21 October 1953

*When a true artist concentrates and sees the Divine in himself, can he use art to express the Divine?*

And why not? Whom do you call an artist, first of all? A painter, a sculptor — Is that all? What else? What meaning do you give to the word “artist”? Of whom do you think when you speak of an artist? Of a painter or a sculptor?

*Someone who can draw.*

Yes, a painter, someone who can draw, it is the same thing. Of a painter, a sculptor, that’s all? Painter and sculptor? Not of a musician or a writer or... I am asking you because the answer would be different according to the instances....

*I had thought of someone who can draw.*

For instance, there were in the Middle Ages — there still are today, but they were already there in the Middle Ages — men who made stained-glass windows, designs with pieces of coloured glass and in various forms. In the churches, in cathedrals, there were always stained-glass windows. Instead of ordinary windows, there were these coloured panes which made designs. It is a wonderful material, for there is the sun behind (in any case the full light), and these glasses were transparent; so they gave out a colour which was as though self-luminous, and these men made designs, made pictures with these coloured glasses cut out, you know, in special forms and painted in different colours. And that indeed was art. In all the cathedrals, the big churches, there were stained-glass windows; some of them were quite marvellous. And they expressed, for instance, the life of a
saint or scenes from the life of Christ or... all kinds of things like that.

So, what is your question? Put it clearly.

*Whether one can express the Divine himself...*

Whether one can express the Divine himself in art? But in what can one express Him? I mean, what exactly do you call “expressing the Divine”? In words? In teachings? In books, finally? Or how else? Who has expressed the Divine completely in the material world?... It is only when the material world is transformed that it will be possible to express the Divine in his purity. And I don’t see what difference there can be between art and any other activity. It is something which has the capacity to become fused, but not entirely, and it remains (how to put it?) an instrument for giving a form. And I don’t see what difference this makes, whatever may be the form. If one can express the Divine with words, one can express Him with colours, express Him with sounds, express Him with forms. But in none of these instances is the expression perfect, for the union is not perfect. But when the world is transformed and the Divine is able to manifest Himself without being deformed, the expression will be perfect. But for the moment all expressions are on the same plane. None of them is better than any other. One mode of expression (I mean in itself) is not better than another. There is always *something* of the human personality, the being in form, which is there to give a limitation or deformation to what has to be expressed.

Art is just one activity like all others. Truly speaking, I was too polite to tell that lady¹ this, but I thought: “Why do you make distinctions like that, all this is the same thing.” Do you catch what I mean?

¹ The one who asked the question in the conversation of 28 July 1929: see Questions and Answers 1929–1931.
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When one is identified with the Divine, does one see Him in the form one thinks He has?

Usually. It is very rare—unless one is able to get rid of one’s mental formation completely—it is very rare to see Him quite objectively. Besides, Sri Aurobindo always used to say that the relation with the Divine depended on what one wanted it to be. Everyone aspires for a particular form of relation, and for him the relation takes that form.

Then, what is it in truth?

Probably something that escapes form totally—or that can take all forms. There is no limitation to the expression of the Divine. He can express Himself without form and He can express Himself in all forms. And He expresses Himself in everyone according to each one’s need. For even if somebody succeeds in becoming sufficiently impersonal so as to identify himself completely with the Divine, at that moment he will not be able to express it. And as soon as he is in a condition to express it, there will be something of the limited personality intervening and through this the experience has to pass. The moment of the experience is one thing and the expression of this experience is another. It may be simultaneous: there are people who while having the experience express what they feel in some form or other. Then it is simultaneous. But that does not prevent that which has the experience in its purity and that which expresses it from being two fairly different modes of being. And this difference is enough for one to be able to say in truth that it is impossible to know the Divine unless one becomes the Divine.

As for expressing Him, there is always a shifting; it always causes something like this (gesture of changing levels), whatever the mode of expression.

There remains only one field in which the experience has not been totally achieved, that is the purely material field. And
there, it may be asked if truly, when the divine Consciousness descends into the body, the transformations will not be sufficient for there to be a possibility of integral expression.... But that is yet to come; it has not yet been done. And so long as it is not done, one cannot know. For even in the highest mental expression there is something which intervenes, due to the physical body. For the inspiration to come right down to the paper, for instance, well, despite everything, it must pass through very material vibrations which may change it. But if these very vibrations are transformed, then in that case it is possible that the outer expression is absolutely identical with the inner; that is, the corporeal manifestation truly becomes a manifestation of the divine essence.

Is that all?

_Aren’t the incidents of the Mahabharata and the Ramayana true?_

True, in what sense? Whether it all really happened on earth like that? Hanuman and the monkeys and the... (laughter) I can’t tell. I have the feeling that it is symbolical; that, for instance, when one speaks of Hanuman, this represents the evolutionary man, and Rama is the involutionary being, the one who comes from above. But...

