated withdrawal and internal direction of the Ashram. In the role of his *Śakti*, the Mother primarily performed her portion from a place of activity and external work, outwardly manifesting what they considered the internal achievements of his *sādhana* or spiritual discipline in the ordered, varied, and effective administration of the Ashram. Though the Gurus functioned in some respects as opposites, they operated in a complimentary and harmonious fashion. As he said to his disciples after the descent of the overmind and the beginning of the Ashram in 1926, “Mirra is my Shakti. She has taken charge of the new creation. You will get everything from her. Give consent to whatever she wants to do.”¹²

In Chapter One, we saw how the Divine Mother embodied as India influenced Sri Aurobindo’s thought, political activism, and educational aspirations for his country. *Mahāśakti* was his way to ground an active political and national agenda to a spiritual vision, as well as to externalize a spiritual agenda into material results, which included creating and celebrating a more beautiful and just expression of life by the arts and culture. His later desire to find a *śakti* for himself to realize

¹¹ Heehs, *The Lives of Sri Aurobindo*, 328-29.

¹² Sri Aurobindo, reported oral remarks, notation of November 27, 1926, Haradhan Bakshi Papers, notebook 3, 240, in the Sri Aurobindo Ashram Archives; quoted by Heehs, *The Lives of Sri Aurobindo*, 345.

these goals was a natural result of this early spiritually motivated political work. This *śakti* appeared at his doorstep in 1914.

Mirra Richard's presence effected Sri Aurobindo's spiritual growth and experience, especially when she moved to Pondicherry for good in 1920. Before that period, from 1914-1920 when Mirra was in France and Japan waiting out The Great War and its aftermath, Heehs notes that Sri Aurobindo accomplished an immense amount of writing. After she returned, from about 1921-1926, he hardly wrote anything at all, focusing intensely on the goals of his *sādhana*. Since nothing is written, we cannot report what his methods and achievements may have been; however, as Heehs writes,

the arrival of Mirra Richard had an enormous impact on his practice. With her help, he told [his brother] Barin, he completed ten years of *sādhana* in one. Her assistance was especially important in turning his *sādhana* outward. If he had been concerned only with his own transformation or with transmitting his yoga to a limited number of people, he could have done it on his own. But for his work to have a lasting effect in the world, he needed a *śakti*, a female counterpart.¹³

At first, Sri Aurobindo's Indian students had trouble accepting the increasingly privileged place of this cultured French woman in their shared life together. Two years after the Sri Aurobindo Ashram was formed, in 1928 Sri Aurobindo wrote and published his first text in about eight years, *The Mother*. In this small yet important book, he explains to his nascent community Mirra's indispensable role in their spiritual practice and in the universe to bring about "the new creation." This role is the universal Mother or *Mahāśakti*, as he writes, who at this time in the evolution of consciousness incarnates four divine "powers" or "personalities" as *Maheśvarī*, *Mahākālī*, *Mahālakṣmī*, and *Mahāsarasvatī*, the principles of wisdom, strength, harmony, and perfection, respectively. Mirra, in his estimation, fully incarnated these powers, a view his followers increasingly adopted.

¹³ Heehs, *The Lives of Sri Aurobindo*, 328. Cf. V. Chidanandam, ed., "Sri Aurobindo at Evening Talks," *Mother India* 24 (August 1972): 484 (date of talk July 16, 1926).

In *Letters on Yoga* there are multiple passages in which Sri Aurobindo advises his students to follow him by deepening their contact with Mirra, now called the Mother, as the polestar of their souls: “Remember always that whatever the difficulties the Mother’s love is with you and will lead you through.”¹⁴ In fact, as Sri Aurobindo wrote to one disciple in 1927, “I no longer take direct charge of people’s sadhana...all is in the hands of Sri Mira Devi,” the name he briefly called the Mother.¹⁵ As Heehs notes, “no exceptions to this rule were permitted,” which remained the case until his death.¹⁶ Heehs also reports a division of labor between them in terms of their work with their disciples. Between them, they sought to transform the whole being. Heehs writes, “Sri Aurobindo acted ‘directly on the mental and vital being through the illumined mind,’ while the Mother acted ‘directly on the psychic being and on the emotional vital and physical nature through the illumined psychic consciousness.’”¹⁷

As we saw in Chapter Three, Sri Aurobindo’s epic poem *Savitri* symbolizes their yogic collaboration. Out of all the stories of the *Mahābhārata* to inspire this poem, he chose the one to do with conjugal love and the goddess of the Sun. However, he turns it into a story of spiritual love between Satyavān and Sāvitrī, two consorts like he and the Mother, who are seeking to unite and in that perfect union bring the sun-power of the supermind down into the Earth to create a new creation. Disciples now apply Sāvitrī’s description of her work with Satyavān to the Mother and Sri Aurobindo. Sāvitrī says to the character Death,

¹⁴ Sri Aurobindo, *Letter on Yoga IV*, 21.

¹⁵ Sri Aurobindo, reply to letter dated March 23, 1927, in Sri Aurobindo Ashram Archives, quoted in Heehs, *The Lives of Sri Aurobindo*, 354. Sri Aurobindo referred to Mirra as “Mira,” dropping one “r” at about the same time that Aurobindo became known by his disciples as “Sri Aurobindo” in 1926. Mira is the name of a fourteenth-century Rajasthani princess and spiritual aspirant. Later that year, he began calling Mira “the Mother,” which became the final standard starting in 1927. See Heehs, *The Lives of Sri Aurobindo*, 353.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., 357. Heehs quotes from a letter of Sri Aurobindo dated March 26, 1926, published in *Sri Aurobindo Circle* 32 (1976): 25-26.

Our lives are God's messengers beneath the stars;
 To dwell under death's shadow they have come
 Tempting God's light to earth for the ignorant race,
 His love to fill the hollow in men's hearts,
 His bliss to heal the unhappiness of the world.
 For I, the woman, am the force of God,
 He the Eternal's delegate soul in man.
 My will is greater than thy law, O Death;
 My love is stronger than the bonds of Fate:
 Our love is the heavenly seal of the Supreme.¹⁸

As we saw in Chapter Four, the Mother's first spiritual teachers and collaborators from Algeria, Max Théon and his wife Alma, modeled an ideal of spiritual consorts. Also, her early visions in France of a figure that she identified as *Kṛṣṇa* must have motivated her to find her own spiritual partner as *Rādhā* longed for her beloved. Using the research of Karen Pechilis on the nature of Hindu female gurus, I also described in Chapter Four the way in which the Mother is the guru of the Ashram without describing how she worked directly and in tandem with Sri Aurobindo to guide their students and to manage the Ashram Departments. In reality, the two together are "the guru." After Sri Aurobindo withdrew into permanent seclusion in 1926, the Mother was one of the only people to see him everyday besides one or two attendants. When they met everyday, the Mother and Sri Aurobindo spoke of management of the Ashram Departments and of the ashramites's welfare, news of which often came to them in the form of personal letters. This epistolary communication required a collaboration between the Gurus and the students. Heehs writes, "Because the rule of the yoga was to approach Sri Aurobindo through the Mother, the letters were addressed to her."¹⁹ Sri Aurobindo very often wrote the response on their behalf. At its height in 1933, Heehs reports that Sri Aurobindo wrote "1,350 significant letters" that had to do with life and yoga, not counting what

¹⁸ Sri Aurobindo, *Savitri*, 633.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 366.

might be considered “insignificant” or mundane letters that might address things like personal hygiene or cooking techniques.²⁰

In Chapter Five we saw how the Golconde Dormitory was a commission that both the Mother and Sri Aurobindo gave to Antonin Raymond in 1936. Though the workers Nakashima and Chandulal wrote and interacted with the Mother with a daily diary, Sri Aurobindo would have spoken with her about them, as was their custom. When the building was finished in the mid 1940s, he also supported the Mother’s special rules for living in this building in his advice to disciples. Also, in Chapter Six, we saw how Krishnalal corresponded with both Gurus as described above: writing to the Mother and receiving a response from Sri Aurobindo. They both critiqued Krishnalal’s artwork as well.

One of the more public displays of their spiritual consortship was during the *Darśan* Days when the Mother and Sri Aurobindo would sit together in a small outer room of their apartments. “Here they remained for the next few hours as ashramites and visitors—more than three thousand by the end of the of the 1940s—passed before them one by one.”²¹ During this phase of Ashram life, four *Darśan* Days occurred per year: the Mother’s birthday (February 21), the Mother’s final arrival to Pondicherry (April 24), Sri Aurobindo’s birthday (August 15), and the descent of the overmind/founding of the Ashram, which is called Siddhi Day (November 24). Except for rare occasions, these were the only times that anyone besides the Mother saw Sri Aurobindo from 1926 until his death.

Eleven days after the Siddhi *Darśan* Day in 1950, Sri Aurobindo died of kidney failure on December 5th. In response to his dying, the Mother says, “People do not know what a tremendous

²⁰ Ibid., 365. Consuming about twelve hours a day at its height, he typically wrote letters in the afternoon and during the night before sunrise when he would then sleep for six or seven hours. Students wrote to the Mother in many languages (English, French, Bengali, Gujarati, or Hindi) and Sri Aurobindo responded mainly in English and occasionally in Bengali. Some of these letters comprise four edited volumes called *Letters on Yoga* totaling over 2400 pages.

²¹ Heehs, *The Lives of Sri Aurobindo*, 399.

sacrifice Sri Aurobindo has made for the world. About a year ago, while I was discussing things, I remarked that I felt like leaving this body of mine. He spoke out in a very firm tone, ‘No, this can never be. If necessary for this transformation, I might go, you will have to fulfil our yoga of supramental descent and transformation.’”²² She later describes her experience of his dying in 1972, which in her view, united them even more intensely together,

He had gathered in his body a great amount of supramental force and as soon as he left... You see, he was lying on his bed, I stood by his side, and in a way altogether concrete—concrete with such a strong sensation as to make one think that it could be seen—all this supramental force which was in him passed from his body into mine. And I felt the friction of the passage. It was extraordinary—extraordinary. It was an extraordinary experience. For a long time, a long time like that (*Mother indicates the passing of the Force into her body*). I was standing beside his bed, and that continued. Almost a sensation—it was a material sensation.²³

Many disciples became anxious in their grief that the Mother would soon leave them as well. She responds, “No, I have no intention of leaving my body for the present. I have a lot of things to do. So far as I am concerned, I am in constant contact with Sri Aurobindo.”²⁴ To another she says, “Formally I used to go to Sri Aurobindo and discuss matters with him. Now he is in me, and whenever you ask any question, I just ask Sri Aurobindo and tell you his reply.”²⁵ As described in *The Mother’s Agenda*, her work after Sri Aurobindo’s death was to use the supramental force that he brought to the Earth and then transferred to her body as a means for its own supramental

²² The Mother, *Words of the Mother I*, 8.

²³ The Mother, *Notes on the Way*, 328.

²⁴ Quoted in K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar, *On the Mother: A Chronicle of a Manifestation and Ministry* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education, 1978), 501. Quote taken from *Life in Sri Aurobindo Ashram*, 337.

²⁵ Ibid.

transformation.²⁶ In her view, if her body could accomplish the supramental change than it would be possible for all. She says, “what has been realised by one can be realised by others. It is enough that one body has been able to realise that, one human body, to have the assurance that it *can* be done. You may consider it still very far off, but you can say, ‘Yes, the gnostic life is certain, because it has begun to be realised.’”²⁷ Sometime in 1951 she summarizes her role: “I am only realizing what He has conceived. I am only the protagonist and the continuator of His work.”²⁸

2. *The Avatāra*

A related term to spiritual consorts that can help describe this couple and their work together is *Avatāra*.²⁹ For most of their disciples, the pair is regarded as a perfect integration of duality like East and West or male and female; an integration that supports the possibility of an evolution of a new human species that is made perfectly whole as well. This union expressed by the Mother and Sri Aurobindo is also seen as a descent of God. As one devotee writes, “this time the

²⁶ *The Mother's Agenda* is a set of thirteen volumes of conversations with her Parisian student, Bernard Enginger (who she later named Satprem). The conversation lasted many years, starting in 1957, when Satprem did not record any of the discussions. He tape-recorded the remaining conversations and discourses for almost fifteen years, from 1958-May 19, 1973, when he says “the disciples closed the door on us” a few months before the Mother passed away. (He took the tape-recordings, edited the contents, and published them against the wishes of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram Trust, who were concerned about the publication of personal information of individuals mentioned in many of the discussions). Broadly speaking, these thirteen books record in an empirical fashion her experience of supramental forces coming into forceful contact with the Earth and with her body after Sri Aurobindo's death and also after February, 29, 1956, when she experienced their first broad descent into creation, now called the Golden Day.

²⁷ The Mother, *Questions and Answers 1950-51*, 159.

²⁸ The Mother, *The Mother's Agenda I*, undated 1951.

²⁹ This term is difficult to define as it has many meanings and uses in sacred texts and in conventional use in modern India. It can mean simply “any distinguished person in the language of respect” or a “descent (especially of a deity from heaven), appearance of any deity upon earth.” *MMW*, s.v. “*avatāra*.” *Avā* is a preposition that means “off, away, down” and *tāra* can mean “carrying across, a saviour, protector.” *MMW*, s.vv. “*ava*” and “*tāra*.”

Avatar came not in a single, male body as on previous occasions: he came as a complete incarnation of the male and female poles of existence in Sri Aurobindo and Mirra.”³⁰

In the Gurus’ understanding, for the supramental goal of creation to become a living potential in life, the Supreme Lord *Īśvara* and his *Śakti* need first to incarnate this goal in and as creation in the form of an *Avatāra* in order to demonstrate and anchor its destiny for all creatures in this stage of evolution. As they understand it, there will be other stages of cosmic evolution beyond the supramental that will require different incarnations of God in the future. In this vein, Sri Aurobindo developed his view about the role of the *Avatāra* between 1916-18.³¹ The Yogi writes, “[The *Avatāra*] is the manifestation from above of that which we have to develop from below; it is the descent of God into that divine birth of the human being into which we mortal creatures must climb; it is the attracting divine example given by God to man in the very type and form and perfected model of our human existence.”³²

Reflecting this view, the Mother considered the *Avatāra* necessary for consciousness to grow one more rung up the ladder to Spirit without losing touch with matter. In 1930 or ’31 she writes, “Each time [the *Avatāra*] adds one more step to the ladder there is a new creation upon earth.... The step which is being added now Sri Aurobindo has called the Supramental; as a result of it, the consciousness will be able to enter the supramental world and yet retain its personal form, its individualisation and then come down to establish here a new creation.”³³ The *Avatāra*, the Mother writes, “does not need to be recognised, he need have no outward power in order to be able to establish this conscious connection. Once, however, the connection is made, it must have its effect

³⁰ Georges Van Vrekhem, *Overman: The Intermediary Between the Human and the Supramental Being* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2012), 45.

³¹ See “The Possibility and Purpose of Avatarhood” and “The Process of Avatarhood,” in *Essays on the Gita* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Press, 2003) 145-67.

³² Sri Aurobindo, *Essays on the Gita*, 157.

³³ The Mother, “The Supramental Realization,” in *Questions and Answers 1929-31*, 178-9.

in the outward world in the form of a new creation, beginning with a model town and ending with a perfect world.”³⁴ As discussed in Chapter Four, the Mother considered Sri Aurobindo the *Avatāra Kṛṣṇa* come again. Her role would therefore be that of *Rādhā*.³⁵ Together they have come “to establish here a new supramental creation,” “a perfect world,” of which the Ashram is a vanguard that seeks to live the principles of the future new creation now.³⁶

The Mother’s teaching about their divine origin is found powerfully in her use of visual culture, especially her use of flowers. The red lotus flower she calls “Avatar—the Supreme manifest on earth in a body” and the white lotus she names “Aditi—the Divine Consciousness.”³⁷ Commenting on these flowers, she says, “The red lotus represents Sri Aurobindo, the white one me. In a general way the lotus is the flower of the Divine Wisdom, whatever its colour. But red signifies the Avatar, the Divine incarnated in matter, and white signifies the Divine Consciousness manifested upon earth.”³⁸

Both the Mother and Sri Aurobindo also had a symbol for their *avatāric* roles that the Mother crafted, shaping the sacred gaze of their devotees (See Figure 7.2).³⁹ These emblems are stylized versions of the lotus flowers that she named, and they enshrine the central values of their yoga and their role in it, which are displayed all over the Ashram and printed on their published materials. The Mother describes her own symbol: “The central circle represents the Divine Consciousness. The four petals represent the four powers of the Mother [that Sri Aurobindo described in *The Mother*].

