1 June 1955

Mother reads from The Human Cycle, Chapter 14, “The Suprarational Beauty”, second paragraph.

What do you want to ask about this?

_Sweet Mother, what is an aesthetic conscience?_

It is the consciousness of beauty. Aesthetic means that which concerns beauty, art. There are people, for example, who move around in life and see landscapes, see people and things and have absolutely no sense of whether it is beautiful or not; and into the bargain, it makes no difference at all to them. They look at the sky, see whether there are any clouds, whether it will rain or be clear, for instance; or whether the sun is hot or the wind cold. But there are others — when they raise their eyes and look at a beautiful sky, it gives them pleasure, they say, “Oh! It is fine today, the sunrise is lovely today, the sunset is beautiful, the clouds have fine shapes.” So, the first kind do not have an aesthetic conscience, the second have.

_What does “the ordinary scale of our powers” mean?_

“Scale” gives the idea of a gradation from the lowest to the highest powers; as, for example, the faculty to walk and the faculty to think: there’s a gradation between the two; the faculty of walking is an altogether physical one, the faculty of thinking is something intellectual. So these are different gradations of the consciousness of which Sri Aurobindo speaks here, “the ordinary scale of our powers”; he is not speaking of spiritual or yogic things; it is the scale of ordinary life, that is, for everyone it is like that. For he says that even in the barbarian, the savage,
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	here is something which is not altogether savage, and that he has, he too, indeed, this scale; it is more rudimentary, more crude, but it exists, from the most material thing to an embryo of thought and speculation. As we are told, he has his own opinion about the world and what the world is, he has an idea about these things; it is perhaps a little childish but he has an idea about them. So he too has this gradation. Of course there are higher faculties than that of thought, but they are not frequent, that is, one doesn’t often come across them.

That’s all? What are we going to do?

*I have things to ask in the other paragraph, the next one.*
*I haven’t understood very much.*

The next one? But the next one is for next Wednesday, unless you want me to read it to you.

No, Sweet Mother, the others have questions.

You have some questions? You have questions, you? Over there, do you have any questions? No questions?

*Can beauty exist outside any form?*

There is a beauty of feelings; unless you think that feelings also have a form. What you mean is: “Is there a beauty outside any physical form?”

Yes.

Ah! Yes, there is a beauty of thought, a beauty of feeling. This is something we perceive very often; when someone has done a very noble deed, very generous, very unselfish, quite spontaneously we say, “It is beautiful!” And it’s true, it gives the sense of beauty.
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Beauty is not something purely physical. However, we have said that the best expression of the Divine in the physical world is beauty; but it is not exclusive, it does not mean that it is only in the physical world.

(Silence)

Isn’t that all right?

*Sweet Mother, Sri Aurobindo has said here: “...this seeking for beauty ... springs from the roots of our life...”*

It springs from the roots of our life — so?

*What are the roots of our life?*

He means that it is instinctive, that it isn’t rational, it doesn’t depend on the domain of reason, it is something instinctive. We have a sense of beauty and love beauty without even knowing why, and there are things which give the sense of beauty without our knowing why, without our reasoning. It is instinctive. He says that this is the infrarational stage of the aesthetic sense. It is absolutely obvious that a child, who sees a pretty flower and has the feeling of beauty he does not know why, would never be able to tell you that it’s because the form is balanced and the colours are lovely; he cannot explain it. Therefore it is not rational, it is altogether instinctive, it is an attraction, an impulse drawing one towards something, a harmony one feels, without being able to define it. But most often it is like that. It is rarely that one is able to say, “This thing is beautiful because of that, because of this,” and to give a whole lecture on the beauty of something. Usually, one simply feels that it is beautiful; if later one wonders, “Why did I feel it is beautiful?” then, by making an effort with one’s intelligence one may succeed in understanding it; but at the
beginning one is not preoccupied with the why, one feels that it is beautiful, and that's all, one is satisfied with that.

For example, you enter a historical building, and suddenly you are seized by the sense of a great beauty; how do you explain it? If someone asks you about it you would say, “Well, I feel that it is beautiful.” But if an architect enters a building and has the same feeling that it is beautiful, he will immediately tell you, “It’s because the lines meet harmoniously, the mass of the volumes is in harmony, the entire structure follows certain laws of beauty, order and rhythm”, and he will explain them to you. But that’s because he is an architect, and yet you could have felt the beauty as much as he without being able to explain it. Well, your feeling for beauty is what Sri Aurobindo calls infrarational, and his feeling for beauty is what Sri Aurobindo calls rational, because he can explain with his reason why he finds it beautiful.

But even when you look at someone, a person, and find her beautiful, would you be able to tell yourself why? Not often. If you make an effort, look attentively, reflect, then you may begin to tell yourself, “Yes, why! it is for this, it is for that”, and it is not at all certain that you are right.

