

Eleven talks at Auroville

Preparing
for
the **Miraculous**

Georges Van Vrekhem

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Stichting Aurofonds

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Foreword

The talks in this book have been delivered in Auroville, the first four at the Townhall in September, the following six at Savitri Bhavan in November and December 2010. The talk on “The Kalki Avatar” was also held at the Townhall, in February 2011, in the context of the seminar on “Mutation II”.

I had been invited to give talks in Europe, the USA and India, but I had to cancel all travelling plans because of my heart condition. This led to the idea of giving a series of talks in Auroville, where I am living, and to record them so that the people who had invited me would be able, if they so desired, to have the talks all the same. After having delivered the series it was found worthwhile to round it off by making the talks also available in writing.

The texts in this collection are not transcriptions of the talks, they are what I call “write-outs,” presenting a read-

able version of the spoken word. Each text follows the talk faithfully and treats a given topic in its entirety, yet these are not polished-up essays which are supposed to exhaust their subject and could in each case easily be extended into a book.

The reader may find that repetitions occur, even of quotes. I have kept these repetitions because I thought that they create an inner resonance which connects the various topics into a whole which reflects, as I dare to hope, the Aurobindian vision behind it.

I wish to thank fellow-Aurovillians Anandi Breton and Joseba Martinez for suggesting to give the talks; Bindu Mohanty and Carel Thieme for their initiative of organizing them; Shraddhavan for her hospitality at Savitri Bhavan; Sergey Stanovykh for the video recordings; Joel Van Lierde and the people of the Auroville Radio for the audio recordings; and Muriel Ghion and Antim Singhi for their kind assistance when giving the talks. Also thanks, once more, to Carel Thieme for reading the texts in spite of his busy schedule.

Last but not least I would like to thank the Aurovillian audiences. Their empathy and aspiration have each time created the atmosphere which carried me through the talks and made them an unforgettable experience for me.

G.V.V.

It comes at last, the day foreseen of old,
What John in Patmos saw, what Shelley dreamed,
Vision and vain imagination deemed,
The City of Delight, the Age of Gold.

The Iron Age is ended. Only now
The last fierce spasm of the dying past
Shall shake the nations, and when that has passed,
Earth washed of ills shall raise a fairer brow.

Sri Aurobindo

1

Adam Kadmon and the Evolution

The Cosmic Purusha

The Mother has told several times of a very old tradition at the origin of the Vedic and the Chaldean branches of wisdom and spirituality. According to this tradition, the One, wanting to know himself, manifested as the Great Mother and thus became two. And the Great Mother, in her turn, manifested the attributes of the One – Truth, Light or Consciousness, Life, and *Ananda* or Bliss – as the main elements of the manifestation. But, relates the tradition, a crucial mistake happened which

made Truth turn into falsehood, Light into darkness and ignorance, Bliss into suffering, and Life into death.

“The Creative Power implored the Supreme Origin, asking for a special intervention which could save this corrupted universe; and in reply to this prayer there was emanated from the Supreme Origin a special Entity of love and consciousness, who cast himself directly into the most inconscient matter to begin there the work of awakening. In the old narratives this Being is described as stretched out in a deep sleep at the bottom of a very dark cave.”

This very old story about an accident on the threshold of creation, for which the Great Mother was held responsible, is also the foundation story of all schools of Gnosticism; according to the gnostic myths, souls (sparks of the Divine) get lost in the world of the Ignorance and can only be saved by a redeemer who reminds them of their origin. In the Bible, Satan (originally the Angel of Light) revolts against God and becomes the devil. The Mother herself has more than once told the same story in its complete form: the four attributes of the Divine – truth, light, life and bliss – in their boundless egoistic pride deemed themselves equal to be the very Divine and therefore turned into the great Asuras: the Lords of Falsehood, Darkness, Suffering and Death. (In one of his sonnets Sri Aurobindo called them “the iron Dictators”. They are also known as the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse.)

The “special Entity,” emanated by the Divine to save the world, is described in the narratives of the old traditions “as stretched out in a deep sleep at the bottom of a very dark cave, and in his sleep prismatic rays of light irradiate from him and gradually penetrate in all the elements of the Inconscient.” Without this direct divine permeation the world of Ignorance and Darkness could never have evolved back towards its Origin.

During her second visit to Tlemcen, in 1907, when working with Max Théon, the Mother descended in trance into the “total Inconscient” at the bottom of the manifestation. Suddenly she found herself in front of a cave in which there was that special Entity, “a Being of iridescent light, lying on one side and with its head resting in its hand.” She had trained herself to talk in trance, and when she reported to Théon what she saw, he replied that it was “the immanent Divine at the bottom of the Inconscient.” But then something remarkable happened: the Being opened its eyes, thereby indicating that the time of wakeful, conscious action had come.