³⁴ Ibid., 179.

³⁵ See p. 190 of this dissertation and “Radha’s Prayer” that she wrote in 1932, published in Sri Aurobindo, *The Mother with Letters on the Mother*, 647.

³⁶ The Mother, *Words of the Mother I* (Pondicherry: SAAP, 2004), 39.

³⁷ The Mother, *The Spiritual Significance of Flowers, Part 1* (Pondicherry: SAAP, 2000), 5 and 3 respectively.

³⁸ Ibid., 1.

³⁹ See Peter Hechs, “The Symbol of Sri Aurobindo,” *Sri Aurobindo Archives and Research* 3, no. 2 (December 1979): 211-19 for an analysis of Sri Aurobindo’s symbol and its relationship to the Jewish Magen David, a.k.a. Seal of Solomon or Star of David, and how the Mother came to create it before she met Sri Aurobindo.

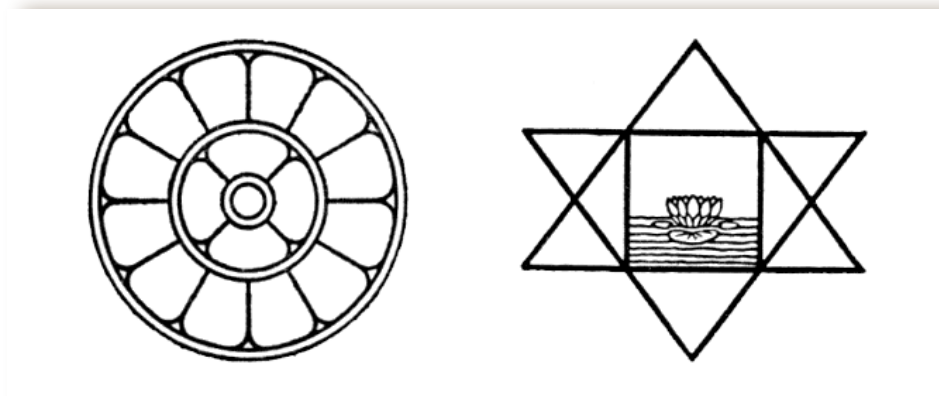


Figure 7.2. The Mother's and Sri Aurobindo's symbols, respectively.

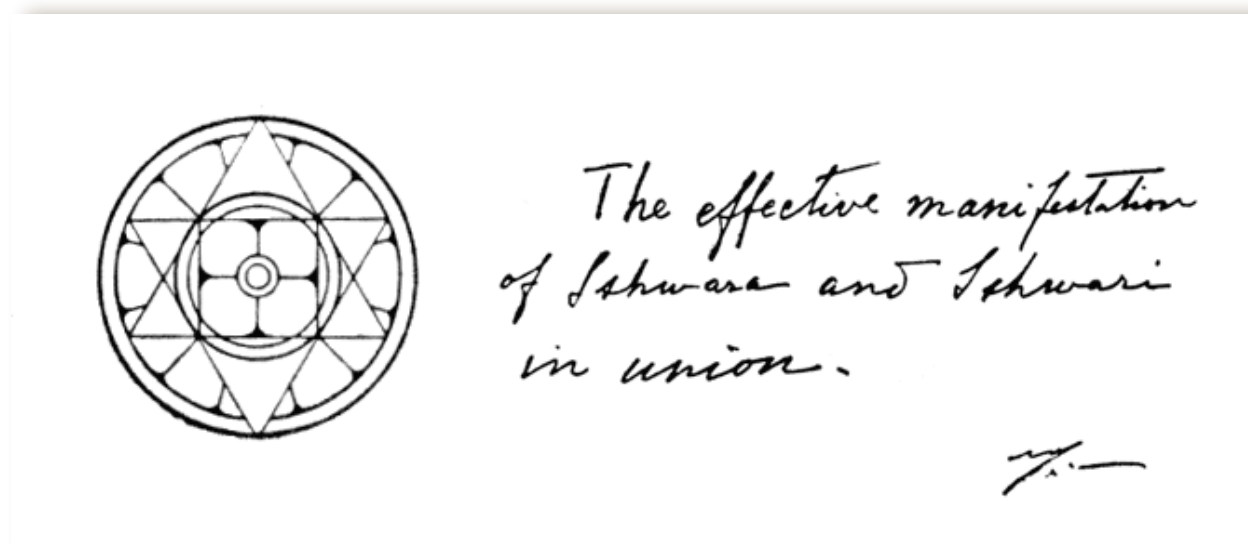


Figure 7.3. The union of both symbols used as the logo for the Sri Aurobindo Center of Education and also the Ashram Archives and Research. Depicted here with the Mother's handwriting and signature.

The twelve petals represent the twelve powers of the Mother manifested for her work.”⁴⁰ About Sri Aurobindo's symbol the Mother writes: “The descending triangle represents Sat-Chit-Ananda. The Ascending triangle represents the aspiring answer from matter under the form of life, light and love. The junction of both—the central square—is the perfect manifestation having at its center the Avatar of the Supreme—the lotus. The water—inside the square—represents the multiplicity, the

⁴⁰ <http://www.sriarobindoashram.org/ashram/mother/symbol.php>; accessed March 3, 2016. Of the twelve petals, the Mother says, “It signifies anything one wants, you see. Twelve: that's the number of Aditi, of Mahashakti. So it applies to everything; all her action has twelve aspects. There are also her twelve virtues, her twelve powers, her twelve aspects, and then her twelve planes of manifestation and many other things that are twelve; and the symbol, the number twelve is in itself a symbol. It is the symbol of manifestation, double perfection, in essence and in manifestation, in the creation.” The Mother, *Questions and Answers 1954*, 395.

creation.”⁴¹ In other places within the Ashram, the union of both symbols are also displayed, which the Mother simply writes is “The effective manifestation of Ishvara and Ishvari in union” (See Figure 7.3 above).

III. THE DESTINY OF THE MIND IN THE NEW CREATION

1. *A Dissertation Review*

Despite this union, there is evidence in their writings that the Mother and Sri Aurobindo temporarily had differing views about the destiny of the mind in the new creation. We have seen in every chapter how the mind is a central concern of both Gurus and their aesthetic theories. For them both, the role of the intellect (*mānasa buddhi*) in the creative process and spiritual growth is diminished or even entirely stilled. It is important to note that, for them, the mind is related to *Īśvara's* consort, *Mahēśvarī*, the power of the Divine Mother that Sri Aurobindo calls the personality of “wisdom.” He writes that she is “seated in the wideness above the thinking mind and will and sublimates and greatens them into wisdom and largeness or floods with a splendour beyond them.”⁴²

As I argued in the Introduction, the initial research on Sri Aurobindo’s aesthetics mistakenly prizes the imagination as the source of creativity and spiritual growth. With a closer reading of the Yogi’s texts, we see that the imagination is a power of the intellect that is involved in these processes, but because it is not of the higher nature, it is not the source. The *vijñāna* or supermind is the fountainhead. The imagination must be transformed into “inspiration”—one of the powers of genius (*jñāna*) in the higher self—to be of use by the *vijñāna* in creating their notion of what they call “the future art.”

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Sri Aurobindo, *The Mother*, 18.

In Chapter One, we reviewed in “The National Value of Art” Sri Aurobindo’s idea of maturing the mind in a process of *cittaśuddhi*, or purification (*suddhi*) of the basic consciousness (*citta*) through proper use of the arts. In this process, the sense mind (*manas*) is transformed into the reasoning mind (*buddhi*) and reason into intuition (*vijñānabuddhi*). The mind does not go away in this maturation process, but becomes a servant of higher faculties of wisdom. He also mentions stilling (*nivṛtti*) the mind as a way to grow beyond the duality of an abstemious experience of art and life and an overindulgent one.

In Chapter Two we analyzed Sri Aurobindo’s articles on “Indian Art” where he prizes the intuition as the creative and spiritual authority in the creative process and in the interpretation of traditional (ascendant) Indian sacred art and architecture. The *manas* and *buddhi* (or *mānasa buddhi* in their composite form) must be surrendered in this experience. He recommends a meditative practice (*dhyanā*) to still the *mānasa buddhi* and to access the intuition. This meditative practice in combination with a creative process awakens the vision of the soul, not of the mind and its senses. This spiritual vision is *dr̥ṣṭi*, “seeing, not conceiving. It is the vision at once of the essence and the image.”⁴³

In Chapter Three, Sri Aurobindo continues to highlight the intuition and demote the intellect for the purposes of creating *mantric* poetry. He writes, “In the heat of creation the intellectual sense of it becomes a subordinate action or even a mere undertone in his mind, and in his best moments he is permitted, in a way, to forget it altogether.”⁴⁴ Of his own creative practice, he says, “I don’t think about the technique because thinking is no longer in my line....If the inspiration is the right one, then I have not to bother about the technique then or afterwards.”⁴⁵ The proper way to create art in his view is to access the plane of genius (*jñāna*). The four powers of genius are

⁴³ Sri Aurobindo, *Isha Upanishad*, 71.

⁴⁴ Sri Aurobindo, *The Future Poetry*, 13.

⁴⁵ Sri Aurobindo, “Letters on ‘Savitri,’” in *Savitri*, 730.

intuition and discrimination (combined they are *smṛti*, or that which is “remembered”), revelation (*dṛṣṭi*, or that which is “seen”), and inspiration (*śruti*, or that which is “heard”). To create the *mantra*, the four powers of the intellect (reasoning, judgment, perception, and imagination) are purified and elevated into these four powers of the genius. He singles out the intuition as crucial for *mantric* poetry now in history, which he calls a “sea or mass of ‘stable lightnings,’” and it is associated with Indra’s faithful hound, Sarama.⁴⁶ Finally, he says that the heart (*hṛd*) is the home of the intuition and must replace the intellect as the authority of knowledge in *mantric* art.

In Chapter Four we saw how the guide of the Mother’s ideal artist is not the mind but the intuition. For their disciples, the Mother and Sri Aurobindo are a living embodiment of this guide. As the guru, they are the embodiment of the student’s intuition and connect the higher supramental light with the hidden light within the heart (*hṛd*) of the student. The Mother’s important work with flowers enacts this dynamic, which is not a mental experience but one that seeks to awaken the psychic being to its own beauty, the beauty of nature, and the aspiration “to perfect form” in art and life. Her use of flowers is meant also to awaken one’s own aspiration for the Light, as “plants have more [aspiration] in their physical being than man.”⁴⁷ As plants can be stimulated for more growth by being placed in the dark, the disciple’s mind is meant to “go dark” so the *citta* can find its own aspiration within the heart/psychic being.

In Chapter Five we studied the way the Golconde Dormitory invites a willing participant to let go of any mental construct and to experience its spaces from a deeper place of consciousness. Also, the process of building the structure in collaboration with the Mother invited the workers to let go of mental preferences and opinions so as to seek solutions to conflicts with each other that went beyond the comforts of self, and beyond cultural biases and habits of mind.

⁴⁶ Sri Aurobindo, *The Life Divine*, 983.

⁴⁷ The Mother, *Flowers and Their Messages*, i.

In Chapter Six, we saw how the Mother valued the heart of her student Huta more than the intellectual art training of her other artist-student, Krishnalal. She trained Krishnalal to unlearn his art education and for Huta to bring out her heart's wisdom more fully. The Mother proclaimed that "Huta is the painter" not because she possessed refined intellectual knowledge of the creative process such as color theory, two-point perspective, or human anatomy, but because she could surrender more fully to the Mother's guidance and work from a motivation of love and longing for the divine. Rather than merely strengthening her technique, a matter for the intellect, the Mother strengthened her consciousness, specifically the consciousness of her body and its capacities for creating with direct guidance from the *citta*. The Mother says, "Well, it is impossible to learn piano or painting unless the consciousness enters into the hand and the hand becomes conscious independently of the head. The head can be busy elsewhere, that has no importance."⁴⁸ Further, to more reliably paint her series called *Meditations on Savitri*, the Mother gave Huta visions and experiences of the "World of Supreme Beauty," instead of reading *Savitri* as a scholar or academic to understand the poem.

2. *The Mother's View of the Mind's Destiny*

What do these ideas mean for the future of the mind (*mānasa buddhi*) in the new creation? In 1920, right before she came to India permanently, the Mother writes,

This faculty [the intuition] which is exceptional, almost abnormal now, will certainly be quite common and natural for the new race, the man of tomorrow. But probably the constant exercise of it will be detrimental to the reasoning faculties. As man possesses no more the extreme physical ability of the monkey, so also will the superman lose the extreme mental ability of man, this ability to deceive himself and others.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Huta, *The Story of a Soul 1956, Volume Two Part Two*, 211.

⁴⁹ The Mother, *Words of Long Ago*, 164.

The editors of this text note that the Mother wrote an earlier draft that she rejected for publication:

“so also will the superman lose perhaps all of the power of reasoning; and, even, the organ itself may become useless, disappear little by little as the monkey’s tail, which was of no use for man, disappeared from his physical body.”⁵⁰ It would seem that in coming into contact with Sri Aurobindo and his personal experience of purification (*śuddhi*) and transformation of the mind, not its dissolution, she tempered her view: the mind is compared to the strength of the monkey, not its tail; and the mind will be transformed, not outlive its usefulness.

However, she returns to her earlier stance in much greater detail in the last phase of her life in *The Mother’s Agenda*. As a result of her continual contact with the supramental forces after her consort’s death and the Golden Day six years later in 1956, the Mother claims that her mind and vital are annihilated as her body discovers a new authority, which initiates radical changes in her physical nature. This new ruler is comprised of the *cakra* in her heart (the home of the intuition) and “above her head,” that is, above the crown of her head (above even the traditional place of full enlightenment in *kundalini* yoga theory called the *sahasradala* or “thousand-petalled” *cakra*), such that she senses, “thinks,” feels, and acts from this new composite place of consciousness.⁵¹ She notes that this contact with her heart and the center above the crown actually began when she first saw Sri Aurobindo in person in 1914, while her mental activity stilled and “never started up again.”⁵²

Not only was her mind stilled, in the 1960s the Mother tells Satprem and his companion Sujata that the “vital and the mind [were] sent packing so that the physical may truly be left to its

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ She mentions this experience seventy times by my counting in *The Mother’s Agenda*. She also says that Sri Aurobindo described the same experience in himself; see *The Agenda XI*, July 11, 1970. The reader will recall that *cakras* are “lotuses,” “wheels,” or “centers” located in the subtle body (*sūkṣma deha*) that some Hindu philosophies describe as interfacing and influencing the existence and function of the physical body along the spinal column. Sri Aurobindo writes, “Each of these lotuses is the centre and the storing-house of its own particular system of psychological powers, energies and operations,— each system corresponding to a plane of our psychological existence.” *Synthesis of Yoga*, 537.

⁵² The Mother, *The Mother’s Agenda I*, June 6, 1958.

own resources.”⁵³ Satprem notices this process and its difficult effects for over a decade and tells the Mother, “Strangely, every time you’ve had those great moments, or violent blows [from the supramental forces], if I may say so, every time it’s the mind and vital that were swept away. The first time too, in 1962.” The Mother agrees,

Yes, every time. I know, it’s like that: the mind and vital have been instruments to... knead Matter—knead and knead and knead in every possible way: the vital through sensations, the mind through thoughts—knead and knead. But they strike me as transitory instruments which will be replaced by other states of consciousness. You understand, they are a phase in the universal development, and they will be... *they will fall off as instruments that have outlived their usefulness*. So then, I had the concrete experience of what this matter kneaded by the vital and the mind is, but WITHOUT vital and WITHOUT mind... It’s something else.⁵⁴

For the Mother, as the supramental forces cause the *cakera* of the heart and the one above the head to grow in power and unity, the lower *cakras* that influence the vital and the mind dim and finally extinguish. As we will see, she thinks this will have physical repercussions for the new supramental being.