In fact, beauty is something very elusive. It is a kind of harmony which you experience much more than think, and the true suprarational relation with beauty is not at all a “reason-able” relation (Sri Aurobindo will tell you this at the end), it completely overpasses reason, it is a contact in a higher realm. But what precisely he tells us in this paragraph is that when it is an instinct it is found mixed with movements of ignorance and a lack of culture and refinement. So this instinct is sometimes very gross and very imperfect in its expression. One can experience an aesthetic pleasure (let us call it that) in seeing something which is truly beautiful and at the same time something else which is not beautiful, but which gives one some sort of pleasure, because it is mixed, because one’s aesthetic instinct is not pure, it is mixed with all kinds of sensations which are very crude and untrained. So it is here, as he says, that reason has its role, that it comes
in to explain why a thing is beautiful, to educate the taste; but it is not final, and reason is not the final judge; it can very well make mistakes, only it is a little higher, as judgment, than that of a completely infrarational being who has no reason and no understanding of things. It is a stage. It is a stage, that’s what he says, it is a stage. But if you want to realise true beauty, you must go beyond that, very far beyond this stage. In what follows in our reading he will explain it. But this is the summary of what he has said in this paragraph. At first your sense of beauty is instinctive, impulsive, infrarational, lacking light, wanting reason, simply without any true understanding, and so, because the origin of the aesthetic sense is infrarational, it is understood, one always says this: “There’s no disputing tastes and colours.” You know, there are all kinds of popular proverbs which say that the appreciation of the beautiful is not a matter of reasoning, everyone likes a particular thing he doesn’t know why, he takes pleasure in looking at a thing, and this pleasure cannot be discussed. Well, this is the infrarational stage of the aesthetic sense.

_Sweet Mother, last time, at the end of the class you were going to tell us something, but you stopped because we had no time._

Ah, you suppose that I remember! What was it about?

_It was the morality of Nature._

Oh! It is not interesting.

It was a group of people whom I met in Paris. A certain gentleman had founded a group called “The Morality of Nature”, and so he took his stand on all the movements of Nature to set up his moral code. But we know that Nature is... how to put it... a force, a consciousness or being, call it what you like, which is absolutely amoral, for whom the moral sense does not exist
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at all. So naturally this had rather disastrous results in practice. And in the very meeting where this gentleman was expounding his theories, there was a Catholic priest, a very learned man who studied many things (he knew lots of things), who immediately began to tell him that his morality of Nature was not moral. Then the other gentleman was not pleased and told him, “Oh, yes! You climb to the seventh storey of your ivory tower and from there you look at things without understanding them”. “The seventh storey of your ivory tower” was very amusing.

Well, he had found, according to himself (I don’t remember his name now), he had found the means of being happy, that everyone may be satisfied and men may love one another. So naturally people who did not agree with him, said to him, “But how does it happen that when the law of Nature alone reigns — as for example, without even going as far as the animal, in vegetable life — how does it happen that there are constant massacres between plants and the perpetual struggle for life? Is this what you call harmony?” Then the other man did not understand anything.

In fact, people who are interested in general questions, those who come out of their little daily preoccupations of being born, living and dying, living as well as possible — there are people not satisfied with this, who try to have general ideas and look at world problems — these people make an inner effort or a mental effort, and in one way or another enter into contact with the great currents of forces, at first currents of mental force, of the higher light and sometimes of spiritual force. Then they receive a kind of drop of that within their consciousness, and this produces in them the illumination of a revelation, and they feel that they have grasped the truth. They have a revelation and so naturally are very happy and immediately think, “My happiness I am going to pass on to others”; for they are very fine people, they have very good intentions. Then, to pass on their happiness to others they begin by making a construction around their revelation; they must make it into a system; otherwise how
to preach to others? So they make a system, like this gentle-
man. I have met hundreds like this in the world. Now, each
one had had a revelation and had constructed something which
seemed to him to be the solution to all problems. They wanted
to apply it to everything. So they gathered people around them;
according to the strength of their influence, their power, they
gathered more people or less, from three or four to some hun-
dreds; sometimes they had groups and they said, “Here we are, if
everyone does what we do, well, the world will be transformed.”
Unfortunately it was only a spark of light, and their construction
was purely mental and not free from the ordinary laws of life.
And so the people in the groups who were to have preached
to the world harmony, beauty, happiness, joy and peace, etc.,
quarrelled among themselves. This took away all power from
their teaching. It is like this, and in fact it is true.

It is only when something absolutely new and absolutely
superior enters the earth atmosphere and changes it by a kind
of spiritual coercion, it is only at that moment that human
consciousness will change sufficiently for circumstances also to
change.

As for me, I have no illusions on the subject, because I
know that Sri Aurobindo saw the truth of things and therefore,
if humanity were ready to be transformed simply by the vision
of the truth of things, well, at least all those who are in contact
with this truth should be transformed. Well, they aren’t.