While still at Tlemcen, the Mother had another, related experience which she narrated many years later, in 1961. She had learned to leave the successive sheaths of the body “with great dexterity... I could halt on any plane, do what I had to do there, move around freely, see, observe, and then speak about what I had seen.” Once, having left behind the most subtle body sheath, she passed “beyond all possible forms, even all thought forms,” in a domain where one experienced total unity – unity in “something that was the essence of Love.” Quite unexpected, and to her amazement, she there found herself “in the presence of the principle, the principle of the human form. ... It was an upright form, standing just on the border between the world of forms and the Formless” like a kind of norm, model or archetype. “At that time nobody had ever spoken to me about it,” for no one she knew had ever seen anything like it. But she felt at once the special importance of her experience. “Afterwards [at least thirteen years later], when I met Sri Aurobindo and talked to him about it, he told me: ‘It is surely the prototype of the supramental form.’ I saw it several times again, later on, and this proved to be true.”

We remember that the Mother said that the story about what she usually called “the accident,” the fall into the

Inconscient, was under different names known in the ancient wisdom traditions. "In every country, every tradition, the event has been presented in a special way, with different limitations, different details or particular features, but, truly speaking, the origin of all these stories is the same." It is the gnostic story, rediscovered and revived in the great periods of the history of humankind (as we shall see). And we remember that, at the beginning of the evolution as well as at its end, there is a divine archetype determining the development of Life on Earth.¹

Sri Aurobindo too has written about such archetype, which he called "the body of the creative Deity." When considering the four *varnas* – *brahmins*, *kshatriyas*, *vaishyas*, and *shudras* – he mentions the *Purushasukta* of the *Vedas* "where the four orders are described as having sprung from the body of the creative Deity, from his head, arms, thighs and feet. To us," he comments, "this is merely a poetical image. As if this were all, as if the men of those days would have so profound a reverence for mere poetical figures like this of the body of Brahma. ... We read always our mentality into that of these ancient forefathers and it is therefore that we can find in them nothing but imaginative barbarians. ... The image was to these seers a revelative symbol of the unrevealed and it was used because it could hint luminously to the mind what the precise intellectual word, apt only for logical or practical thought or to express the physical and superficial, could not at all hope to manifest. To them this symbol of the Creator's body was more than an image, it expressed a divine reality. Human society was for them an attempt to express in life the cosmic Purusha. ... Man and

The references to the works of Sri Aurobindo follow the online edition by the Sri Aurobindo Ashram for the volumes of the Complete Works published there until February 2011.

1 See in *L'Agenda de Mère* the conversation of 7 November 1961.

the cosmos are both of them symbols and expressions of the same hidden reality.”²

Man as a microcosm contains the macrocosm within him. The structure of his person is expressed in society as the fundamental characteristics of the *brahmin*, *kshatriya*, *vaishya* and *shudra*. These four “*varnas*,” writes Sri Aurobindo elsewhere, are in various degrees the characteristics of each human being, man and woman. They are universal properties and should not be confused with the four “castes,” which are no more than their calcified caricature. It is in the human individual and in the human society that we find “the cosmic Purusha” or the divine archetype mirrored.

As the idea of a universal archetype is common to the fundamental wisdom traditions everywhere, so is the idea of the principal four fundamental human characteristics and the ways they are worked out in society. “It is noticeable,” writes Sri Aurobindo, “that both in Europe and in Asia there was a common tendency, which we cannot trace to any close interchange of ideas and must therefore attribute to the operation of the same natural cause and necessity, towards the evolution of a social hierarchy based on a division according to four different social activities [*i.e.* the *varnas*]. ... The spirit, form and equipoise worked out were very different in different parts of the world according to the bent of the community and its circumstances, but the initial principle was almost identical.”³ This is, for instance, the reason why in the European Middle Ages we find society dominated by the clergy (*brahmins*) and the knights (*kshatriyas*), a social order soon expanded with the merchants (*vaishyas*). So strong became the presence of the latter, rightly called “the third estate,” that it resulted in the upheaval known as

2 Sri Aurobindo: *The Human Cycle*, pp. 9-10.

3 *Id.*, p. 375.

the French Revolution, which was almost immediately followed by the rise of the proletariat (*shudras*) and their mass movements of socialism and communism.

Thus we may conclude that, according to Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, and the traditions they refer to, there is the presence of a divine archetype resembling the human form above or behind the evolution. The knowledge of this form has been and still is common wisdom in East and West. It is this form – here understood in the philosophical Platonic sense as “idea” – which we find in the course of the evolution of life on Earth gradually expressed in the shape of the human being. This form is also the inspiration of the knowledge at the base of the occult schemata of the world, e.g. the chakras, the chain of being, the astrological structure of the human being, and the sephiroth in the Kabbalah.