3. Sri Aurobindo’s View of the Mind’s Destiny

The mind’s annihilation or *manonāśa* is a concept that is found in late medieval *Advaita Vedānta* texts as a potential for individuals, and much later in the twentieth century in the thought

⁵³ The Mother, *The Mother’s Agenda IX*, August 28, 1968.

⁵⁴ Ibid. The italics are my emphasis, the capitol letters are the editor’s.

and practice of Ramana Maharishi and Meher Baba who are in conversation with *Advaita Vedānta*.⁵⁵

Though the Mother articulates her own version of *manonāśa* independent of this tradition, Sri Aurobindo makes a different argument in the majority of his texts, convinced of the perfectibility of the mind as part of the future perfection of the human being in the new creation. With a genius intellect like his own, his confidence in the mind is not surprising. Further, as we discussed in Chapter One, his first spiritual realization of Nirvana in 1907 gave him great confidence in the mind. This experience stilled (*nirṛtti*) the mind, seemingly like the Mother in 1914, but also elevated it. He writes, “It is not to say that everybody can do it in the way I did it and with the same rapidity of the decisive moment (for, of course, the latter fullest developments of this new untrammelled mental power took time, many years) but a progressive freedom and mastery of one’s mind is perfectly within the possibilities of anyone who has the faith and the will to undertake it.”⁵⁶

Therefore, for the Mother’s consort at this stage in his experience, the mind will not disappear, but will follow the path in others as it did for himself; it will be purified and then grow into a higher form of itself and be taken into the supramental future since “the possibilities of the mental being are not limited and ... it can be the free Witness and Master in its own house.”⁵⁷

⁵⁵ I am grateful to James Madaio and Roland Steiner for pointing these sources out to me. They note that the philosophical text *Mokṣopāya* (10th century) is a monist work that informs the later *Advaitin* traditions in the use of the concept of *manonāśa*. The *Laghu-Yoga-Vāsiṣṭha* (c. fourteenth century) is the key textual source for the usage of *manonāśa* in *Advaita Vedānta*. Similar constructions of ‘mindlessness’ can also be found in the works of early *Advaitins* like *The Āgamaśāstra of Gaṇḍapāda* as well as early medieval yogic works. In the twentieth century, *manonāśa* can be found in the thought of Ramana Maharshi, *The Collected Works of Ramana Maharshi*, ed. Arthur Osborne (Boston, MA: Red Wheel/Weiser, 1997), and in the teachings of Meher Baba, see Bhau Kalchuri, “Manonash,” in *Lord Meher* online edition, ed. and expanded by David Fenster, 2927-3032; (<http://www.lordmeher.org/rev/index.jsp?pageBase=page.jsp&nextPage=2927>, accessed March 3, 2016). To my knowledge, no one has done a critical comparative study of *manonāśa*. As I hope to show, this is an important concept for twentieth-century spiritual practice in India as exemplified by the Mother and Sri Aurobindo. Whereas *Advaita Vedānta* describes an individual *manonāśa*, the Mother as well as Meher Baba describe achieving a collective one, permanently accomplished as a template for a future human species.

⁵⁶ Sri Aurobindo, *On Himself*, 84.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

4. *The Divine Body and a New Center of Consciousness*

Only months before he died in 1950, Sri Aurobindo moves towards a view of *manonāśa* in his last essays that were written at the request of the Mother. With the dissolution of his own body on the horizon, he addresses the kinds of transformations that might need to happen to achieve what Sri Aurobindo calls “the divine body.”⁵⁸ He admits that he can only conjecture about how this might occur; however, he writes that no “such limits and no such impossibility of any necessary change can be imposed on the evolutionary urge.”⁵⁹ In his view, whatever parts of the current human body that are perfectible will be kept and developed, yet “whatever has no longer a use or is degraded, ... can be discarded and dropped on the way.”⁶⁰ The mind seems to be one such part that may be discarded. Echoing the Mother’s unpublished statement about the mind of 1920, Sri Aurobindo writes, “For it may well be that the evolutionary urge would proceed to a change of the [internal] organs themselves in their material working and use and diminish greatly the need of their instrumentation and even of their existence.”⁶¹ In 1953, the Mother writes, “For the organs are only the material symbols of centres [*cakras*] of energy; they are not the essential reality; they simply give it a form or a support in certain given circumstances.”⁶² In other words, all the organs, including the

⁵⁸ See the eight essays grouped under the title “The Supramental Manifestation Upon Earth,” especially “The Perfection of the Body” and “The Divine Body,” in *Essays in Philosophy and Yoga*, 521-57. These essays were in fact dictated as his eyesight was too deteriorated to write them. The Mother comments: “When Sri Aurobindo wrote this, he wrote it quite obviously for people who were not interested in yoga and had not read his books. He wrote it for people who were concerned with physical education, so he put himself in their place, expressed their ideas and tried to lead them a little farther. He took the standpoint of those who had never read his books.” *Questions and Answers 1957-1958* (Pondicherry: SAAP, 2004), 183.

⁵⁹ Sri Aurobindo, *Essays in Philosophy and Yoga*, 555.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 556.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 555. See also The Mother, *On Thoughts and Aphorisms* (Pondicherry: SAAP, 2001), 143-4.

⁶² The Mother, *Questions and Answers, 1953*, 59.

brain-mind, will be replaced with the direct workings of the *cakras*, in their vision of the future new being.⁶³

No matter his changing perspective about the mind's destiny, throughout his writings, Sri Aurobindo theorizes the measured way in which the supramental body might evolve out of homo sapiens. This transition is a vast, seemingly impossible evolutionary leap that would go from our mortal, animal/mental species that is indirectly influenced by the *cakras* through internal organs, to an immortal, divine/supramental species that is directly influenced by the *cakras*. Like the ancient hominids that bridged the large gap between ancient primate and the homo sapiens, he describes the need for an intermediate mind and body bridging our current animal-natured mental form and the supramental divine body to come. In these last essays, he calls this intermediary species or set of species "the new humanity," and in her discussions, the Mother calls it "the superman." For them, the superman would be an animal-natured body like our own; however, it would be "new" and "super," in that it would somehow begin to exceed "man" and the influence of the vital and the *manas*, and capable of procreating the new supramental being. The Gurus both labor to find an English word that describes the ultimate supramental species, who is truly a divine "being" and not a "man" since it would not be a creature of the *manas* nor sexually differentiated, but androgynous.⁶⁴

According to Sri Aurobindo's late essays, homo sapiens, the so-called "wise man," knows incompletely by means of the *mānasa buddhi*, whereas the intermediate superman would possess a new, yet temporary faculty that gives direct, complete, and perfectly reliable knowledge. He introduces a new term to describe it: a "mind of Light." It will eventually replace our current obscure mental capacities, "the mind of Ignorance," preparing for the full installation of the new

⁶³ One of her students asked her once, "Sri Aurobindo spoke of replacing the organs by the functioning of the chakras." The Mother responded, "Yes, yes. He said [it would be accomplished in] three hundred years!" The Mother, *On Thoughts and Aphorisms* (Pondicherry: SAAP, 2001), 144.

⁶⁴ As a reminder, the word "man" is derived from the Proto-Indo-European root \sqrt{man} , to think, which is the root also of *manas*. "Man" is by this definition, a creature of the *manas*, whereas the supramental being, having experienced *mānonaśa* takes no part in this nature.

supramental Consciousness. The mind of Ignorance seeks “for knowledge but even in its knowledge [is] bound to the Ignorance.”⁶⁵ The mind of Light is not thusly bound and “proceeds from knowledge to knowledge.”⁶⁶ It seems that it includes the intuition, but is not limited to its briefer though reliable “lightning strikes” of wisdom. It is closer in nature to the Truth of the supermind, which “knows by its own inherent right of nature, by its own light.”⁶⁷ He writes, “In the Mind of Light when it becomes full-orbed this character of the Truth reveals itself though in a garb that is transparent even when it seems to cover.”⁶⁸ The mind of Light is “veiled” version of the supermind.

Though Sri Aurobindo died before he could finish his essays on the mind of Light and possibly relate this new idea to his previous theory about the higher planes of consciousness, the Mother claimed all the supramental force he had gathered over his life came to her and, “what he has called the Mind of Light got realized in me.”⁶⁹ She writes that unlike its ignorant predecessor, this new form of intermediate consciousness is able, with constant perfection and stability, to follow the dictates of the psychic being, which is our direct connection to God.⁷⁰ It also communicates its full vision of the truth, in a partial, sequential manner.⁷¹ She notes that

to say everything at the same time, all at once, is [now] impossible, and we are compelled to veil one part of what we see or know in order to bring it out one thing

⁶⁵ Sri Aurobindo, *Essays in Philosophy and Yoga*, 585. His “mind of Ignorance” matches what he writes in other places about the *mānasa buddhi*. In *The Synthesis of Yoga*, for instance, he writes, “For what language forged by the reason can express the suprarational? Fundamentally, this is the difference between these two powers that the mental reason [*mānasa buddhi*] proceeds with labour from ignorance to truth, but the [supramental] gnosis has in itself the direct contact, the immediate vision, the easy and constant possession of the truth and has no need of seeking or any kind of procedure.” Sri Aurobindo, *Synthesis of Yoga*, 482.

⁶⁶ Sri Aurobindo, *Essays in Philosophy and Yoga*, 589.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 588.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 589.

⁶⁹ The Mother, *Words of the Mother I*, 63.

⁷⁰ The Mother, *Questions and Answers 1955*, 222.

⁷¹ The Mother, *Questions and Answers 1957-1958*, 194. Sri Aurobindo also explains this comparison in “Towards the Supramental Time Vision,” *Synthesis of Yoga*, 885-904.

after another; and this is what [Sri Aurobindo] calls the “veil” [when describing the mind of Light], which is transparent, for one sees everything, knows everything at the same time; one has the total knowledge of a thing, but one cannot express it fully all at once.⁷²

The *mānasa buddhi* also communicates sequentially, but at its best, it guides the *citta* from darkness to less darkness, while the mind of Light is perfectly reliable and leads it from light to greater light. In contrast to both of these minds, the Mother says a supramental way of expression would not be a series of utterances, but a unity, given in a total, global, and simultaneous manner. However, the Mother notes that to achieve this kind of communication, an appropriate instrument is required: a body that expresses and receives this simultaneity and coincidence of opposites in its physical form; a body that *is* this unity and wholeness, which is why androgyny is so important in their view of the supramental being.

One of the difficulties to overcome, it seems, is the verbal inheritance from the mind of Ignorance. As the Mother understands it, mentally-produced words cannot communicate supramental vision in the supramental way, which is one of pure truth, truthfully and transparently. As homo sapiens, we exist in a body that was formed to serve the dual natured *mānasa buddhi*, and so it is adapted only to give and receive knowledge in the manner of the *mānasa buddhi*, that is, partially and sequentially—ignorantly and heavily veiled by the Ignorance from which it sprang. Discovering fragmentary truths is its best hope, and so it is condemned to express in a language that is always a partial deception at the same time. Deception is the mind of Ignorance’s signature characteristic and ruling identity, and mentally produced words share this nature. The Mother’s published statement of 1920 that in the future, the ability of the mind to deceive itself and others will disappear with the superman, is tantamount to saying that this mind of Ignorance itself will disappear. For her, the kind of expression of truth that is left after *manonāśa* is simply the ability to live it, which eventually has repercussions for the structure of the body. She writes, “The Truth is not linear but global; it is

⁷² The Mother, *Questions and Answers 1957-1958*, 194.

not successive but simultaneous. Therefore it cannot be expressed in words: it has to be lived.”⁷³

This living experience of Truth is related to artistic communication. For the Mother, art is capable of being “global and simultaneous;” of expressing the mind of Light and even the supermind, which is why the arts become even more important in her spiritual growth after *manonāśa*.

5. *Some Implications of Manonāśa and the Mind of Light for Art and the Body*

The mind of Light communicates in much the same way that the Gurus describe creative expression. During the same timeframe of *The Mother's Agenda* (1957-1973), the Mother worked with her student Huta (1956-1972) on a kind of “lived” communication other than words, suggesting a direct relationship between her artwork and her difficult experiences of transformation in her *cakras* and the body. As described in Chapter Six, first the Mother trained Huta in oils and then they experimented with an expression of the “future painting,” inspired by passages from *Savitri*, Sri Aurobindo’s “future poetry.” The Mother told Huta in 1969 that in reading this poem and painting pictures of it with Huta, she experiences no mental activity. She says, “You see, *Savitri* is very good for me also, because while I read and recite, I do not think at all. I am only inspired. I need this experience.”⁷⁴ Huta wonders how the Mother could need anything since she is divine. The Mother responds that “Yes, that I am but this is physical (*pointing out her body*). And there is the physical world and it must be perfected.”⁷⁵ To help her body find the new authority beyond the mind and express itself supramentally, Sri Aurobindo and his poetry are the key. She says to Huta,

When I concentrate and go back to the Origin of the Creation, I see things as a whole in their reality and I speak. You see, each time when I speak, Sri Aurobindo comes here. And I speak exactly what he wants me to speak. It is the inner hidden truth of *Savitri* that he wants me to reveal. Each time he comes, a wonderful

⁷³ The Mother, *Words of the Mother III*, 279.

⁷⁴ The Mother, *About Savitri* (Pondicherry: SAAP, 2015), no page number.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

atmosphere is created. I have read *Savitri* before but it was nothing compared to this reading.⁷⁶

The “inner hidden truth” of *Savitri* is linked to what the Mother discovers in her vision of “the Origin of the Creation.” It is also linked to the presence of Sri Aurobindo and it helps her to “see things as a whole in their reality and then she speaks.” This vision of “the whole” stimulated by the art form of Sri Aurobindo’s *mantric* poetry is proper to how the Gurus describe the mind of Light and the body of the superman.

According to the Mother, Sri Aurobindo also found his poem nourishing for his work in anchoring the supramental forces on the Earth, especially at the end of his life. The Mother writes,

What struck me is that he never wanted to write anything else [other than *Savitri*]. To write those articles for the *Bulletin* [“The Supramental Manifestation Upon Earth”] was really a heavy sacrifice for him. He had said he would complete certain parts of *The Synthesis of Yoga*, but when he was asked to do so, he replied, ‘No, I don’t want to go down to that mental level!’ *Savitri* comes from somewhere else altogether. And I think that *Savitri* is the most important thing to speak about.⁷⁷

Expressing his yogic experience as poetry took precedence over refining his (mental) theories about his spiritual practice. Given the Gurus’ experience of *Savitri*, the arts and poetry are more vitally important to their yogic practice because they seem to help anchor the supramental forces, to aid the *citta* as it undergoes *manonāśa*, and they possess the potential for communicating supramental knowledge the supramental way; *viṣṭ*, in a simultaneous, global, and unitary way. Even in his early writings about ascendant sacred art, Sri Aurobindo writes, “All art reposes on some unity and all its details, whether few and sparing or lavish and crowded and full, must go back to that unity and help its significance; otherwise it is not art.”⁷⁸ If this is art’s potential in the “old consciousness” and ascendant spiritual practice, all the more important might it be in service to descendant spirituality

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ *The Mother’s Agenda Vol II*, September 23, 1961. The editor of the *Synthesis of Yoga* notes that the “third section, ‘The Yoga of Self-Perfection,’ ... was never completed.” This section is specifically about the Integral Yoga.

⁷⁸ Sri Aurobindo, *The Renaissance in India and Other Essays on Indian Culture*, 274.

and “the new Consciousness” in the mind of Light, and eventually in the supermind. For the Gurus, in the new creation “*Savitri* is the most important thing to speak about” because it is the supramental message, supramentally given. To paint it, repeats and expands this expressive dynamic for the Mother and for Huta.