What do you mean by the involutionary and evolutionary being?

The evolutionary being is the one that’s the continuation of the animals, and the other is a being from higher worlds who, when the earth was formed, materialised itself upon earth — it does not come from below, it has come from above. But in the evolutionary being there is that central light which is the origin of the psychic being, which will develop into the psychic being, and when the psychic being is fully formed, there is a moment
when it can unite with a being from above which can incarnate in it. So this being from above which descends into a psychic being is an involutionary being — a being of the Overmind plane or from elsewhere.

That is all?

Was Anatole France’s “jongleur” an artist?

I don’t know. That depends (that’s just what I was asking Parul), it depends on the definition you give to the word “artist”.

If you ask me, I believe that all those who produce something artistic are artists! A word depends upon the way it is used, upon what one puts into it. One may put into it all that one wants. For instance, in Japan there are gardeners who spend their time correcting the forms of trees so that in the landscape they make a beautiful picture. By all kinds of trimmings, props, etc. they adjust the forms of trees. They give them special forms so that each form may be just what is needed in the landscape. A tree is planted in a garden at the spot where it is needed and moreover, it is given the form that’s required for it to go well with the whole set-up. And they succeed in doing wonderful things. You have but to take a photograph of the garden, it is a real picture, it is so good. Well, I certainly call the man an artist. One may call him a gardener but he is an artist.... All those who have a sure and developed sense of harmony in all its forms, and the harmony of all the forms among themselves, are necessarily artists, whatever may be the type of their production.

You did not finish telling us about Rama and Hanuman.

(Laughter)

I did not finish? But yes, I said... Oh! because he asked what difference there was between an involutionary and an evolutionary being. But that’s enough as it is. Once you know that you have the key to the whole story. Besides, I don’t know whether there
is a single authentic text or many texts of the Ramayana. For I have heard different versions. There are different versions, aren't there? Above all, for two very important facts (Mother turns to Nolini) concerning the end: the defeat and death of Ravana, and then the death of Sita. I have heard it narrated very differently, with different significances, by different pandits. According to their turn of mind, if I may say so, some who were very very orthodox told me certain things and others who were not orthodox told me something very different. So I don't know if there are several texts or whether it was their own interpretation.

(Nolini) *There are several texts. There is one text in the North and another in the South.*

Ah! as for Buddhism. The people of the South and the North have different kinds of imagination. The southern people are generally more rigid, aren't they?... I don't know, but for Buddhism, the Buddhism of the South is quite rigid and doesn't allow any suppleness in the understanding of the text. And it is a terribly strict Buddhism in which all notion of the Godhead in any form whatsoever, is completely done away with. On the other hand, the Buddhism of the North is an orgy of gods! It is true that these are former Buddhas, but still they are turned into gods. And it is this latter that has spread into China and from China gone to Japan. So, one enters a Buddhist temple in Japan and sees... There is a temple where there were more than a thousand Buddhas, all sculptured — a thousand figures seated around the central Buddha — they were there all around, the entire back wall of the temple was covered with images: small ones, big ones, fat ones, thin ones, women, men — there was everything, a whole pantheon there, formidable, and they were like gods. And then too, there were little beings down below with all kinds of forms including those of animals, and these were the worshippers. It was... it was an orgy of images. But the Buddhism of the South has the austerity of
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Protestantism: there must be no images. And there is no divine Consciousness, besides. One comes into the world through desire, into a world of desire, and abandoning desire one goes out of the world and creation and returns to Nirvana — even the nought is something too concrete. There is no Creator in Buddhism. So, I don’t know. The Buddhism of the South is written in Pali and that of the North in Sanskrit. And naturally, there is Tibetan Buddhism written in Tibetan, and Chinese Buddhism written in Chinese and Japanese Buddhism in Japanese. And each one, I believe, is very very different from the others. Well, probably there must be several versions of the Ramayana. And still more versions of the Mahabharata — that indeed is amazing!

(Nolini) Of the Ramayana also.

Then texts have been added later.

*Did it exist, Mother, the Mahabharata?*

I suppose something did exist. In all these things, there is “something” that’s true and then what has been made of it. These are two very different things. But in all religions, everywhere, it is the same thing: there is something which is there, something exists, and then one makes quite a different thing of it. That’s the difference between history and legend — but history itself is a legend.

The same story, even taken quite objectively, when it is repeated several times, changes; and so after thousands of years it is altogether deformed. Which are the original texts — I mean the first recognised original texts — of the Mahabharata? It was related orally for a very long time, wasn’t it? So you can imagine how it could have changed. These were oral traditions for a very long time. But who wrote the first version?
(Nolini) Vyasa.

Ah!

(Nolini) At first there were 36,000 verses. Now it is more than a lakh or two.