Primordial Man

The pure spiritual knowledge is the great treasure heedfully kept in India, and which she is now communicating to the world for its further evolution. Yet this knowledge, though often truncated, has also been a part of other great wisdom traditions through the ages.

“The ideas of the *Upanishads*,” writes Sri Aurobindo, “can be rediscovered in much of the thought of Pythagoras and Plato and form the profounder part of Neoplatonism and Gnosticism with all their considerable consequences to the philosophical thinking of the West.” In his remarkable series of articles on the pre-Socratic sage Heraclitus, he writes for instance that in one of Heraclitus’ sayings “we are reminded of the Vedic Fire which is hymned as the upbuilder of the worlds, the secret Immortal in men and things, the periphery of the gods. ... We are reminded of the Vedic thunderbolt, that electric Fire, of the Sun who is the

true Light, the Eye, the wonderful weapon of the divine pathfinders Mitra and Varuna." And we read in one of Sri Aurobindo's letters: "The Vedic Rishis were mystics of the ancient type who everywhere, in India, Greece, Egypt and elsewhere, held the secret truths and methods of which they were in possession as very sacred and secret things, not to be disclosed to the unfit who would misunderstand, misapply, misuse and degrade the knowledge."⁴

Garth Fowden describes those wisdom traditions in the following terms: "They were none of them religions of the masses, because all taught that salvation comes through knowledge ['gnosis']. Knowledge may be imparted suddenly, by revelation, to whomever the teacher deems worthy, as was the wont of certain Gnostics; or it might be learned by long study as among the Platonists, not a few Gnostics and, it seems, the Hermetists. But however acquired, it was always the possession of an elite. Hence the tendency within these milieux towards the emergence of a two-tier structure, with a small group of teachers, the 'elect', taking responsibility for the instruction of a much larger group of what the Platonists and Manicheans appropriately called 'listeners'."⁵

Secrecy on penalty of death was imposed not only by the Pythagoreans but by all mystery cults. A striking illustration is this passage from Apuleius' *Golden Ass*: "So listen, and be sure to believe that what you hear is true. I [an initiate] drew near to the confines of death and trod the threshold of Proserpina, and before returning I journeyed through all the elements. At dead of night I saw the sun gleaming with bright brilliance. I stood in the presence of the gods below and the gods above, and worshipped them

4 Sri Aurobindo: *Letters on Yoga*, p. 103.

5 Garth Fowden: *The Egyptian Hermes*, p. 19.

from close at hand. Notice, then, that I have referred to things which you are not permitted to know, though you have heard about them. So I shall communicate only what can be communicated without sacrilege to the understanding of non-initiates."

Egypt and Greece

An important though forgotten or disparaged source of much of the spirituality in the ancient civilizations around the Mediterranean was Egypt. This is insufficiently realized because the minds of most Egyptologists have remained closed to spiritual values, forced as they felt to comply with the positivism of their academic environment and the dominant Abrahamic religions. It is only recently that authors like Martin Bernal (*Black Athena*) and Christos Evangeliou (*The Hellenic Philosophy: Between Europe, Asia and Africa*) have shown how frequent the exchanges around the eastern Mediterranean were in ancient times, and how deeply Egypt's highly developed culture, occultism and spirituality had penetrated into pre-classical Greece.

The spirit behind the Egyptian temples, the pyramids and the animal masks of the gods has surfaced around the beginning of the Common Era in writings which are called *Hermetica*. These hermetic texts gained enormous influence after being rediscovered during the Renaissance, bought by Cosimo de' Medici and translated by Marsilio Ficino. Long suspected of not being genuine, they have gradually gained acceptance as expressions of the authentic wisdom in such centres of ancient Egypt as Heliopolis, Hermopolis, and the great temples of Luxor and Memphis.

"Or are you ignorant, Asclepius," one reads in the text of the same name, "that Egypt is the image of heaven? Moreover, it is the dwelling place of heaven and all the forces that are in heaven. It is proper for us to speak the truth,

our land is the temple of the world." And another text in the *Codex Hermeticus* says: "Hermes often used to say to me that those who read my books will think that they are very simply and clearly written, when in fact, quite on the contrary, they hide the meaning of the words, and will become completely obscure when later on the Greeks will want to translate our language into their own, which will bring a complete distortion and obfuscation of the text. Expressed in the original language, the discourse conveys its meaning clearly; for the very quality of the sounds and the intonation of the Egyptian words contains in itself the force of the things said." The mantric vibration of the esoteric Egyptian compositions was a sufficient barrier to exclude exoteric outsiders at a time that what we now know as one world was still divided into many worlds.