The Gurus also describe supramental sensory experience in a way that is analogous to the creative experience that they describe. The Mother’s experience of *manonāśa* is not a dissociative experience of the self, for she reports an unusually heightened awareness of her senses and the objects of sense as a result of this loss of mind.⁷⁹ Of the supramental experience of the senses she says in 1961, “it’s not that you employ the senses proper to another plane (we have always known we had senses on all the different planes); it’s quite different from that: the [physical] senses THEMSELVES change. [Sri Aurobindo] foretells this change – he says it will occur. And I believe it begins in the way I am experiencing it now.”⁸⁰ To take sight as an example, instead of seeing the subtle (*sūkṣma*) plane with subtle sight, or the causal (*kāraṇa*) plane with supramental sight (something they already claim to possess), both Gurus report that the supramental change involves physical sight seeing physical objects in a supramental way. Sri Aurobindo writes,

The supermind uses the physical organs and confirms their way of action, but it develops behind them the inner and deeper senses which see what are hidden from the physical organs and farther transforms the new sight, hearing, etc. thus created by casting it into its own mould and way of sensing. The change is one that takes nothing from the physical truth of the object, but adds to it its supraphysical truth

⁷⁹ One can find the idea of *manonāśa*, in fact, in Āyurvedic texts as a term for mental illness. For example, see the classic text *Aṣṭāṅgahṛdayasamhitā* (*Heart of Medicine*) by Vāgbhāta; http://sarit.indology.info/exist/apps/sarit/works/arunadatta-sarvangasundara.xml_1.3.4.2.2.7.79.html?action=search#1.3.4.2.2.7.79.2; accessed March 3, 2016. Thanks to Dominik Wujastyk for this reference. See Dominik Wujastyk, *The Roots of Ayurveda* (London: Penguin Classics, 2003).

⁸⁰ The Mother, *The Mother’s Agenda II*, June 27, 1961. Their notion of *śruti* and *dṛṣṭi* are these spiritual senses proper to other planes. Supramental sight and hearing and the rest are physical senses proper to the physical plane, but transformed by supramental force.

and takes away by the removal of the physical limitation the element of falsehood in the material way of experience.⁸¹

This description relates to Sri Aurobindo's descriptions of sensing like an artist. For example, he writes that in supramentalized physical vision, "It is as if the eye of the poet and artist had replaced the vague or trivial unseeing normal vision, but singularly spiritualised and glorified,—as if indeed it were the sight of the supreme divine Poet and Artist in which we were participating and there were given to us the full seeing of his truth and intention in his design of the universe and of each thing in the universe."⁸² Seeing as an artist is therefore a prototype of supramental seeing for the Guru. What an inspired artist might abnormally receive and see in a temporary way, the supramentalized body sees in a normal and permanent manner.

The last implication of the Mother's experience and projection of *manonāśa* for the future is that it does not seem to be a principled stance against pursuits by the (current) mind of Ignorance or *mānasa buddhi*. For her, the mind is "a phase in the universal development," so it must be honored, even as it eventually dies in the new creation.⁸³ Another hint of this caveat is in her 1920's comparison of the mind's destiny in the supramental age with the destiny of the strength of the monkey (or the monkey's tail) in the age of reason. She seems to say that when the mind emerged in evolution, the extreme strength of the primate was no longer needed for the mental being, who could use the mind to master matter in an even stronger way, presumably building machines that would outdo any strength he would have used as an ancient primate, making this extreme bodily strength obsolete.

⁸¹ Sri Aurobindo, "The Supramental Sense," in *Synthesis of Yoga*, 868. In light of this description, one can understand why the Mother wanted her future painting to depict objects "without shadow," that is, without the shadow of the falsehood. This description also seems related to the idea that the *cakras* will take over physical functions like seeing in the new supramentalized physical body.

⁸² Sri Aurobindo, *Synthesis of Yoga*, 868.

⁸³ The Mother, *The Mother's Agenda IX*, August 28, 1968.

Likewise, the Mother thinks that when the supramental being emerges in evolution, the extreme mental capacities of homo sapiens will no longer be needed, since the new Consciousness and its divine body will outshine any knowledge and placement of that knowledge into action that a human could achieve or imagine now. Given this logic, it seems that the supramental species would not evolve by artificially inducing *manonāśa* any more than pre-human primates could have evolved into mental beings by artificially annihilating their strength (*balanāśa*). She indicates that the mind of Ignorance needs to be used but used well and maybe even “used up” before it can be replaced by the mind of Light in a natural way as the “Grace-Light” of the new Consciousness does its work of transformation for the new creation. She writes, “New means of expression must be worked out to make it possible to express the supramental knowledge in a supramental way.... Now, we are obliged to raise our mental capacity to its utmost so that there is only, so to say, a sort of hardly perceptible borderline, but one that still exists, for all our means of expression still belong to this mental world, do not have the supramental capacity.”⁸⁴ “Raising one’s mental capacity to its utmost” would be, as all things are in the Integral Yoga, an individual concern, as different aptitudes require different methods for different aspirants. However, it is clear that creative expression in the arts is one of the important ways that the mental capacity will be raised and new means of expression worked out to prepare for *manonāśa* and its aftermath, making room for “the supramental capacity” of communication.

IV. DESCENDANT SPIRITUALITY AND OPPOSITION

Maheśvara’s consort, *Maheśvarī*, is what Sri Aurobindo calls the power of “wisdom” at work in the growth and dissolution of the mind and its eventual replacement by the supermind consciousness. Operative in the Gurus’s descendant spiritual approach is *Brahmā’s* consort

⁸⁴ The Mother, *Questions and Answers 1957-1958*, 199.

Mahāsarasvatī, the power of “perfection.” Of her Sri Aurobindo writes, “When her work is finished, nothing has been forgotten, no part has been misplaced or omitted or left in a faulty condition; all is solid, accurate, complete, admirable. Nothing short of a perfect perfection satisfies her and she is ready to face an eternity of toil if that is needed for the fullness of her creation.”⁸⁵ In the view of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo, their Integral Yoga is not “a flight from life,” but a spiritual practice that seeks “this material existence to *participate* in the divine life” in order to build a “world of perfection” on Earth and in history.⁸⁶ This approach implies very hard and even nearly impossible work. As the Mother says, “But this [*sādhana*] is not for lazy folk. It’s for people who like progress. ... This [Ashram] is not a place for rest..., this is a place for working even harder than before.”⁸⁷

As the Gurus see it, before the twentieth century, spirituality tended to be transcendent in nature, where the difficult work of joining the inner spiritual planes of consciousness (“a flight from life”) was deemed appropriate since matter was understood not to be perfectible, owing to the binding grip of death, suffering, ignorance, and falsehood. They claim that during the twentieth century, these contraries became fundamentally weakened for the first time in the universe’s (13.82 billion year) history by new divine forces, inviting an even more difficult labor than transcendence: transformation, which is the business of “kneading” matter to be freed for something new and eternal. For them, death, suffering, ignorance, and falsehood are woven by God into the fabric of creation, to more fully awaken “a call for a Power of Eternity with an intensity which would not be there except for [these] constant threat[s].”⁸⁸ As such, these threats—these resistances—are actually welcomed in the descendant spiritual practice of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, since they can stimulate more forcefully an aspiration to establish their opposites on Earth: eternal life, abiding

⁸⁵ Sri Aurobindo, *The Mother*, 23.

⁸⁶ The Mother, *Questions and Answers 1957-1958*, 161-62. Her emphasis.

⁸⁷ The Mother, *Questions and Answers 1956*, 21.

⁸⁸ The Mother, *On Thoughts and Aphorisms*, 164.

bliss, fully reliable knowledge, and unitary truth. We have seen the Mother's commentary throughout this dissertation that "opposition and contraries are a stimulus to progress," since the Gurus think that opposition in fact "is the quickest and most effective means to bring creation out of its inertia and lead it towards its fulfilment."⁸⁹

In the understanding of both Gurus, oppositions are agents of God's *Cit* or "pure consciousness," which the Gurus also call *Cit-Śakti* (Conscious-Force). She is the divine *Cit* of *Saccidānanda*, which applies a forceful pressure on the *citta*, or "basic consciousness" of all creatures and especially the aspirant over many lifetimes to become *Itself*, to become increasingly "pure." In their evolutionary theory of growth, this pressure is not always the same, but in fact changes as the needs of creation and the individual creature change. For the Gurus, delivery of and battle with these oppositions are the province of *Śiva's* consort, *Mahākālī*. Sri Aurobindo describes her as the Divine Mother's personality of "strength" who, "[i]ntolerant of imperfection, ... deals roughly with all in man that is unwilling and ... is severe to all that is obstinately ignorant and obscure; her wrath is immediate and dire against treachery and falsehood and malignity, ill-will is smitten at once by her scourge."⁹⁰ She is that strength in the ashramite embodied by the Mother that prompts the *sādhaka* to face weaknesses and victoriously conquer them.

For the Gurus, if one can surrender to the pressure that *Cit* provides, one increasingly awakens to experience what God experiences: to become the pure and illimitable Being of *Brahman's Sat*, the Conscious-Force of *Brahman's Cit-Śakti*, and the Self-Delight of *Brahman's Ānanda*, in a new perfected body. The Gurus used art and the creative process as the most prominent practical way to progressively reach this exalted goal. Art is a purifier of consciousness (*cittaśuddhi*), a means for its liberation, and then a tool for its perfection in the Integral Yoga. In other words, the arts have a role

⁸⁹ Ibid., 165-6.

⁹⁰ Sri Aurobindo, *The Mother*, 19.

to play in all three stages of “The Triple Transformation” that Sri Aurobindo says describes his Integral Yoga: the psychic change (purification), the spiritual change (liberation), and the supramental change (perfection).⁹¹

This dissertation argues that if one does not understand and appreciate the value of this principle of growth and opposition, one misses a crucial hermeneutical key to the Integral Yoga. In Chapter One, we saw the way in which the right and left “hands” of the *buddhi* oppose each other in the natural, though difficult stage of mental development. The difficulty, as Sri Aurobindo articulates in his social political works, is that these two “hands” create a further opposition in different kinds of personal and social ideals or powers. The first ideal is ethical (the “will power” of *tapas*) and the other aesthetic (the “delight” of *ānanda*). They tend to repulse each other in their purest forms, though in a way that is in fact creative for the *citta* throughout history. This tension and conflict between the right and left hands of the *buddhi* is necessary before, he says, they may unite and fulfill each other in the supramental manifestation. Sri Aurobindo writes, “The misunderstanding between these two sides of our nature is an inevitable circumstance of our human growth which must try them to their fullest separate possibilities and experiment in extremes in order that it may understand the whole range of its capacities.” Further, this experimentation in “contrast and opposition between individual types reproduces itself in a like contrast and opposition between social and national types.”⁹² The arts, as he describes them in his early articles on India art and education, help to guide this difficult learning of the *citta* in the *buddhi*, both individually and collectively.

We saw evidence of this principle of growth in Chapter Two, when we analyzed Sri Aurobindo’s pilgrimage of past ascendant Indian sacred art and architecture stimulated by

⁹¹ See Sri Aurobindo, “The Triple Transformation,” *The Life Divine*, pp. 924-54. See also my diagram of this in the Appendix I.

⁹² Sri Aurobindo, *The Human Cycle*, 96.

disparaging thinkers like William Archer. Archer's negative view of traditional Indian painting, sculpture, and architecture motivated the Yogi to clearly articulate the value of this heritage in the context of colonial oppression and an aspiration for self-rule. The Yogi also argues that sacred art itself can be a form of opposition to stimulate transformation for any willing participant-observer, which is a view shared by Lindsay Jones. For Jones, a ritual-architectural event tends to destabilize the participant's sense of place and self; potentially transforming what is familiar into what is strange for the participant. This transformative process is a gamble for Jones, one in which a person may lose cherished worldviews that honor theory over practice; and yet, transformation is possible in which one may gain inclusive perspectives that honor theory informed by embodied experience. For Sri Aurobindo, the transformation involves more than worldviews; it includes the difficult and painful surrender of the reasoning intellect (*mānasa buddhi*) to spiritual faculties.

We also saw this principle of growth in Chapter Three when we explored Sri Aurobindo's theories of a "future *mantric* poetry" in the English language, the very tongue of his oppressors. Like Jones's ritual-architectural event that destabilizes the participant as a way to initiate a new identity, Sri Aurobindo's future poetry challenges the hearer to surrender to something higher within herself and to become someone new. Similar to reader-response theorists, the Yogi describes a process of self-discovery in the reading of this poetry. For him, one comes to the *mantric* poem as a certain person, whose personality may somehow be found wanting in light of "the impersonal spirit of Truth and Beauty" within it. The poem potentially exposes this limitation and invites the reader to surrender to being a broader, newer person, what Walker Gibson calls a "mock" reader; what Sri Aurobindo might call a "mock intuitive reader." As the Yogi describes it, the impersonal nature of Truth and Beauty that characterizes the ritual-poetic experience, happens between the poem, the hearer, and the poet, and it is intense: stretching the personal experience beyond itself to participate in an

impersonal one. If the reader applies enough effort with this poetry over time, this temporary expansion of identity may become a permanent one.

Sri Aurobindo's own creative process in writing poetry is similar. As he describes it, he continually revised his poetry as his consciousness ascended the spiritual planes and grew more impersonal in the process. His poem *Savitri*, as we saw in Chapter Three, is the primary example of this pattern, for it provided him with a constant way to face his own limitations in supramental expression, first exposing these limitations and then allowing him to revise the words in the light of the higher attainment of consciousness. Though he used *Savitri* "as a means of ascension," his goal is not to remain in the higher impersonal realms of Truth and Beauty, but to bring their presence "down" in the creative process and in the poem, to divinize language. The Mother's view is that "The Truth is not linear but global; it is not successive but simultaneous. Therefore it cannot be expressed in words: it has to be lived."⁹³ Sri Aurobindo's experience is that these verbal limitations are overcome if words are used and transformed in the service of art by the faculty of the heart not the intellect, which is in the service of *mantric* poetry.

The poem *Savitri* itself also expresses the principle of growth through opposition thematically. Sri Aurobindo's tale might be thought of as a descent into the oppositions of matter, leading to a confrontation and transformation of Death itself into deathless Life by the highest forms of love between his two main characters, Sāvitṛī and Satyavān. Like all threats and opposition, Death is not depicted as something to be transcended, but as "someone" to be welcomed and transformed when united with Spirit. In the end, Spirit is also transformed in the poem, since combined with mortal matter, a new phenomenon or being is created that is neither mortal nor transcendent, but is an entirely new, terrestrial yet divine species.

⁹³ The Mother, *Words of the Mother III*, 279.

In the chapters on the work of the Mother, we also see more explicit evidence of this principle; in her own experience and in her work with her students. She embodies the energy of Sāvitṛī for her students, a word that etymologically means “stimulator.” In the context of a nurturing and caring relationship, the Mother encourages the student to face oppositions as they surface in life, or even as she furnishes them herself. As we saw in Chapter Four, she thinks that plants are instructive for the Yoga in this way. Plants embody aspiration for the light, which is stimulated more intensely at night or in places of competition for the sun. She notes that plants grow higher and larger when deprived of light than they would if continually exposed to it. In the same way, the Mother sometimes keeps her students “in the dark” to awaken more intense longing for God and more intense potentials for spiritual growth if the darkness is used wisely, and greeted with an attitude of joy.

Informed by the work of Lindsay Jones, in Chapter Five I described the ritual-architectural eventfulness of the Golconde Dormitory, discovering in it a very full expression of descendant spirituality and growth through opposition, both in the experience of its built form and in the accounts of the builders during construction. As a descendant form of architecture, the Mother and Sri Aurobindo built Golconde and the Ashram in the city of Pondicherry, not on a mountain retreat. In this metropolitan context, Golconde allures and orients its residents to be like its namesake and live in a diamond mine. As diamonds are formed through titanic heat and pressure, progressing in the Yoga is achieved by the crushing pressure of the new Consciousness on the lower natures of the residents. I also found that the physical spaces and the rules for living commemorate an experience of God as “the Dawn,” which can be thought of as an experience of opposition between light and dark. In my own precarious stay as a Western scholar who was considered a threat by some within the community, I found this opposition to be intellectually and personally productive, as it stimulated more fully my research into the very principle of opposition itself in the Integral Yoga.