Oh! Oh! it has grown: from 36,000 it has become quite inflated!
But the Gita — are there several versions?

(Nolini) No.

But the Gita is a part of the Mahabharata.

(Nolini) Yes.

Is the Ramayana more recent?

(Nolini) No.

Is it of the same period? And is the author known?

(Nolini) Valmiki.

Yes, and this has not changed so much.

(Nolini) Not as much as the other. Not so much as the Mahabharata.

But there are differences. There is one tradition which says that Ravana died deliberately, that it was deliberately he chose the role of the Asura and that he died willingly in order to shorten his “stay” outside the Divine. He dissolved into Rama when he died, saying that thus he had succeeded sooner in uniting with him definitively. Which version is this? Is it orthodox or not?
(Nolini) *Everything is orthodox!*

It is orthodox. The idea (it is an idea, isn’t it?) is that the Asuras have chosen to be Asuras because they will be dissolved by the Divine and thus return more quickly, unite more swiftly with the divine essence than the gods or sages who take a big round of labour before being able to return to the Divine. The Asuras, on the other hand, having chosen to be very wicked, will be destroyed much more quickly, they will return much faster. It’s one way of looking at it! *(Laughter)*

In the same way, I have heard two versions (but as I said, one was broad-minded and the other extremely orthodox) about the end of Sita; one said that Sita chose to be swallowed up in the earth to prove her innocence, whilst the very orthodox version said that it was just because she was not innocent that she was swallowed up! *(Laughter)*

*Flowers fell from the skies, didn’t they?*²

Ah! that again is another story.... I heard the Ramayana from a man called Pandit, and he was the son of a pandit and had come to Paris to study Law. But he had remained orthodox, as orthodox as one could be, it was tremendous! And he had with him a Ramayana translated into English, with pictures, and he showed it to me. And he told me the story. And then, when he came to the end he told me that. So I said: “What do you mean?” He told me: “You understand, for an Indian, if a woman has lived even for a few hours in another man’s house, she is impure....” Oh! it is terrible... So, it was because she was impure that she was swallowed up.... I remember, he was quite short. He was from a Bombay family — not Bombay proper but from that side. He was a Gujarati. I believe he spoke Gujarati.

² According to the texts, it seems, flowers fell from the skies after Sita’s disappearance, proving her innocence.
And then the other version, I heard that from... that man was called Shastri. He was another pandit. He was in Japan. There we are, then.

Is that all? No questions? You... Be quick, it is late.

*In one of your writings you have said that beauty is universal and that one must be universal in order to see and recognise it.*

Yes. I mean one must have a universal *consciousness* in order to see and recognise it. For instance, if your consciousness is limited to one place, that is, it is a national consciousness (the consciousness of any one country), what is beautiful for one country is not beautiful for another. The sense of beauty is different. For example (I could make you laugh with a story), I knew in Paris the son of the king of Dahomey (he was a negro — the king of Dahomey was a negro) and this boy had come to Paris to study Law. He used to speak French like a Frenchman. But he had remained a negro, you understand. And he was asked (he used to tell us all kinds of stories about his life as a student), someone asked him in front of me: “Well, when you marry, whom will you marry?” — “Ah! a girl from my country, naturally, they alone are beautiful....” (*Laughter*) Now, for those who are not negroes, negro beauty is a little difficult to see! And yet, this was quite spontaneous. He was fully convinced it was impossible for anyone to think otherwise.... “Only the women of my country are beautiful!”

It is the same thing everywhere. Only those who have developed a little artistic taste, have travelled much and seen many things have widened their consciousness and they are no longer so sectarian. But it is very difficult to pull a person out of the specialised tastes of his race — I am not even speaking now of the country, I am speaking of the race. It is very difficult. It is there, you know, hidden right at the bottom, in the subconscious, and it comes back without your even noticing it, quite spontaneously,
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quite naturally. Even on this very point: the woman of your race is always much more beautiful than the woman of other races — spontaneously, it is the spontaneous taste. That’s what I mean. So, you must rise above that. I am not even speaking of those who find everything that’s outside their own family or caste very ugly and bad. I am not speaking at all of these people. I am not even speaking of those for whom one country is much more beautiful than another. And yet, these people have already risen above the altogether ordinary way of thinking. I am not even speaking of a question of race. It is very difficult, one must go right down, right down within oneself into the subconscious — and even farther — to discover the root of these things. Therefore, if you want to have the sense of beauty in itself — which is quite independent of all these tastes, the taste of the race — you must have a universal consciousness. Otherwise how can you have it? You will always have preferences. Even if these are not active and conscious preferences, they are subconscious preferences, instincts. So, to know true beauty independent of all form, one must rise above all form. And once you have known it beyond every form, you can recognise it in any form whatsoever, indifferently. And that becomes very interesting.

So that’s all. Au revoir, my children.