But what interests us more specifically is the Primordial Human, the cosmic Purusha, of which all humans are the image. What have the hermetic writings to say about this? Their core is that "the essence of Man is the God within," and that the goal of the initiate is "an actual assumption of the attributes of God, in short: divinization." The way of Hermes is the way of immortality, and the goal is reached when the purified soul has realized God, "so that the reborn man, although still a composite of body and soul, can be fairly called a god." (Fowden) Such realizations are not possible without a concrete knowledge of what later will be called the chain of being or the sephiroth, against the background of reincarnation. The possibility of these realizations was what the Egyptian priests carried to the islands and the mainland of primitive Greece, together with the statues of their gods, when they founded the mysteries at Dodona, those of the Kabiroi, and probably most others including Delphi. The *theos anèr*, the divine Man, seems to have been known also by those people who dedicated their lives to becoming what, as they discovered, they were the living image of.

Gnosticism

Gnosticism, again centred around the eastern Mediterranean, was a spiritual movement of many shades that, like Hermetism, became widespread in the first centuries of the common era. (Christianity first took shape as a gnostic sect.) Yet the thinking assimilated by Gnosticism can be traced back through most of the previous history. Direct influences are discernible of Pythagoreanism, Platonism, the ascetic schools referring back to Socrates, and Neoplatonism. Gnosticism also enriched itself with Hermetism, and it has inherited undeniable elements of oriental thought, especially Indian. It should once more be remembered that there were frequent exchanges between the cultures and religions of those times. Persons on a quest of spiritual truth were in most cases also adventurous travellers. And missionaries, e.g. those sent by Emperor Ashoka, were a well-known phenomenon. (There was a Judeo-Buddhist group of Therapeutae in the neighbourhood of Alexandria.)

How close Christianity has been to Gnosticism is shown by the furore with which all remainders of the latter, and there were many, were branded as heretic and inexorably destroyed by the early Christian Church. What remained known of Gnosticism were the quotations of it found in Christian polemical texts – till 1945, that is, when by an incredible coincidence a treasure trove of gnostic texts was found in Egypt, at Nag Hammadi. The texts not burned in the cooking fire of the mother of one of the finders have been deciphered and translated. There were fragments and some complete books of all the sources mentioned in the previous paragraph, and there were also several unknown gospels, the ones that had found no place besides the accepted four in the New Testament.

Essential ideas of the *Upanishads* can be found also here; in fact, they form the foundation on which Gnosticism

has worked out its cosmic and supracosmic vision, albeit with other names and sometimes quite baroque variations. There is a transcendent, ineffable God (the passive Brahman). For reasons surpassing our understanding (his *Lila*), this God wanted to know himself by manifesting himself, by making himself concrete in the glories of his infinity. His Knowledge and Power of manifestation, the Great Mother, is called by many names in Hinduism as well as in Gnosticism (Eva, Barbelo, Sophia...). All went well in the manifestation of the higher worlds, but through a "mistake" or, as the Mother called it, an "accident," the creation of the lower world, the one we live in, was entrusted to a Demiurge, a "blind god" (Samael), also called Yadalbaoth.

Here we are back to the basic Gnostic myth, which the Mother confirmed by telling it more than once in her own way, although with the warning that there was a deeper meaning beneath the story as told to children. Because of the ill-begotten creation by the Demiurge, the divine manifestation became divided into two: the greater part, where all worlds and levels of existence were perfect heavens, and the nether part, ruled by the blind god (by the Gnostics also identified with the Yahweh of the Bible), and where there is ignorance, suffering and death. Sometimes souls, sparks of the divine, happen to fall into the nether world, the material hemisphere. Recovery from the fallen state can only be brought about through remembrance of their true, original state, i.e. through knowledge ("gnosis"), revealed to them by a Redeemer.

In Gnosticism the Primeval Man is named Anthropos (man), Protanthropos (first or primal human), Adam or Adamas. The relationships between the spiritual principles are quite often explained in the way of human relationships, as sexual or family ties.

This superficial or exoteric meaning has led to the misunderstandings which rendered Gnosticism suspect, not unintentionally. Yet, names of Man and Woman or Husband and Wife for the absolute Being, who is the creator, and his Knowledge or Power, who is the creatrix, are common to most high religions. In Hinduism, for instance, they are *Purusha* and *Prakriti* or *Ishvara* and *Shakti*. The principle of the universal manifestation is then their Son, the true and perfect Anthropos or Adamas, divine as his parents are, from whom all things originate, and who is seen as "an incorruptible and endless light." This "pre-existent man" was none other than the archetypal man perceived by the Mother, or the cosmic Purusha mentioned by Sri Aurobindo. As the light not darkened by matter but at its origin, he is what Sri Aurobindo has called the Supermind or archetypal Superman.

Kabbalah

One of the biblical expressions that have entered into the common language is that "man is created in the image of God." The interpretation of this saying given in the spiritual and occult traditions rather differs from the way it is commonly understood. For the biblical book of *Genesis* tells of two ways in which Adam was created. In the one he was at first alone, and God gave him a mate to lighten his solitude; in the other God created Eve from one of Adam's ribs. The latter version would mean that Adam was man-woman, potentially androgynous, and that the separation of the sexes resulted from an operation upon Adam's bisexual body.