In terms of what Jones calls “the Ritual Context,” we saw how the building phase of the Golconde dormitory provided an opportunity to pressure limited and limiting cultural habits and sacred gazes of the workers to expand into a non-sectarian way of seeing and behaving. The conflictual relationships between the workers, as I could discern through diary evidence, resulted from the Mother’s attempt to catalyze a growth progress in their Yoga, much like a cocoon does for a larva. If one can manage it, joy is the counter pressure to this yogic cocoon that many in the community describe to help make the progress proceed more rapidly; to continue in potentially impossible and irritating work, knowing that to do so invites the death of an old self but also the birth of a new life in a future form that the Mother herself embodies.

In Chapter Six, we saw how the Mother’s painting work with Krishnalal and Huta demonstrates these principles. In Krishnalal’s case, he describes how his vital nature opposed his development, and his early art expresses it in his awkward and sometimes melancholic figurative painting. He even noticed this influence in his own behavior; that being in the Mother’s presence awakened new, more mature potentials which his vital nature resisted. Paradoxically, as Krishnalal and the Gurus suggest, the arousal of weaknesses, limitations, or errors while in the Mother’s presence need not be alarming, but an indication of a successful beginning in the Integral Yoga. In the same way, he realized that the influence of his lower vital nature in his art need not be disconcerting, but can be seen as the necessary first step in revealing what nature hides. In the attempt to express beauty in art, first the vital opposition is exposed. If one can persist in anchoring the new potential while the vital resists, the psychic being may be revealed.

Huta, the Mother’s chief painting collaborator, describes elements of living in the community as “dark, depressing, strange, startling, crushing.”⁹⁴ In moving to the Ashram from Africa, Huta began a difficult process of dissolving former identities of daughter, sister, and wife,

⁹⁴ Huta, *The Story of a Soul, 1954-1955, Volume One*, 36.

even as the Mother tried to encourage a new identity of being her spiritual child. According to Huta's diary, the Mother focused Huta's consciousness away from her struggles by training her gaze to be increasingly more universal, inclusive, generous, and sensitive to the physical world. The Mother used flowers, cleaning tasks, clothing exchanges, dolls, and painting lessons. Like Chandulal at Golconde, the Mother also scolded Huta when needed, which Huta thought helped "[ashramites] to see their obstacles and change."⁹⁵ This opposition by the Mother was always practiced in a broader context of care and love. As with all her students, the Mother constantly tried to assure Huta that "You are my adopted child, I have adopted you, and I like to take care of you."⁹⁶

For followers of the Integral Yoga, *Mahākālī* and her opposition can obviously come in the form of negative experiences, but also in what might be considered desirable ones. An experience of beauty is a prime stimulus in the Yoga that I will next summarize from this dissertation.

V. BEAUTY AND THE INTEGRAL YOGA

According to the Gurus, art surrendered to beauty is primarily the charge of *Viṣṇu*'s consort, *Mahalakṣmī*, the Divine Mother's power and personality of "harmony." Sri Aurobindo writes that it is "through love and beauty that she lays on men the yoke of the Divine."⁹⁷ For both Gurus, the difficult pressure for growth of the *Cit-Śakti* is integrated with the experiences of *Sat* (being) and *Ananda* (delight).⁹⁸ Potential progress in the life divine is growth through and beyond oppositions that, once conquered, touch the fullness of being and delight. Sri Aurobindo writes,

Even our relative humanity has this experience that all dissatisfaction means limit, an obstacle,—satisfaction comes by realisation of something withheld, by the surpassing of the limit, the overcoming of the obstacle. This is because our original

⁹⁵ Huta, *The Story of a Soul, 1956, Volume Two Part Two*, 46.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 138.

⁹⁷ Sri Aurobindo, *The Mother*, 21.

⁹⁸ See Sri Aurobindo, *The Life Divine*, 80-121.

being is the absolute in full possession of its infinite and illimitable self-consciousness and self-power; a self possession whose other name is self-delight.⁹⁹

This conscious experience of “self-delight” (*Ānanda*) in our “original being” (*Sat*) is the goal of humanity for the Gurus. As Sri Aurobindo writes, beauty plays a central role in this experience, since, along with love, “beauty is *Ānanda* taking form.”¹⁰⁰ For them, delight spontaneously expresses itself as beauty and love in the world of form: in nature, life, or a work of art. Sri Aurobindo writes, “What has been said of great creative art, that being the form in which normally our highest and intensest aesthetic satisfaction is achieved, applies to all beauty, beauty in Nature, beauty in life as well as beauty in art.”¹⁰¹ For the Gurus and their followers, this is *Mahālakṣmī*’s achievement.

As we saw in Chapter One, considering his essays on “The National Value of Art,” Sri Aurobindo notes that *Ānanda* is preeminently embodied by the beauty and love of the *Avatāra*—the Guru of gurus—whose presence and pressure raises the *citta* in developmental stages to ultimately enjoy his *Ānanda*. Sri Aurobindo writes that the delight of the *Avatāra*’s beauty and love potentially awakens the will to let go of limited physical, emotional, and mental pleasures, for purer, broader pleasures and identities that increasingly approach his experience of delight and being. This view can be linked to his second important spiritual experience in jail, where he encountered *Kṛṣṇa*, whom he saw in all forms. Based on this experience, Sri Aurobindo’s notion of divine beauty is beyond the dichotomies of pain and pleasure, attraction and disgust, or ugliness and conventional qualities of physical beauty, yet present within all beings.

As Sri Aurobindo conceives it, the arts that have a spiritual function mimic the *Avatāra* by expressing this universal presence of beauty and love. These two divine attributes are potentially unpleasant to the lower nature, however, since they are integrated with *Cit*, potentially “kneading”

⁹⁹ Ibid., 101.

¹⁰⁰ Sri Aurobindo, *Letters on Poetry and Art*, 700.

¹⁰¹ Sri Aurobindo, *The Human Cycle*, 143.

and “sifting” the *citta* of the viewer of such art. His notion of spiritual art, in fact, “purifies by beauty.”¹⁰² Like the *Avatāra* or any guru, this art pressures the boundaries that define a well-formed lower nature (*aparārdha*), causes it to dissolve, and in turn, guides the resulting chaos into a new and broader structure; eventually the divine life of the higher nature (*parārdha*). Thus is the vocational nature of beauty (*kaḷon*), which “calls” one to live from a broader place of consciousness.

Sri Aurobindo recognizes that beauty is a loaded term and can be used for many different reasons, some of which may be inappropriate and even lead to injustice. As he explains in “The National Value of Art,” many European cultures give a “scientific” or rational value to art, emphasizing some notion of its usefulness for luxury over an ideal of spiritual beauty. In his view, art and its service to colonial notions of beauty keep the powerful in power and the colonized in ignorance of their cultural inheritance, unwilling to change their circumstances. In these essays, he advocates fighting abusive forms of beauty with broader forms; using the arts to express indigenous notions of beauty to stimulate the Indian *citta* to develop from *manas* to *buddhi* to intuition. This maturation of the basic consciousness by art and beauty is Sri Aurobindo’s crucial weapon in battling the British Raj and creating a new Indian civilization built on stable and indigenous foundations.

When we come to his writings on poetry, he writes that the direction of English poetry seems to be actually leading towards his notion of the *mantra*, which is an expression of “Impersonal Truth and Beauty.” This view of beauty in art is one in which the message of the artwork is united to the medium. In the case of poetry, the goal “is not perfect technical elegance according to precept but sound-significance filling out the word-significance.”¹⁰³ As I wrote in Chapter Three, Sri Aurobindo’s ideal of beauty occurs in poetic language when the sound of the word, as this registers

¹⁰² Sri Aurobindo, *Early Cultural Writings*, 439-40.

¹⁰³ Sri Aurobindo, “Letters on ‘Savitri,’” in *Savitri*, 731.

in one's physical ear ("sound-significance"), harmonizes with the meaning of the word ("word-significance"), resulting in a union of both form and content that approaches a natural, meaningful, and intensely satisfying onomatopoeia.

As we saw in Chapter Four, the Mother described beauty in terms of perfection, which all creatures are potentially capable of expressing. One of her key insights is that "In the physical world, of all things it is beauty that expresses best the Divine. The physical world is the world of form and the perfection of form is beauty. Beauty interprets, expresses, manifests the Eternal."¹⁰⁴ For her, beauty is an attribute of the divine that is universally hidden within the physical dimension, which art tries to unveil as a descendant spiritual practice of growth in consciousness for both the artist and the viewer.

For the Mother, this kind of beauty in art is nourishing to culture, even if it challenges the existence of old cultural forms. As she writes, beauty expressed in art is not "self-sufficient" or "extraneous" like a mushroom, "which has no roots in the totality of creation," but it draws from and contributes to a larger whole.¹⁰⁵ A mushroom lives on decayed matter, but the Mother's notion of beauty in art is like a flower that has deep roots in living matter, growing in harmony with other living organisms. As I wrote in Chapter Four, this kind of art lives symbiotically, amplifying, not exhausting energy for life, offering a beauty that is a sacrifice of itself to nourish other's progress towards perfection.

As we learned in Chapter Five, in her experiment to perfect the form of architecture and express the divine in matter, the cultivation of beauty is very hard work, for it demands at the same time an attempt to perfect the consciousness of the ones involved. Living by and with beauty means taking care of the matter in one's life. As the Mother writes, "Not to take care of material things

¹⁰⁴ The Mother, *On Education*, 232.

¹⁰⁵ The Mother, *Questions and Answers*, 1953, 338

which one uses is a sign of inconstancy and ignorance.”¹⁰⁶ I noted that Golconde commemorates a vulnerable God that houses itself in the ordinary and in the fragile. This is also the notion of beauty that it commemorates. Beauty also integrates opposites in the Integral Yoga. Golconde commemorates this aspect in the permeable yet geometric nature of the spaces. The permeable walls, ceilings, and floors of Golconde ferry one’s awareness between the natural and the built; the open and the closed; the dark and the light; the cool and the hot; the comfortable and the uncomfortable; the private and the public; and even the masculine and the feminine. As I noted in Chapter Five, dualities merge into one another, communicating a notion of beauty that is a coincidence of opposites.

The Mother and Sri Aurobindo integrate beauty with truth, as we read in *The Future Poetry* and as the Mother says to Huta in her direction for painting. In Chapter Six we saw how the Mother taught Huta that beauty and truth are universal and non-sectarian. She says, “Truth is behind everything. For the Divine dwells in flowers, trees, animals, birds, and rivers as well as human beings—in fact in every creation of Nature.”¹⁰⁷ Light is the symbol that best suits this understanding. One European artist who demonstrates it in the Mother’s view is J.M.W. Turner, known as the “painter of light.” She also calls the supramental force “the Grace-Light,” a term she borrowed from Swami Ramalingam. Her “future painting without shadow” in fact, is meant to express this supramental Grace-Light.

As we saw last chapter the Mother’s painting experiments are her way of helping the physical world adopt the new creation, by painting it into being using a palette of the dawn. This palette includes transparent white, milky white, gold, and golden pink. She associates these colors with planes of consciousness: white is *Brahman*, and gold is the supramental planes. Pale golden pink is

¹⁰⁶ The Mother, undated printed card in all the rooms at Golconde. Also found in *Words of the Mother II*, 323.

¹⁰⁷ Huta, “My *Savitri* Work with the Mother,” *Invocation* 12 (August 2001), 9.

the new creation, which is a mixture of red (the physical plane) with white and gold. She sees these colors in visions of the new creation on the subtle-physical plane. She also sees bodies there that exhibit these hues, along with being self-luminous, ageless, androgynous, capable of being in many places at the same time, and very adaptable. After his death, she claims to see Sri Aurobindo's body in this way; that in fact, he is busy leading others in creating these new forms and colors of the "World of Supreme Beauty," preparing for its descent.

For Sri Aurobindo's ideal of beauty in poetry, the message is integrated with the medium. The Mother values the same ideal in painting. She says to Huta, "where there is a combination of the two—outward charm and inner vision—then they are real and can be considered as true art."¹⁰⁸ In the Mother's training of Huta, choosing the color that best communicates the message, white for *Brahman* and black for the Inconscient, for example, creates this "outward charm," amplifying the meaning of the painting, which is tied to a non-sectarian, "inner vision" of beauty.

VI. BEAUTY, THE CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT, AND THE INTEGRAL YOGA

1. *The Embryo of a New Art?*

The Gurus' understanding of the mind, art and beauty, as well as opposition and growth, are sometimes related to but often in conflict with Western art practice. Though a full critical analysis of these issues is not possible in this study, in closing this dissertation I will briefly highlight some salient elements of how the Mother and Sri Aurobindo related to their cultural milieu. Generally, Sri Aurobindo thinks that much of the English poetry in his context is a product of the intellect, which is problematic, since the "creation of beauty in poetry and art does not fall within the sovereignty or even within the sphere of the reason. The intellect is not the poet, the artist, the creator within us; creation comes by a suprarational influx of light and power which must work always, if it is to do its

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 11.

best, by vision and inspiration [*dṛṣṭi* and *śruti*].”¹⁰⁹ In spite of this, he claims to find evidence of English poetry of the early twentieth century that potentially expresses a new form of non-sectarian beauty created by the intuition and directed at satisfying the soul. Similarly, the Mother says European visual art of the twentieth century was a decisive turn to the “head,” away from the “feeling for beauty,” and she connects this intellectual turn to coping with the horrors of war. She writes, “People are compelled to put aside all refined sensibility, the love of harmony, the need for beauty, to be able to undergo all that; otherwise, I believe, they would really have died of horror.”¹¹⁰ She recognizes that much of the art of the twentieth century expresses ugliness and conflict and comes out of the desire “to wallow in the mire, to be what they [call] ‘realistic,’” which for her is a potential form of catharsis. However, she claims to see “an embryo of a new art” in her lifetime that goes beyond this limited therapeutic process, which seems to her a harbinger of the new age of intuition and universal beauty.¹¹¹ Unfortunately, she does not give examples.

These are somewhat remarkable statements since, according to many scholars, beauty has been used, abused, and/or exiled from Western culture since the two World Wars and The Cold War.¹¹² Modern art at the time of the Gurus also began to serve a new intellectual spirit, as it provided a way to philosophize in visual modalities and even to rage against injustice. In 1911, Painter Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944) describes the time as “The great upheaval” (*große Ummwälzung*) in his and Franz Marc’s manifesto. They write,

¹⁰⁹ Sri Aurobindo, *The Human Cycle*, 137. Like his other major works, this text was written between 1915-20. It was revised in the 1930s.

¹¹⁰ The Mother, *The Mother: Paintings and Drawings*, 188.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 165.

¹¹² For the “use” of beauty see Dave Hickey, *The Invisible Dragon: Four Essays on Beauty* (Los Angeles: Art issues. Press, 1993). For the “abuse” of beauty see Arthur Danto, *The Abuse of Beauty: Aesthetics and the Concept of Art* (Chicago: Open Court Publishing, 2003). For the “exile” of beauty, see Wendy Steiner, *Venus in Exile: The Rejection of Beauty in Twentieth-Century Art* (New York: The Free Press, 2001). Elaine Scarry assumes beauty’s rupture with art and the humanities in her book *On Beauty and Being Just* (Princeton, NJ: University Press, 1999).

The great upheaval,
 The shifting emphasis in art, literature, and music,
 The multifariousness of form, the constructive principle, the composition
 of these forms,
 The intensive turn to the inner realm of nature and, associated with it,
 the rejection of the beautification of nature's exterior—
 —Such are, generally sketched out, the signs of the new inner renaissance.¹¹³

This “new inner renaissance” echoes some of the ideals of the Gurus, though in a cosmetic way in comparison to their “future art.” Kandinsky and Marc sought new forms in art that negated what they understood as constricting bourgeois values, forms, and principles of the mimetic academic painting of Europe that seeks only to copy nature, life, and self—“the beautification of nature’s exterior”—not to reveal its inner realities. These artists call for a “turn to the inner [psychological] realm” of the subject who creates, instead of to the outer realm of nature that had dominated creative inspiration since the Italian Renaissance until this moment in art history.