You know all the defects which you have, personally and
collectively, and how in spite of a goodwill which must be
obvious, there is still much to do for the world to be as one
conceives it when one comes out of ordinary notions — simply,
let us say a world of harmony, peace, understanding, broad-
mindedness, goodwill, unselfishness, disinterested consecration
to a higher ideal, self-forgetfulness... you want more of these
things, there are still many more. You must begin with just a
little at first, simply this: to have slightly greater ideas, a little
vaster understanding, not to be sectarian.
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What kind of reason guides the realistic and surrealistic artists who are so gross?

What kind of reason! But why do you suppose that it is reason? Unless reason is just an explanation we give of what they do! But otherwise why do you suppose that it is reason?

No, because Sri Aurobindo has said in this paragraph that it is here that reason guides.

But perhaps it is just because it does not guide them that they do what they do and as they do it, isn’t that so?

But how does it happen that after having reached so high the art of painting becomes so ugly and childish?

But have you ever seen that the human ascent is like that, a funicular ascent, quite straight? It turns all the time. So if you assume that there are vertical lines which are lines of a kind of human progress, then when things come there, they progress, but when they go further away they degenerate.

I shall tell you perhaps in ten years... I don’t know, perhaps in ten years I shall tell you whether there is something in modern painting. Because I am going to tell you something curious: for the moment I find it downright ugly, not only ugly but stupid; but what is frightening is that it makes you completely sick of all other pictures. When one sees painting as it is done today... for we receive all the time art reviews in which, with much intelligence, are put reproductions of both ancient and modern pictures, and they are put side by side, which makes the thing very interesting, you can see both and compare. I can’t manage to have yet a very clear notion of beauty in what modern painters do, I confess this, I haven’t yet understood; but what is curious is that they have succeeded in taking away from me all the taste for the painting of old; except some very
rare things, the rest seems to me pompous, artificial, ridiculous, unbearable.

Now this means that behind this incoherence and chaos there certainly is, there must be a creative spirit which is trying to manifest.

We have passed from a particular world which had reached its perfection and was declining, this is absolutely obvious. And so to pass from that creation to a new creation (because... well, suppose that it is the forces of ordinary Nature which are acting), instead of passing through a continuous ascent, there was evidently a fall into a chaos, that is, the chaos is necessary for a new creation.

The methods of Nature are like that. Before our solar system could exist, there was chaos. Well, in passing from this artistic construction which had reached a kind of summit, before passing from this to a new creation, it seems to me still the same thing, evidently a chaos. And the impression I have when I look at these things is that they are not sincere, and that's what is annoying. It is not sincere: either it is someone who has amused himself by being as mad as possible or perhaps it is someone who wanted to deceive others or maybe deceive even himself, or again, a kind of incoherent fantasy in which one puts a blot of paint in one place and then says immediately, “Why, it would be funny to put it there, and if one put it here, like this, and again if one put this like that, and again...” There, for the moment this is the impression it gives me, and I don’t feel that it is something sincere.

But there is a sincere creative spirit behind, which is trying to manifest, which, for the moment, does not manifest, but is strong enough to destroy the past. That is, there was a time when I used to look at the pictures of Rembrandt, of Titian, of Tintoretto, the pictures of Renoir and Monet, I felt a great aesthetic joy. This aesthetic joy I don’t feel any more. I have progressed because I follow the whole movement of terrestrial evolution; therefore, I have had to overpass this cycle, I have
arrived at another; and this one seems to me empty of aesthetic joy. From the point of view of reason one may dispute this, speak of all the beautiful and good things which have been done, all that is a different affair. But this subtle something, precisely, which is the true aesthetic joy, is gone, I don’t feel it any longer. Of course I am a hundred miles away from having it when I look at the things they are now doing. But still it is something which is behind this that has made the other disappear. So perhaps by making just a little effort towards the future we are going to be able to find the formula of the new beauty. That would be interesting. It is quite recently that this impression came to me; it is not old. I have tried with the most perfect goodwill, by abolishing all kinds of preferences, preconceived ideas, habits, past tastes, all that; all that eliminated, I look at their pictures and I don’t succeed in getting any pleasure; it doesn’t give me any, sometimes it gives me a disgust, but above all the impression of something that’s not true, a painful impression of insincerity.

But then quite recently, I suddenly felt this, this sensation of something very new, something of the future pushing, pushing, trying to manifest, trying to express itself and not succeeding, but something which will be a terrific progress over all that has been felt and expressed before; and then, at the same time is born the movement of consciousness which turns to this new thing and wants to grasp it. This will perhaps be interesting. That is why I told you: ten years. Perhaps in ten years there will be people who have found a new expression. A great progress would be necessary, an immense progress in the technique; the old technique seems barbarous. And now with the new scientific discoveries perhaps the technique of execution will change and one could find a new technique which would then express this new beauty which wants to manifest. We shall speak about it in ten years’ time.

_Au revoir!_