This becomes meaningful if one knows that the divine Purusha, the Supramental Being at the origin of creation, is the gnostic Adam who is not bi-sexual but a-sexual. Sri Aurobindo and the Mother have stressed time and again that the supramental being is asexual, and that the sexes are a

means created by Nature on her lower levels to attain her ends. In this way the Genesis myth of the creation of Adam and Eve is incorporated in the basic knowledge of one of the great traditional systems, the Chaldean.

What Sri Aurobindo called “the cosmic Purusha” is also an important element in the great occult system of the Kabbalah, developed mainly in northern Spain and southern France in the 12th and 13th centuries (and which also designed the Tarot). In the Kabbalah the divine archetype is called Adam Kadmon, meaning Primal or Primordial Man, and sometimes also “the High Man” or “the Heavenly Man.” Adam Kadmon is “the embodiment of all divine manifestations,” he is “the creative deity.” In his supernatural body he contains the ten sephiroth, the principles of the manifestation, by whose power the human body too is constructed. Gershom Sholem, the noted authority on the Kabbalah, wrote in *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*: “Adam Kadmon is a first configuration of the divine light which flows from the essence of En-Sof [the absolute, self-existent Being] into the primeval space ... He therefore is the first and highest form in which the divinity begins to manifest itself. ... From his eyes, mouth, ears and nose the lights of the sefiroth burst forth...”

Gnosis in Sri Aurobindo

The wealth of the spiritual and occult traditions in the past is immense and as diverse as the cultural backgrounds against which it developed, which are the one humanity in its various forms. The glimpses of those traditions in the previous paragraphs may illustrate Sri Aurobindo’s reminder that the great dynamic ideas at the basis of the Indian spirituality have been a common possession of humanity’s richest cultures. Much of these wisdom traditions has been misunderstood and often deformed in ridiculous

caricature by their modern rediscoverers our commentators. The dominant positivist spirit has no understanding for such wisdom and condemns it with supercilious disdain.

For those acquainted with Sri Aurobindo and the Mother's view of things it will have become clear that the divine Being witnessed by the Gnostics, the Kabbalists, and even in several of the most ancient mysteries, must either be what Sri Aurobindo called the Supermind or something closely related to it. Every kind of consciousness is a being, every being is a kind of consciousness. Which is why Sri Aurobindo stated in *The Life Divine* that "Supermind is Superman." The Supermind is the intermediary Power between Sachchidananda, *i.e.* the ultimate attributes of the Godhead as conceivable by the human intellect and spiritual experience, and the mental ranges at the disposal of the human being. It is "the beginning and end of all creation and arrangement, the Alpha and the Omega, the starting point of all differentiation, the instrument of all unification ... It has the knowledge of the One, but is able to draw out of the One its hidden multitudes; it manifests the Many, but does not lose itself in their differentiations ..."⁶ The supramental species to succeed the human species in the terrestrial evolution is of the essence of the divine Consciousness and Being here called "Supermind", and will, in the infinity of time to follow, be as varied and glorious as are the potentialities of the Supermind.

So much aware was Sri Aurobindo of the gnostic tradition and its values that, when writing the *Arya*, he used the term "gnosis" time and again as equivalent to the term "Supermind." He noted for instance: "This full power of the consciousness is supermind or gnosis – supermind because to reach it we have to pass beyond and turn upon

6 Sri Aurobindo: *The Life Divine*, p. 134.

mind as the mind itself has passed and turned upon life and inconscient matter, and gnosis because it is eternally self-possessed of Truth and in its very stuff and nature it is dynamic substance of knowledge."⁷

Gnosis means knowledge, but of a special, higher kind: it is effective knowledge, insight that saves or leads one to the Truth. In the cosmic scheme of the Gnostics it was the knowledge, brought down to them by a Saviour, that would allow them to return to the supra-terrestrial worlds from which they had fallen into the terrestrial world of darkness, suffering and forgetfulness. For Sri Aurobindo and the Mother gnosis is the knowledge of the complete scheme of things which grants the understanding of the next step in the evolution on Earth, and the means to participate in its realization. It is "a growing gnosis lifted beyond our human mentality and partaking of the light and power of the Divine."⁸ (The symbol of this gnosis or supermind is the Sun.) Later Sri Aurobindo will use the term gnosis less often, but even in 1950 the Mother said: "The gnostic life is certain."