For some, this turn to the subject meant drawing on Asian influences. Alexandra Munroe writes about this trend as it developed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries,

Reactions against Europe’s rapid industrialization and materialism dominated intellectual thought as artists, writers, philosophers, and political thinkers struggled to find alternative directions. The Symbolists sought out the occult and folk, at times invoking Oriental imagery. Others rediscovered an East-West mysticism—the selfless, direct, transcendent experience of being one with God or ultimate reality conceived as infinite void or perpetual progress.¹¹⁴

Kandinsky, in fact, is a good example of this experiment. He “drew from Theosophy to develop his revolutionary claim that abstract art (the formless form) had the greatest potential for expressing cosmic laws.”¹¹⁵ Though not influenced by Asian religion directly, Henri Matisse (1869-1954) is

¹¹³ Announcement of the first Der Blaue Reiter Exhibition, 1911, in *The Great Upheaval: Modern Art from the Guggenheim Collection, 1910-1918*, ed. Tracey Bashkoff and Megan M. Fontanella (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 2011), 15.

¹¹⁴ Alexandra Munroe, *The Third Mind: American Artists Contemplate Asia* (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 2009), 22.

¹¹⁵ *The Great Upheaval: Modern Art from the Guggenheim Collection, 1910-1918*, 23. Also see Vasily Kandinsky *The Spiritual in Art* (1914), trans. M. T. H. Sadler (New York: Dover Publications, 1977).

another key example. He was an associate of the Mother when she lived in Paris and she admired his work. As he wrote in his “Notes of a Painter” in 1908, his goal is to discover “the essential character of things” through paint.¹¹⁶ It seems to me that both the abstract work of Kandinsky and the impressionistic and fauvist work of Matisse may be included in what the Mother understands as “the embryo of a new art” in Modernism. To the extent that artists go beyond the perception of the intellect, turning to the soul and a spiritual realm for inspiration, and not to the darker forces of the untransformed vital and subconscious, the Mother values its innovation.

For many others, however, this “great upheaval” meant a turn to the unstable, shadow dimensions of the unpurified personality that necessarily leads the artist to express a confusion and sometimes a riot of forms. Cubism is an example of this endeavor. It expresses the three dimensions on a two-dimensional plane, using colors that are decidedly “ordinary” earthy hues made with found media like house paint, wallpaper, and oilcloth. The Mother was unimpressed with Cubism, finding it insincere and willfully deceptive. She writes,

If these painters were sincere, if they truly painted what they feel and see, the picture would be the expression of a confused mind and an unruly vital. But, unhappily, the painters are not sincere and then these pictures are nothing else than the expression of a falsehood, an artificial imagination based only on the will to be strange and to bewilder the public in order to attract attention and that has indeed very little to do with beauty.¹¹⁷

Cubist Pablo Picasso (1881-1973) did not disagree. He says he wanted to be insincere and deceive the mind of his viewers in a *trompe l'esprit*. To do this he took unrelated things and related them in strange ways, to “displace objects” in his work. He says, “The displaced object has its

¹¹⁶ Jack Flam, *Matisse on Art* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995), 18. Matisse’s work with Sister Jacques-Marie, O.P. (his former model and nurse turned Dominican nun) in designing the Vence Chapel in Southern France, is a rare example of Western religious Modernist art. Matisse also designed and created many of the paintings, stained glass, furnishings, and priestly vestments for this church. See *A Model for Matisse*, directed by Barbara F. Freed, First Run Features, 2003.

¹¹⁷ The Mother, *On Education*, 234. One wonders if the Mother saw Picasso’s *Guernica*, which expresses something authentic and moving about the horrors of war, evoking a kind of beauty that is possible even in a depiction of suffering.

strangeness. And this strangeness was what we wanted to make people think about because we were quite aware that our world was becoming very strange and not exactly reassuring.”¹¹⁸

Artists like Max Ernst (1891-1976) shared Picasso’s view of the world and demonstrates the Mother’s insight about trauma and art as potential catharsis. Ernst was a Dada artist and artilleryman in WWI. He wrote, “To us, Dada was above all a moral reaction. Our rage aimed at total subversion. A horrible futile war had robbed us of five years of our existence. We had experienced the collapse into ridicule and shame of everything represented to us as just, true, and beautiful. My works of that period were not meant to attract, but to make people scream.”¹¹⁹ In this vein, another Dadaist, Tristan Tzara (1896-1963) from Romania, wrote a manifesto that says,

Let each man proclaim: there is a great negative work of destruction to be accomplished. We must sweep and clean. Affirm the cleanliness of the individual after the state of madness, aggressive complete madness of a world abandoned to the hands of bandits, who rend one another and destroy the centuries. Without aim or design, without organization: indomitable madness, decomposition.¹²⁰

It is not hard to see that the Mother would critique this use of art for the context of her Ashram, even if she understood its cathartic value in the wider world. She says,

And they produced absurd and ridiculous and frightful things. Now they have gone farther still, but that, that is due to the wars—with every war there descends upon earth a world in decomposition which produces a sort of chaos. And some, of course, find all this very beautiful and admire it very much. I understand what they want to do, I understand it very well, but I cannot say that I find they do it well. All I can say is that they are trying.¹²¹

Some artists did not have the energy to destroy and clean as the Dadaists. T. S. Eliot’s 1922 poem “The Waste Land” expresses another widely shared experience in the early twentieth century, which is one of mourning the loss of human aspiration. Wendy Steiner notes that instead of beauty,

¹¹⁸ Andrew McNamara, *An Apprehensive Aesthetic: The Legacy of Modernist Culture* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2009), 59.

¹¹⁹ Max Ernst quoted in Arthur Danto, *The Abuse of Beauty: Aesthetics and the Concept of Art*, 48.

¹²⁰ Tristan Tzara partially quoted in *The Abuse of Beauty*, though I took more of the text from <http://www.mariabuszek.com/kcai/DadaSurrealism/DadaSurrReadings/TzaraD1.pdf>; accessed March 3, 2016.

¹²¹ The Mother, *Questions and Answers 1953*, 332-33.

the “idea of waste—prostitutes, garbage, art, everything that needs to be relegated to an underworld—pervades twentieth-century culture.”¹²² If we locate in this cultural landscape the Mother and Sri Aurobindo’s integration of the arts, beauty, aspiration, and progress it looks like an alien being. Their very perspective about waste, in fact, is anomalous. Sri Aurobindo writes, “Yet even our own human action is full of an apparent waste, so appearing from the individual point of view, which yet, we may be sure, subserves well enough the large and universal purpose of things. That part of her intention which we can detect, Nature gets done surely enough in spite of, perhaps really by virtue of her apparent waste.”¹²³ To me, their understanding of the role of waste is analogous to the fertile value of weeds and crops that have outlived their usefulness. Destroying this “waste” in periodic fires or letting it transform as fallow makes room for new potentials, and the resulting residue is absorbed by the soil to become humus, which may fertilize that new growth. One could say that the Gurus saw the art of this century, which rejected beauty, as a destructive force which may yet fertilize more intense and fruitful growth of beauty for the future.

Cleaning the waste of life, in fact, supports the Gurus’ integration of art, beauty, aspiration, and growth. It is impossible not to appreciate the contrast between the city of Pondicherry and the campus of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram within the city (Compare Figures 7.4 and 7.5). The Mother emphatically emphasizes cleanliness in the Ashram, for in her view, “Cleanliness is the first indispensable step towards the supramental manifestation.”¹²⁴ In fact, one of the very first things that the Mother did when she was made guru of the Ashram in 1926 was to have plumbing installed in all the buildings. Before she arrived, Sri Aurobindo and his early companions urinated and defecated into pails, as many did in India, which a coolie would pick up and take to a dump every day. This was in fact, an advance over what is typical in India, which is public defecation. Even today,

¹²² Wendy Steiner, *Venus in Exile: The Rejection of Beauty in Twentieth-Century Art*, 84.

¹²³ *The Life Divine*, 98-99.

¹²⁴ The Mother, *The Words of the Mother I*, 241.



Figure 7.4. Ashram Main building where the *Samadhi* (Tomb-Shrine) of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo is located. Photo by author.



Figure 7.5. Parking lot right outside the campus of the Ashram. Photo by author.

the “country with the largest number of public defecators is India, which has 600 million.”¹²⁵ One can well understand the sentiments of one of the ashramites, who once complained to the Mother, “I pray to you to save India from the Indians.” The Mother replied, “Yes, it seems rather necessary.”¹²⁶

The potential “embryo of a new art” rests on this very practical level of taking care of matter and the body. As we saw in Chapter Five when we analyzed the Golconde Dormitory, the Mother invites her residents to take care of their spaces because it maintains its beauty, and even potentially reveals God’s presence as beauty for the resident. Huta’s initial training as an artist by the Mother also included this kind of conscious care for matter, as we saw in the last chapter. This spiritual practice values an external character to beauty as well as an internal one.

2. Beauty as a Perfect Integration of Being a Quality and a Value

On a theoretical level, the debates about beauty in art in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries make a distinction between the quality of beauty and the value of beauty. Both of these also find expression in the thought and practice of the Gurus. A quality of beauty is a physical, external, and rhetorical aspect of an artwork that somehow pleases the senses and desires. The value of beauty is an internal principle of meaning in life or dignity of self that an artwork seeks to communicate. For example, Steiner writes that “[f]or a start, I think we must stop treating beauty as

¹²⁵ Tom Miles, “One billion people still defecate in public despite health risks - UN,” <http://in.reuters.com/article/2014/05/08/uk-health-defecation-idINKBN0DO1CC20140508>; accessed March 3, 2016.

¹²⁶ The Mother, *The Words of the Mother I*, 355. Thankfully, awareness of sanitation issues is increasing in India. For example, Mata Amritanandamayi, A.K.A. Amma “the hugging saint” initiated public campaigns in 2010 in Kerala. The project is called the Amala Bharatam Campaign, which enlists her volunteers to pick up trash, create waste management systems, as well as recycling efforts. See <http://www.amritapuri.org/activity/social/abc>; accessed March 3, 2016. The current Prime Minister Narendra Modi is also trying to stop open defecation, though is having a hard time meeting his projected goals of constructing the needed public toilets. See <http://qz.com/324877/is-narendra-modi-losing-the-battle-of-toilets-to-manmohan-singh/>; accessed March 3, 2016.

a thing or quality, and see it instead as a kind of communication.”¹²⁷ As a (white heterosexual) feminist, she argues that if a work of art communicates something more than a woman’s sexual potential, communicating an active feminine agency and self-determination, it would be beautiful.

Likewise, Arthur Danto writes that the quality of beauty “is an option for art and not a necessary condition. But it is not an option for life. It is a necessary condition for life as we would want to live it. That is why beauty, unlike the other aesthetic qualities, the sublime included, is a value.”¹²⁸ For him, since the world is unjust, it does not deserve to be pleased by qualities of beauty, but discomforted by qualities of disgust, silliness, the sublime, or other strategies that artists employ to shame oppressors or expose injustices through art. He declares that when “women are equal, when the races live in harmony and peace, when injustice has fled the world, then the kind of art the Whitney Biennial presents to a resentful world—this writer included!—will stop being made.”¹²⁹ Unlike Danto, Dave Hickey argues that precisely because the world is unjust it deserves the rhetorical quality of beauty. As a pragmatist, he is interested in what beauty *does* as a quality to challenge power, not what beauty putatively *is* as a value, which can be so easily co-opted. For him, beauty can be enlisted to praise and enfranchise an oppressed group by making it look valuable or politically viable even in the eyes of its oppressor. He examines the homosexual photography of Robert Mapplethorpe as an example of this phenomenon in the eyes of Senator Jesse Helms, NC in the late 1980s.¹³⁰ He writes, “So it was not that men were making it in Robert’s images [that angered

¹²⁷ Steiner, *Venus in Exile*, xx.

¹²⁸ Danto, *The Abuse of Beauty*, 160.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 124.

¹³⁰ See the full set of Mapplethorpe’s ten images at <http://www.christies.com/lotfinder/lot/robert-mapplethorpe-x-portfolio-4576015-details.aspx?intObjectID=4576015>; accessed, March 3, 2016. The controversy over these images began in Washington, DC in 1989 after the Board of the Corcoran Gallery saw them among the show, and refused to exhibit them. The exhibit was called “Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Moment.”

and motivated the Senator to censor the photographs in such a public way], but that Robert was ‘making it beautiful.’”¹³¹

I suggest that the quality of beauty in art is what Sri Aurobindo calls the form and rhythm of a *mantric* artwork in *The Future Poetry*, and what the Mother calls the “outward charm” when advising her student Huta.¹³² The value of beauty in art relates to what they both call the “inner vision” of God (the “impersonal Truth and Beauty”) in the theme of the artwork as “remembered, seen, and heard” (*smṛti*, *dṛṣṭi*, and *śruti*) by the spiritual faculties of consciousness in the “genius” (*jñāna*). The purpose of a quality of beauty for them is to reveal the divine principle or value of beauty “that Nature hides” as fully as possible in a given context, which potentially leads to a “perfection of form.”¹³³ This would mean that the quality may have a useful connection to justice and to growth in consciousness in one context and may not in another. When the quality outlives its usefulness in manifesting the divine value, the value retreats so that growth and justice cannot happen through that particular quality or form of beauty. For example, the qualities of beauty that gained prominence in Renaissance Italy to help the consciousness of Medieval Italians, outlive their usefulness when translated into British culture in colonial India, to the extent that they inhibit Indian growth and self-determination. To the extent that they pressure progressive growth, the Gurus honor them.

Given this theory, their aesthetic goals might be characterized as expanding the *citta* in order to critique past uses of beauty that have become an abuse of others, as Sri Aurobindo attempted in his critique of colonial England and its abuse of Indian culture; to reinterpret past achievements in beauty with an eye to include all, as Sri Aurobindo tried to do in his articles on traditional Indian

¹³¹ Hickey, *The Invisible Dragon*, 22.

¹³² Huta, “My *Savitri* Work with the Mother,” *Invocation* 12 (August 2001), 11.

¹³³ Sri Aurobindo, *Essays Divine and Human* (Pondicherry: SAAP, 1997), 440, and The Mother, *On Education*, 232.

ascendant art; and still further, to create new and more inspired, more inclusive expressions of beauty in one's time and place, as both Gurus strove to do in poetry, visual art, architecture, music, and material culture.

To achieve these goals, the Gurus enlist qualities of beauty to praise and enfranchise the value of a non-sectarian beauty experienced by the plane of “genius” (*jñāna*). In poetry, for example, Sri Aurobindo seeks to achieve intense verbal onomatopoeia such that the beautiful sound of the words resonates in a specific way with the beautiful meaning of the words. For this reason, he loved the way Dante's line “E'n la sua volontade è nostra pace” sounded in Italian since the form and rhythm of this verse feels to his ear like the joy in surrender it signifies as words. He writes, “Dante simply says ‘In His will is our peace’ and in writing that in Italian produces one of the greatest lines in all poetic literature.”¹³⁴ Architectural onomatopoeia is found in the Golconde Dormitory. The fragile and permeable nature of divinity that it commemorates is literally designed in the permeable spaces and use of fragile media that invites special care. As another example, the Mother attempts visual onomatopoeia in her use of dawn colors to express the dawn-like nature of the new creation and creating forms “without shadow,” that is, without the shadow of the falsehood.

For the Gurus, when both the quality and the value of beauty are utilized to amplify each other in an intense and integral unity—to express the truth of beauty, beautifully—beauty has the potential to be a force for growth by opposing the status quo of one's lower nature yet strengthening the life of the soul. Whether this intense and integral beauty is found in the natural world, like a flower that the Mother uses with her students; in life by the care one gives the fragility of the material world; or in art, architecture, and material culture that seeks to manifest the generosity of God's light shining on all forms, creating and living in beauty is a sacred sacrifice in their view that is necessary for the progress towards the perfection of individuals, communities, and

¹³⁴ Sri Aurobindo, *Letters on Poetry and Art*, 195. The line is from Dante's *Paradiso*, canto III, v. 85.

creation. These insights carry even more weight in their explicit work for “the new creation.” If beauty is the perfection of form in the world, as the Mother teaches, perfection of creation as the new creation requires a goal of manifesting beauty perfectly and universally. This “perfect perfection” is a coincidence of all opposites and when all opposition is overcome, the internal value of God’s beauty is lived externally in the qualities of matter. In the Integral Yoga, beauty is the hammer that breaks open the golden door to Itself as the dawning new creation.

VII. POTENTIAL AVENUES FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

This dissertation has focused on the role of the Mother with her spiritual consort Sri Aurobindo in the difficult work to manifest the new creation through art in service to growth and beauty. There are other important topics that remain unexplored. Scholars note different relationships between religion and art that I have summarized in my own way in Appendix II. It would be helpful to critically contextualize the relationship(s) between art and the Integral Yoga with other relationships of art and religion in history. Relatedly, scholars often note that some aspects of contemporary art theory are incommensurate with the aesthetic theory and practice of any religious or spiritual path, often ignoring the ways in which modern or postmodern artists may be religiously motivated.¹³⁵ However, the fairly recent exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum in New York, “The Third Mind” is a positive step forward, revealing the ways in which well-known American artists of the twentieth century drew upon Asian religious influences to create their work.¹³⁶ Building on this show and its findings (and others like it in recent decades), one may be able to compare the use of the arts in the Integral Yoga with other traditions and new religious movements that value the arts

¹³⁵ See James Elkins, *On the Strange Place of Religion in Contemporary Art* (New York: Routledge, 2004); and Ena Giurescu Heller, ed. *Reluctant Partners: Art and Religion in Dialogue* (New York: The Gallery at the American Bible Society, 2004); *Re-Enchantment*, ed. James Elkins and David Morgan (New York: Routledge, 2009).

¹³⁶ Alexandra Munroe, *The Third Mind: American Artists Contemplate Asia* (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 2009).

for spiritual practice, like the Theosophical Society, with which both Gurus were familiar. In this vein, an investigation of the work and writings of Kandinsky, who was influenced by Theosophy, in comparison with the Mother's work would be fruitful. A comparison of the Hudson Valley School of painters in the USA with the Mother's work would be an interesting place to begin, since they were influenced by Transcendentalism and J.M.W. Turner among others. Another possibility would be a comparison with the American Transcendentalists who sought to express in poetry and thought an all-inclusive experience of unity with every creature, such as Emily Dickinson and Ralph Waldo Emerson. Sri Aurobindo was already familiar with Walt Whitman, as we reviewed in Chapter Three, calling him a "poet of the Dawn." Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* is comparable to *Savitri* since he (re)wrote it as a means of growth before, during, and after the American Civil war from 1855 to right before his death in 1892.

Most scholars in critical art theory are like Danto, Steiner, and Hickey in that they analyze aesthetics, art, and beauty from a purely culture-centered point of view, making the assumption that art comes from and returns only to culture. Ellen Dissanayake, among other cultural anthropologists and evolutionary scientists, take a species-centered approach to art and aesthetics, finding biological and evolutionary grounds to regard beauty in art a necessity to survival and growth for all people, not just one solution among many others an artist might choose and culture might value.¹³⁷ A critical correlation between the Integral Yoga and this species-centered approach to beauty and art seems like a productive way forward as well. This research would support another topic that remains undeveloped in this dissertation, which is the role of onomatopoeia in aesthetics and Indian religions. Onomatopoeia is both a cognitive and physical experience that might ground a discussion of beauty in more biological ways.

¹³⁷ See Ellen Dissanayake, *Homo Aestheticus: Where Art Comes from and Why* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1995); Denis Dutton, *The Art Instinct: Beauty, Pleasure and Human Evolution* (New York, NY: Bloomsbury Press, 2009); and G. Gabrielle Starr, *Feeling Beauty: The Neuroscience of Aesthetic Experience* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013).

The notion of *manonāśa* or the annihilation of the mind in spiritual experience needs more critical analysis, comparing the Mother's view with her contemporaries in India as well as medieval views from *Advaita Vedānta*. The Guru's theory of growth through opposition could also benefit from a more careful and critical analysis in light of scientific theories of growth and development. There are psychological theories of stress for example, most notably the Yerkes/Dodson Law, that seem relevant.¹³⁸ Another avenue of research might be to compare the Integral Yoga with other spiritual disciplines that prize a descendant spiritual practice and opposition fueling growth, a notion of spiritual consorts, as well as the use of the arts for spiritual development. I have begun a constructive comparison in this way, for instance, between Franciscan spirituality and the Integral Yoga.¹³⁹

Challenged by William Cenkner, a foundation has been built in this dissertation to support these other directions in religion and art. Cenkner understood that Sri Aurobindo and the Mother's role of artist fundamentally influences how their spiritual teaching may be interpreted. Sri Aurobindo's (now) edited thirty-six volumes of prose and the thirty volumes of the Mother can be relied upon as secondary source materials to understand the nature and scope of their spiritual teaching and aesthetics. However, the primary sources of Sri Aurobindo's teaching are found in his creative process, his poetry, his communication with his disciples, and most importantly, in the life and work of his spiritual consort, the Mother. Her teaching extends his own and is comprised of the varied work of the Ashram Departments and her communication with their disciples, her painting, music, architecture, and visual culture, and most importantly her claims to the supramental

¹³⁸ This law, which was published earlier in the Gurus' lifetimes, states that optimal stress or arousal is needed for growth. The researchers found that low levels of stress lead to low levels of performance and growth, yet when stress is too high, the performance also remains low. See Robert M. Yerkes and John D. Dodson, "The Relation of Strength of Stimulus to Rapidity of Habit-Formation" *Journal of Comparative Neurology and Psychology*, 18 (1908): 459-482. <http://psychclassics.yorku.ca/Yerkes/Law/>; accessed March 3, 2016.

¹³⁹ See my article "The Androgynous Visual Piety of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo and St. Clare and St. Francis" *JHCS* 28 (November 2015): 11-32.

transformation of her own body. For those who practice the Integral Yoga, creating the new creation requires great sacrifice in trying to live divine wisdom, strength, harmony, and perfection. For them, a non-Hindu woman from France, incarnates these principles, inspiring and strengthening their own potential progress. As the consort of Lord *Īśvara*, the Mother's wisdom as *Mabeśvarī* brings a new center of consciousness in the heart and above the head to replace the mind; as the consort of Lord *Śiva*, her strength as *Mahākālī* fuels growth of consciousness with her opposition; as the consort of Lord *Viṣṇu*, her harmony as *Mahālakṣmī* reveals the divine beauty that nature hides; and as the consort of Lord *Brahmā*, her perfection as *Mahāsarasvatī* descends into the darkness of inconscient matter to awaken its own "perfect perfection."

Appendix I. THE INVOLUTION AND EVOLUTION OF DIVINITY IN THE INTEGRAL YOGA LEADING TO THE NEW CREATION


Table A shows my view of how Sri Aurobindo's Integral Yoga fits within his mature metaphysics as written in *The Life Divine* and other later essays. The diagram also draws upon the Mother's visions of the "new creation" and the "new Consciousness" that she describes in her later discussions after Sri Aurobindo died, which the Mother considers to be their overarching goal.

The first two columns, "Involution of God" and "Divine States," show Sri Aurobindo's understanding of the levels of divinity. *Paratpara Brahman* is completely aloof from creation while *Brahman* unfolds into lower states of restriction, veiling himself from himself in increasingly limiting concentrations. In these increasingly limiting ways, *Brahman* is, knows, and enjoys *Saccidānanda* (being, consciousness, and bliss), becoming fractured into all the rungs of creation and souls located in these rungs, which I symbolize by the rainbow reflected and refracted from *Brahman*'s white light. "God's Being" labels these two higher states, but it is not clear in my reading of Sri Aurobindo if Supermind is this pure state or somehow the beginning of his limitation in being such that "Becoming" more correctly defines it. The rungs below Supermind are clearly apart of "Becoming" at different levels of potential. Notice the lightning of Intuitive Mind that has accompanied this dissertation as being centrally useful in gaining inspiration in the creative process. The lightning begins in the Intuitive Mind and goes to the bottom of the diagram, which is "the cave or secret place of darkness, *guhāyām*. . . . [the intuition] is a power descended from the superconscious Truth which leads us to the light that is hidden in ourselves, in the subconscious."¹

As can be seen in the second column "Divine States," involved within the darker rungs of the Inconscient and Subconscious are Matter, and involved within Matter is Life, Mind, and all the higher so-called spiritual levels of God's Becoming and Being, making their potential evolution

¹ Sri Aurobindo, "The Hound of Heaven," in *The Secret of the Veda*, 212.

Table A. The Metaphysics of the Integral Yoga.

<i>Involution of God</i>	<i>Divine States</i>	<i>Evolution of God</i>	<i>The New Creation</i>
“God’s Being”	<i>Paratpara Brahman</i>		
	<i>Brahman (Saccidānanda)</i>	<i>God Realization</i>	
“God’s Being or Becoming?”	Supermind		Psychic Being
“God’s Becoming”	Overmind	“ <i>Triple Transformation</i> ”	Psychic Being
	Intuitive Mind	1. Psychic Change (Purification)	Psychic Being
	Illumined Mind		Psychic Being
	Higher Mind		Psychic Being
	Mind	<i>Reincarnation</i>	Psychic Being
	Life	<i>Biological Evolution</i>	Psychic Being
	Matter		Psychic Being
	Subconscious		Psychic Being
	Inconscious		Psychic Being

possible in the third column. The graded dark covering that I place over the rainbow of creation in the first two columns is the specter of opposition and contraries that moves growth along and that accompany the beauty of creation in Involution: death, suffering, falsehood, and ignorance. Red is the color that both Gurus say symbolizes the physical plane while white is *Brahman's* purity, so I made the arrows follow this dynamic. Pale golden pink is the color that the Mother says is the supramental state (which is simply gold) when blended with the physical realm. Not being able to use this complex color in the word processing program, I used pink for this at that level of the Supermind in the next columns, although the image of the dawn is used for this purpose in the third column.

The third column labeled “Evolution of God” is the return to *Brahman* through eons of lives that each individual soul or “psychic being” will experience first in “Biological Evolution,” then human “Reincarnation,” and then “Transformation.” Sri Aurobindo defines the psychic being as the “the true evolving individual in our nature, is a portion, a spark, a flame growing into the eternal Fire from which it was lit and of which it is the witness ever living within us and the conscious instrument of its light and power and joy and beauty.”² It grows in greater and greater self-consciousness and freedom from the dark Inconscient and Subconscient levels as it passes through all the forms in biological evolution, the purpose of which is to evolve the mental conscious human form. The psychic being then passes through all the potential lives of being a “mental” human being until it is finally ready to begin a return to its source on a spiritual path. In the Gurus understanding, in the past, “Transcendence” not “Transformation” was the path of return to God since death, suffering, falsehood, and ignorance were dominant in creation, making their transformation impossible. In Sri Aurobindo and the Mother’s mature explanations of their practice and experience of creation’s evolution, the phenomena of death, suffering, falsehood, and ignorance are now

² Sri Aurobindo, *The Life Divine*, 631.

weakened and are capable of being transformed. This context in the universe makes their Yoga possible, which involves facing oppositions in what Sri Aurobindo calls the “Triple Transformation” after his 1940 writings. Before this date, in the *Record of Yoga* and *The Synthesis of Yoga* he discusses a four-part path: *śuddhi*, *mukti*, *bhukti*, and *siddhi*, or purification, liberation, enjoyment, and perfection.³ His later articulation abandons the Sanskrit words and this four-part process for: 1. “Psychic Change,” 2. “Spiritual Change” and 3. “Supramental Change,” which I use in this and the fourth column.

The first transformation, “the Psychic Change,” I symbolize with a light-red arrow as an elevation of consciousness of the soul through the states above Mind. I make the boundaries between these levels permeable (represented by dotted lines and no longer closed lines) and I also make the blue increasingly lighter as the arrow ascends. The second transformation of consciousness, “the Spiritual Change,” I made with the white arrow ascending to the Supermind; and the third transformation is the pink arrow, “the Supramental Change,” which descends downward, transforming the presence of the darkness that once covered the rainbow into light, not just for one’s psychic being but for all, all the way to the bottom of creation, revealing the “new creation,” the rainbow fully revealed in its beautiful colors.

Bhukti or “enjoyment” is no longer in Sri Aurobindo’s later triple scheme, but elevated, according to Richard Hartz, an ashramite who made a study of this development in Sri Aurobindo’s thought. *Bhukti* became *Ananda* in Hartz’s reading. He writes that the “place of Ananda in the Yoga was not diminished, but greatedened by regarding its consummation as a consequence of the supramental change. In a sense, Sri Aurobindo recognised a quadruple transformation as the

³ Peter Heehs notes that “Sri Aurobindo presented the outlines of his *yoga* in three different works, each destined for a different readership: his diary, the *Record of Yoga*, which he wrote for his own use; *The Synthesis of Yoga*, which he wrote for the general reading public; and *Letters on Yoga*, which he wrote for his disciples.” Peter Heehs, “Aurobindo,” in *Brill’s Encyclopedia of Hinduism, Volume V: Religious Symbols Hindu Migration: Contemporary Communities outside South Asia, Some Modern Religious Groups and Teachers*, ed. Knut A. Jacobson (Leiden: Brill, 2013): 401.

complete aim of the integral Yoga. But he insisted that ‘one must pass through the supermind to arrive to the highest Ananda.’”⁴ In fact, Hartz continues, the experience and consciousness that Sri Aurobindo says characterizes the supramental race are ones characterized by the influence of *Ananda*. Sri Aurobindo writes,

The fully evolved soul will be one with all beings in the status and dynamic effects of experience of a bliss-consciousness intense and illimitable. And since love is the effective power and soul-symbol of bliss-oneness he will approach and enter into this oneness by the gate of universal love, a sublimation of human love at first, a divine love afterwards, at its summits a thing of beauty, sweetness and splendour now to us inconceivable.⁵

Ananda’s attributes of universal love and sweetest beauty characterize the experience and consciousness of this “fully evolved soul” in the new creation, which for this dissertation’s purposes, places any creative expression of beauty in a central position of value within the spiritual practice of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo, since creativity is an act of love meant to express the intensest kinds of beauty in their practice. The dividing lines that define the planes or states of consciousness in column 1-3 have now dissolved in column 4. The divine *Ananda* is represented by this oneness of all rungs of creation and the white ray of light that descends down through the rainbow. *Ananda* is also represented by the absence of darkness even at the lower rungs. This darkness and its potential transformation into light in all of creation is taken from the image in *Savitri* that the Mother uses in her work with Huta that we see in Chapter Six,

The darkness failed and slipped like a falling cloak
From the reclining body of a god.
Then through the pallid rift that seemed at first
Hardly enough for a trickle from the suns,
Outpoured the revelation and the flame.
The brief perpetual sign recurred above.
A glamour from unreach’d transcendences
Iridescent with the glory of the Unseen,
A message from the unknown immortal Light

⁴ Unpublished paper, Richard Hartz, “The Yoga of Self-Perfection and the Triple Transformation,” 19. He quoted Sri Aurobindo *Letters on Yoga: Part One*, 92.

⁵ *Synthesis of Yoga*, 509.

Ablaze upon Creation's quivering edge,
Dawn built her aura of magnificent hues
And buried its seed of grandeur in the hours.⁶

The different levels of the psychic being that exist at different rungs of creation become unveiled in the new creation, as I understand this metaphysics, so that consciousness can know all these levels without the darkness to oppose it. I represent this by typing “Psychic Being” within the column of the new creation on all the previously separated levels. There are, in my reading of the Integral Yoga literature, still distinctions that might be experienced at different levels of this new creation, which is why the font is in increasingly larger size as it goes up to the level of Supermind.

⁶ Sri Aurobindo, *Savitri: A Legend and a Symbol*, 3.