An essential difference between the wisdom traditions and Sri Aurobindo's worldview is that in the former traditions all developments were cyclic. Creation or manifestation ran its course but had no goal, and would start its wheeling again and again *ad infinitum*. (The Hebrews were the first for whom history had an aim, and therefore a direction and a sense.) In many of those traditions the universe was divided into a good and a bad half, for ever. They were Manichean, a view which may have originated among the Zoroastrians. In such a cosmic constellation individual beings can be saved when lost in the bad world, but never that world itself. What is explained as a plunge of the Godhead

7 Sri Aurobindo: *Essays Divine and Human*, p. 164.

8 Sri Aurobindo: *Essays in Psychology and Yoga*, p. 537.

into its contrary cannot be corrected. The world is evil and only an escape into a Hereafter or into Nothing can put an end to the cycles of suffering. Sri Aurobindo on the contrary, in his “complete and catholic affirmation,” has drawn the unconditional conclusion from the Vedantic statement that “All is That” – if All is That, the world too must be That, therefore it must be intrinsically good and have a sense.

Some of the main elements of Sri Aurobindo’s integral synthesis evidently stem from Vedic and Vedantic roots, but he was also thoroughly aware of the great non-Indian wisdom traditions and has integrated them in the formulation of his experience. On the other hand, Sri Aurobindo’s synthetic view illuminates the knowledge and profundity of the wisdom traditions. To them belonged great seers, mystics, and what one would now call yogis. Among them were, in those bygone times, our brothers and sisters in the quest for the Truth and a truly meaningful life. The riches of the wisdom traditions fascinate anybody who has the patience and the perceptivity to study and understand them. And knowledge of them puts the importance of the Aurobindian revolution in perspective.

Positivist and spiritual evolution

The central theme of this talk is that the macrocosm, and in it the human being as the microcosm, are brought about by a divine creative Force above and behind them, which Sri Aurobindo calls “Supermind.” What Sri Aurobindo called Supermind, and what he and the Mother discovered through their own experience, was partially known in the great wisdom traditions under various names such as the Cosmic Purusha, Protanthropos, Adamas or Adam Kadmon, and the Primordial Man (“Supermind is Superman”). While in the traditions this knowledge remained limited and often deformed within the context of their cosmic

vision, Sri Aurobindo and the Mother completed it in an unconditional revalidation of the Earth, as part of the supramental manifestation, and the evolution of Life on it.

Such an interpretation of the origin of Life on planet Earth and explanation of the evolution of Life is, of course, totally unacceptable, not to say absurd, to the positivist biological sciences in the present day. With Darwin the biological sciences have tried to adapt their findings to the materialistic and mathematical tenets of the physical sciences. In this they followed the spirit of their times, the nineteenth century, when, as one author puts it, God gradually disappeared like the smile of Lewis Carroll's Cheshire Cat, and Nietzsche's declaration of the death of God resounded through the vaults of the Western mind.

Today this mentality has not softened among some of the most prominent savants and widely read publicists. Stephen Jay Gould, for instance, wrote: "Only one causal force produces evolutionary change in Darwin's world: the unconscious struggle among individual organisms to promote their own personal reproductive success – nothing else, and nothing higher." And Richard Dawkins made his famous proclamation: "It is absolutely safe to say that, if you meet somebody who claims not to believe in evolution [meant is Darwinian evolution], that person is ignorant, stupid or insane (or wicked, but I'd rather not consider that)." Alister McGrath comments on this attitude: "Some might draw the conclusion that Darwinism encourages agnosticism. Far from it: for Dawkins, Darwin impels us to atheism [actually to anti-theism]. It is not merely that evolution erodes the explanatory potency of God, it eliminates God altogether."

This "scientific" conclusion concerning evolution and the human being is in keeping with the positivist premises.

“There is no reason to single out the human line as special, except for our chauvinistic interest in it. ... There is no way in which we can claim to be ‘better’ than Aegyptopithecus [an early monkey], or the miocene apes, only different,” writes John Gribbin. Scott Atran could not agree more: “Human beings are accidental and incidental products of the material development of the universe, almost wholly irrelevant and readily ignored in any general description of its functioning.” (It might be noted here that, according to the latest paleontological findings, the origin of *Homo sapiens* and even that of his closest relatives, the big apes, remains unknown.)

If the animosity with which the aforementioned authors, and many others, condemn and belittle any form of non-materialism as animism, mysticism, hallucination and simply mental aberration shows one thing, it is that none of them have any notion of what they are attacking. Some of them, like Daniel Dennett, candidly confess as much. They are not aware that the God and the religions which they declare to be pests to humanity belong within the so-called “Abrahamic” tradition, by which the Western societies are still profoundly influenced. Of the wisdom traditions and the oriental spiritualities, with their countless generations of seers, saints, yogis and spiritual masters, and with their immense treasures of knowledge, they have no idea.

The spirit of faith has, as its source and touchstone, the spiritual experience. “The ancient Indians through their yogic insight found the idea of similar evolution, which the modern scientists are finding out by observation and research. In the Tantras this kind of evolution has been described in detail,” writes Sri Aurobindo. And: “In the old Indian versions of this theory evolution, heredity and rebirth are three companion processes of the universal unfolding,

evolution the progressional aim, rebirth the mean method, heredity one of the physical conditions.”⁹

According to Sri Aurobindo’s scheme of things, the creative Supermind has unfolded itself in the immense hierarchic range of worlds which he calls the involution, from the highest Supermind itself all the way down to Matter, and below Matter to the dark Inconscient. We remember that, at the request of the Great Mother and by a special intervention of the manifesting Divine, a recovery of the lost Godhead became possible. In the succeeding climb upwards of the evolution, we *Homo sapiens*, the mental being, are somewhere halfway up on the ladder, which is a gradation of consciousness. But every step in the ascension necessitates a response from the corresponding level in the already existing hierarchy of worlds. The evolution and the forms it takes are determined from on high, and ultimately from the Supermind, the creative Being emanating (as rendered in the sephiroth, the chakras and the chain of being) the structures of the macro- and microcosm. “For the evolution proceeded in the past by the upsurging, at each critical stage, of a concealed Power from its involution in the Inconscience, but also by a descent from above, from its own plane, of that Power already self-realized in its own higher natural province.”¹⁰ “That is what we call evolution which is an evolution of Consciousness and an evolution of the Spirit in things and only outwardly an evolution of species.”¹¹

In one of her *Entretiens* (1957) the Mother spoke as follows: “According to spiritual and occult knowledge, consciousness precedes form, consciousness by self-concentration produces its forms. Whereas, according to the

9 *Arya*, vol. 5, p. 509.

10 Sri Aurobindo: *The Life Divine*, pp. 1002-1003.

11 Sri Aurobindo: *On Himself*, p. 105.

materialist idea, it is form which precedes consciousness and makes it possible for consciousness to manifest. For those who have some knowledge of the invisible worlds and a direct perception of the play of forces, there is no possible doubt: it is *necessarily* consciousness which produces a form in order to manifest. The way things are arranged on earth, it is quite certainly a consciousness of a higher order which penetrates a form and helps to transform it, so that this form may become – either immediately or through successive generations – capable of manifesting that consciousness. For those who have the inner vision and knowledge, this is absolutely beyond doubt. It is impossible for it to be otherwise. But those who start from the other end, from below, will not admit it. But, all the same, it is not for ignorance to dictate knowledge to wisdom! ... Conception precedes manifestation and expression.”

“A theory of spiritual evolution,” writes Sri Aurobindo, “is not identical with a scientific theory of form-evolution and physical life-evolution [e.g. the Darwinian theory]; it must stand on its own inherent justification: it may accept the scientific account of physical evolution as a support or element, but the support is not indispensable. The scientific theory is concerned only with the outward and visible machinery and process, with the detail of Nature’s execution, with the physical development of things in Matter and the law of development of Life and Mind in Matter; its account of the process may have to be considerably changed or may be dropped altogether in the light of new discovery, but that will not affect *the self-evident fact of a spiritual evolution, and evolution of Consciousness, a progression of the soul’s manifestation in material existence.*”¹²

We can only now begin to appreciate how clear and detailed Sri Aurobindo’s knowledge of the physical as

12 Sri Aurobindo: *The Life Divine*, p. 868 (emphasis added).

well as of the spiritual elements of evolution was. When he wrote the *Arya*, from 1914 till 1921, and when later he revised some of its contents for publication in book form, his spiritual knowledge seemed often to disagree with the ever changing scientific findings and hypotheses, and therefore to be incongruous. Today, however, his evaluation of the life in plants and the mind in animals is being validated in practically every new issue of the science magazines. The missing link is still missing, though now under the name of "common ancestor." Punctuated equilibrium, the sudden appearance of new species, became a fashionable biological term only in 1972, when the like-named theory was launched by Eldredge and Gould. That the human species has hardly if at all evolved, as evidenced by some of the splendid paleolithic cave paintings from 40,000 years ago, is now commonly accepted. The age of the neolithic civilizations is constantly pushed back, and the existence of previous civilizations, which disappeared from the surface of the Earth without a trace, is on the verge of becoming an acceptable hypothesis. "Intelligent design" (not to be confused with creationism), the inevitable conclusion that the "irreducible complexity" of Nature's workings cannot but be the planned result of an Intelligence, will be for some time to come the hot issue between positivist science and less dogmatic viewpoints. All this was already present and articulated in the writings of Sri Aurobindo, and in many of the "French classes" of the Mother, decennia ago, but an informed mental predisposition is needed to discern it there.