Appendix II. TYPES OF RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN ART AND RELIGION

The words *art* and *religion* are notoriously difficult to define. They have a long history of use and have held different meanings in different empirical contexts, places, and times. To place them in an academic study that discerns their relationship to each other in any context is already to make some assumptions about their nature and function. I am assuming that first of all, they *are* related, that in fact they have been in some kind negotiation with one another since homo sapiens have existed.¹ I am also assuming that they function in ways to define each other, in positive, neutral, or negative ways, depending on the time and context. I discern five kinds of relationships that I use as background in this thesis as a heuristic device. There may be more that I have failed to notice; however, my main goal is to make it clear that I am not operating with a putatively universal definition of either, but that indeed, there are many legitimate definitions of art and religion and they can only be discerned in temporal, social, cultural, political, and economic contexts. As such, therefore, there are many kinds of relationships between them that have gained purchase in the experience of human beings at different times and places. Since I am a visual artist, I have biased my comments on this kind of creative expression.

In my table below I have made columns that list five relationships of art and religion (see Table B). The first column is called “Religious Visual Imagery/Visual Art Typology.” Firstly, it is important to see that both “imagery” and “art” are used to signal the fact that the word “art” (not the phenomenon) came onto the scene late in human history—in the period I have labeled Mimetic Art.² The dates on this list of types of art/visual imagery are merely suggestions, and are used

¹ See Denis Dutton, *The Art Instinct: Beauty, Pleasure and Human Evolution* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2009) for a study of the ways that human taste for beauty is part of biological evolution and natural selection, not just products of social construction. He bases his philosophical theories on the ethological and anthropological work of Ellen Dissanyake, *Homo Aestheticus: Where Art Comes From and Why* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1995).

² I am assuming here the very good work of Ellen Dissanyake, who makes the argument that art (what she equates with her notion of “making special,” and in later writings, “artifying”) is constitutive of survival in human biological evolution, so art is foundational and constitutive of human growth both psychologically and socially, which influences physical survival. See Dissanayake, *Homo Aestheticus: Where Art Comes From and Why*.

Table B. Relationships Between Art and Religion.

<i>Religious Visual Imagery/ Visual Art Typology</i>	<i>Patron</i>	<i>Training</i>	<i>Context</i>	<i>Artist Paradigm</i>	<i>Growth Description</i>
I. Cosmic Visual Imagery (≈30,000 BCE -3500 BCE) At this time, there is an emphasis in imagery to communicate the oneness of all forms in creation in mythic time and space from the non-self-reflective point of view of the embedded individual in the tribe and nature. Art serves the tribe's survival and social cohesion by visually/totemically embodying its <i>nomos</i> ("The law; the principles governing human conduct, esp. as defined by culture or custom.") and/or <i>anomy</i> ("Absence of accepted social standards or values; the state or condition of an individual or society lacking such standards.")	<i>The tribal leader(s)?/ The needs of the Community?</i>	<i>During Rites of Passage?</i>	<i>One's Own Body, the Cave and the Natural World; the Quotidian</i>	<i>Artisan/ Craftsman?</i>	<i>Unconscious living of the spiritual, the natural, the human and the cultural levels of life</i>
II. Devotional Visual Imagery (≈3500 BCE - ≈1350 CE) At this time, there is a visual emphasis on mythic time and space and/or eschatological time and space (as in the Judeo-Christian context, or the Puranic context in India which combines both mythic and eschatological notions of time) and the human being distinct from nature from the point of view of the human being in the tribe and king, not from the point of view of being in nature. Art serves devotion to God and social identity.	<i>Religious institutions/ Political institutions</i>	<i>Apprenticeships and Guilds</i>	<i>The Tomb and the Sanctuary; the Quotidian</i>	<i>Theologian/ Priest/ Teacher</i>	<i>"The death of nature," conscious desire to contact spirit and clearer social structures are gained</i>
III. Mimetic Art (≈1350 – ≈1860) At this time, there are experiments in no religious imagery in art, a turning to matter with an inaugurating negation of spirit under the values of the age of reason, from the point of view of individual identity and empirical perception (unconscious of the subjective construction of that identity). Art serves the rational mind and individual identity.	<i>Policial Institutions</i>	<i>Apprenticeships and Academies</i>	<i>The Salon and the Museum</i>	<i>Genius/ Hero</i>	<i>"The death of God"; material mastery is gained</i>
IV. Modern Art (≈1860 – 1964) More experiments in no religion; a turn to the psyche and intellect, negating the body from the point of view of the Western isolated individual, conscious of its self-construction of subjective identity but confident of its superiority over other constructions. Art serves an elite individual identity of the wealthy and the European, and material mastery in progressively humanistic utopian ideals, which in fact excludes most of humanity.	<i>Collectors/ Gallery Owners/ Museum Curators</i>	<i>Universities and Art Schools</i>	<i>The "White Cube" Gallery</i>	<i>Prophet/ Healer/ Shaman /Rebel</i>	<i>"The death of humanity;" subjectivity is gained</i>
V. Post-Modern (Post)Art (≈1964 - the present) At this time, there is a turn to language and technology from the point of view of a pseudo-individuality (a conscious knowledge of the falseness of the ego self, not in light of a spiritual notion of an inner divine self, but in light of deconstructing the ego self by seeing it as a construction of shared language games), conscious of the relativity of all identities and their unstable construction and meaninglessness. Art seeks to destabilize social <i>nomos/ dharma</i> and is therefore <i>anomic/ adharmic</i> . Art serves risk in material wealth: a Western democratic system of investments in social, cultural and economic capitol.	<i>Curators/ "The Market"</i>	<i>Universities and Art Schools, but in crisis</i>	<i>The "Street" Brought inside Artworld Institutions</i>	<i>Salesperson/ Marketer/ Celebrity</i>	<i>"The death of art;" in theory, more inclusive participation is stimulated based on values of free flow of capitol instead of elitist values of "art"</i>

heuristically to denote possible periods of time that human consciousness creates ultimate meaning as the use and function of art/visual imagery change. The type actually cannot be reduced to the time period that I suggest because we can find cave paintings in Aboriginal Australia today, or mimetic art in contemporary liturgical art in the United States, for example. It is also important to understand that the chronology in this typology focuses on the global context for the first two types and then turns exclusively to the Western hemisphere. Types III, IV, and V describe development of artists and art in Western contexts, since Europe and North America went through the secularization process of Modernity that redefined all these phenomena in ways very different from the rest of the world. Most of the world has confronted modern forces of thought, feeling, and behavior in unique ways at a later date and, of course, even presently.

The time periods listed here are not closed off from each other. Indeed, it seems necessary to understand that these epics grow out of each other and often overlap. I do not think that the ways of perceiving reality of a previous period of art and visual imagery are replaced by a later one, but they continue in some way, contributing to the life and possibility of cultural forms if even sometimes in an residual or unconscious way. This is why the periods are presented as a list, and not as a clearly distinct timeline with an implied sense of unidirectional progress culminating in the present. I do not argue for a clear developmental progressive narrative, as though earlier times were less human/creative than later, ultimately leading to the present worldview that is the “best.” Nor do I argue for the opposite position that would nostalgically say we have lost the “real” relationship of art and religion and so the goal now is to get back to “that” classic time.

In terms of art history, it also seems important to note that there are important examples of artistic achievement that are begun in confined contexts and time periods before they are later supported by social structures in broad ways and for an extended period of time. For example, the mimetic artistic ideal which defines the third epic of time beginning in the Renaissance, is prefigured

at the height of late Greek antiquity, but collapses under the weight of other cultural, economic, social, and psychological pressures that make the harvest of that learning unavailable until it is literally dug up in the fifteenth century in Italy, when artists discovered the sculptures of the ancient Romans who preserved Greek bronzes in their marble copies. Like growth in biological evolution, growth of human consciousness as culture seems to proceed in fits and starts with countless successes and failures to master itself, picking up where it left off in previous periods many centuries later, or starting completely on new paths of exploration.

The second column in my chart is labeled “Patron.” In some ways this is one of the most important influences in the nature of art in culture since it is the economics and the people with the wealth that can shape cultural tides, like the Cholas in India in the ninth century CE, the Medici in Italy in the fifteenth century, or wealthy and influential collectors like François Pinault who owns Christies in London and New York today.

The third column is labeled “Training.” Institutions for educating artists build, perpetuate, and extend a world of meaning for their communities that make it possible for different types of limitations of thought, feeling, and behavior to be explored. These training contexts bring with them a *nomos* (social construct of order) and a fear of *anomy* (a lack of social norms) that defines their *raison d’être*.³ The values and world views of art teachers and institutions are just as important as the artists they seek to train. The training of artists today is a very contested issue, for example. When art can be made of anything and free to communicate anything, what is the purpose of going to art school? Emphasis on learning critical theory and “ideas” has become an important goal in this current context. This art training negotiates “the proliferation and distribution of *ideas*, and the only matter of final consequence is the quality of the ideas.”⁴ Therefore, craft and mastery of traditional

³ I am using Peter Berger’s terms *nomos*, which is a community’s socially constructed order of experience that is a shield against *anomy*, the social dissolution of order and the protection this serves against the terror of evil, suffering, and death in human consciousness. See *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociology of Religion* (New York: Anchor Books, 1967).

⁴ Steven Henry Madoff, ed. *Art School (Propositions for the 21st Century)* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2009), x.

media may not be valued in art schools as before this post-modern context. The idea of a Ph.D. in the visual arts (no longer “fine” arts) is even being attempted in many parts of the world, since research and theory are so central to making art.⁵

The fourth column in the chart is a list of art contexts, sanctioned by the authority structures of the time. Like my notions of time periods, these spaces in which art and visual imagery are shared, are listed as heuristic devices to show how framing objects of cultural meaning contributes centrally to what that meaning is. To place objects in these spaces is to label them in a certain way as “art” (or art-like objects in the cases of early human history when the notion of “art” did not yet exist). If the visual object is not inside one of these spaces, it is not seen as art or “special” by the community of the time. These spaces are not intended to be exclusive of all others, but a way to understand the moods and motivations of that time for framing objects as “art.” These objects and their contexts also express particular beliefs and attitudes, moods and motivations of a given culture related to broader issues of identity and social structure.

Each artist paradigm that I list in the fifth column is another heuristic device that describes the personality of a creative person in correspondence with each time period. Other paradigms are not excluded in each epoch, but there is an emphasis on one that holds the attention of any given time and place. Diane Apostolos-Cappadona summarizes my perspective of the artist paradigms, though I would include the most recent paradigm *Salesperson/Marketer/Celebrity*, which can be seen in the personalities of artists from Andy Warhol to Jeff Koons to Damien Hirst. She writes,

The term *the artist* requires careful attention. There is a history and an etymology to this word that has evolved, or been denied, through a variety of cultural and religious transformations, transmogrifications, and adaptations. For example, the Western apprehension that began with a coalition of artisan, craftsman, and teacher was transformed by early Christianity into a vehicle for divine expression, by the Renaissance into a cult of the genius, by the nineteenth century into a romantic

⁵ Also see James Elkins, ed. *Artists with PhDs: On the New Doctoral Degree in Studio Art* (Washington, DC: New Academia Publishing, LLC, 2009). Since this phenomenon is changing and growing so rapidly Elkins devotes a collaborative website to it: <http://www.jameselkins.com/yy/>; accessed, March 3, 2016.

rebel, and by the twentieth century into a critical, prophetic voice oftentimes self-defined as shamanic. Each definition or redefinition arose from a new way of seeing and valuing human experience. The sanctification of the artist initiated by the Renaissance cult of the genius, strengthened by the nineteenth-century rebel, and affirmed by the twentieth-century shaman, was cultivated in tandem with the secularization of Western culture.⁶

The last column in the chart labeled “Growth Description” describes the growth of human consciousness as it learns to master itself in relationship to the Earth, to others, and to some notion of Ultimate Reality. By consciousness, I mean what the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines as “The totality of the impressions, thoughts, and feelings, which make up a person’s sense of self or define a person’s identity,” and “Attributed as a collective faculty to an aggregate of people, a period of time, etc.; a set of shared defining ideas and beliefs.”⁷ As human beings use art in different ways for different reasons throughout history, they seem to master one lesson or form of consciousness at the exclusion or “death” of another lesson.⁸ For example, when human beings discovered how to master matter in the later periods, a disenchantment with the world happened. The arts supported and expressed this change by expressing this mastery and the attendant death in consciousness of the sacred (as this was traditionally perceived and expressed) that was lost.

⁶ Diane Apostolos-Cappadona, “Iconoclasm: An Overview,” in *Encyclopedia of Religion* (2005), 6: 4283.

⁷ *OED*, s.v. “consciousness.”

⁸ I am using Nietzsche’s notion of the “death of God” in his work *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* as my inspiration for this column as he describes the phenomenon in his own time. As I read him, this text is not making a claim that God does not exist (and, therefore, never did), but that he has stopped existing as a motivating factor for people as they behave toward one another in the market place. It is more a statement about human consciousness as this was expressed in his nineteenth-century Prussia, not just an assertion of a metaphysical worldview. I am therefore, not arguing that nature, God, humanity, or art no longer exist when they “die” in the epochs that I created in the chart. I am saying that a single definition of these terms fails to have authority over communities, allowing for a new exploration of another part of consciousness.

Appendix III: PERMISSIONS

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To:
PATRICK BELDIO, MFA, PhD Candidate,
Reunion Studios,
1615 Manchester Lane NW,
Washington DC - 20011
USA

Dear Mr. Patrick Beldio,

With reference to your email dated 03.03.2016, we would like to confirm that you have the permission from the Sri Aurobindo Ashram's Copyright Department to use all those images listed in your email dated 03.03.2016 for which the Sri Aurobindo Ashram Trust holds the Copyright, for the purposes of your dissertation.

We wish you all the best for your dissertation.

Yours sincerely,



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HAVYAVĀHANA TRUST

THAT WHICH CARRIES OUR OFFERING TO THE SUPREME LORD

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Postal Address

Sri Aurobindo Ashram,
Pondicherry - 605 002

Mr. Patrick Beldio
Reunion Studios
1615 Manchester Lane NW
Washington DC
USA

October 14, 2014

Dear Mr. Beldio

We apologise for the long delay in responding to your letter with attachment of June 15th. It has taken us all some time to go through what you have written and then to meet and take our decisions regarding your requests.

On the whole we are impressed by what you have written and your attempts to understand the workings of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother with some of their disciples through Art, and are happy that you have decided to use Sri Aurobindo's full name throughout. Attached please find our comments about some points which require correction or re-consideration.

We confirm the permission conveyed to you earlier to reproduce 'Bande Mataram', 'Musa Spiritus', 'The Other Earths' and 'The Living Truth' in your thesis on condition that proper references are given with acknowledgement made to the Trust as the copyright holder, and that the images are not used for any other purpose, in particular not posted on the internet at any point. Please confirm which of these images you still wish to be supplied to you.

You have also requested permission to reproduce some additional images.

1. The Mother's drawing of "Huta's Heart" – *permission granted*
2. "Beauty waiting to be inspired" (scanned from book) – *permission not granted*
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4. Photo of Huta scanned from book – *permission granted*
5. Drawing of the Mother by the Mother *permission needs to be sought from the Ashram Trust.*

Huta has given specific instructions that none of the *Meditations on Savitri* paintings or sketches should be reproduced except in Havyavahana Trust publications. At present a book publication covering all the five cantos of Book One is in preparation, and it is planned to publish the rest in three or four volumes before long. You may view available paintings in book form or video for your work and refer to them in the thesis with relevant references. We also feel that she would not have wished images from *The Joy of Light* to be reproduced in isolation.

CONTD.....2

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HAVYAVĀHANA TRUST

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: 2 :

In response to questions in your letter we can give the following information:

Huta was born on September 1 1931 and was 23 in February 1955. Her visit to London in 1958-60 was part of her sadhana, intended to further her education in art as well as other areas. Photos of the Dolls exhibition appeared in the Ashram journal *Bulletin of Physical Education* of February 1957 and the image in *Story of a Soul* is reproduced from there.

Kindly send a soft copy of this chapter of your thesis and any other passages relating to Huta to the Trust once it is completed.

With regards


Prakash Patel

On behalf of Havyavahana Trust


Shradhdhavan

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