Sri Aurobindo and the Mother's synthetic, integral vision is also an approach of absolute realism, because its norm is Truth. Spirituality is not a matter of seeking refuge in the margins of life, but of accepting and confronting it in all its aspects, big and small, pleasant and painful. For such is how the Cosmic Purusha has made us, and such is how It has made the world in which our souls have chosen

to incarnate. “[The most ancient Vedanta] is the best previous foundation of that which we seek now to rebuild and although, as with all knowledge, old expression has to be replaced to a certain extent by new expression suited to a later mentality and old light has to merge itself into new light as dawn succeeds dawn, yet it is with the old treasure as our initial capital or so much of it as we can recover that we shall most advantageously proceed to accumulate the largest gains in our new commerce with the ever-changeless and ever-changing Infinite.” (Sri Aurobindo)¹³

13 *Id.*, p. 73.

Addendum on the Cosmic Purusha

“In a famous hymn of the *Rig-Veda* (X.90), the ultimate creative singularity is envisioned as a macranthropos or giant man, called purusha. This primordial superbeing is described as having ‘a thousand heads, a thousand eyes, a thousand feet’. The purusha pervades the world and transcends it by ‘ten fingers’. Only one quarter of the macranthropos can be found in the realm of creation, while three quarters are said to be immortal in the heavenly domain.

“Through the purusha’s self-sacrifice the world was created. His mind is said to have been given to the Moon; his eyes to the Sun; his breath to the air element; his navel to the midspace; his head to the sky; his feet to the earth; and so on. Even the structure of ancient India’s society was thought to have been preordained by his self-sacrifice, since the purusha’s mouth gave rise to the brahmin estate; his arms to the warrior estate; his thighs to the people at large; and his feet to the servile estate.

“The symbolic representation of the universe in the shape of the Cosmic Man found expression in a distinctive approach to architecture, sculpture, and literature. The purpose of all human creation was not only to preserve the unity of the macranthropos but also to recapitulate the purusha’s original creative sacrifice that produced the cosmos itself. More than that, all human activity – whether sacred or secular (which is really a modern distinction) – was to be modelled on the Cosmic Man. The very purpose of life was to know the great mystery of existence, which is the mystery of the purusha.”

Georg Feuerstein, Subhash Kak and David Frawley:
In Search of the Cradle of Civilization, p. 219.

2

The Development of Sri Aurobindo's Thought

Now that most of the writings and recorded sayings of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother have been published, and with the hindsight we have of their lives, it is sometimes thought that their Work on Earth was completely preordained. After all, they were “special,” being divine incarnations, and, in the life of such beings, is not all settled beforehand, from beginning to end and with everything in between? Supposing this to be a given, some disciples even wrote to Sri Aurobindo that for him the yoga must be easy, little more than “a sham.” To contradict such suppositions, Sri Aurobindo repeatedly affirmed the constant efforts he

had to make, the battles he had to fight, and the wounds he had to endure.

*My wounds are a thousand and one,
And the Titan kings assail...*

“Our yoga is not a retreading of old walks, but a spiritual adventure,” he wrote. “As for the Mother and myself, we have had to try all ways, follow all methods, to surmount mountains of difficulties, a far heavier burden to bear than you or anybody else in the Ashram or outside, wounds to endure, ways to cleave through impenetrable morass and desert and forest, hostile masses to conquer – a work such as, I am certain, none else had to do before us.”¹ And the Mother said in 1958: “It is a question of a new creation, entirely new, with all the unforeseen events, risks and hazards it entails – a real adventure of which the goal is certain victory, but the road to which is unknown and must be traced step by step in the unexplored.”

From A.A. Ghose to Sri Aurobindo

Sri Aurobindo’s outward life is now fairly well known and can be found in every standard biography. The time he wrote jokingly that he would have to write a book about what he did *not* do in his life, to contradict the many false rumours, is long past. We know of his fame as a classical Cambridge scholar and a master of the English language; we know of his years in Baroda and his study of the Indian culture and its classical literature; and we know of his crucial role as an Indian politician and freedom fighter. In all these years Aravinda Akroyd Ghose, who would revolutionize the spiritual destiny of the world, was an “agnostic,” to use his own term.

1 Sri Aurobindo: *Letters on Yoga*, p. 1362.

1908 was an axis year in his life. In the beginning of this year he met the yogi Vishnu Bhaskar Lele and had with him his first great spiritual experience, the realization of the silent Brahman. Later he was imprisoned in Alipore Jail under accusation of revolt against the Crown, which could cost him his life. But the jail, where his cell is now a shrine, turned into his "cave of *tapasya*," and when, after one year, he came out of it he was no longer the agnostic. His political work for Bharat Mata had turned into a spiritual Work for humanity. As he said in his Uttarpara speech soon after his release: "There is a word to speak and a work to do," but nobody understood him at the time.

From the time of his imprisonment in Alipore Jail, Sri Aurobindo was constantly in the company of Sri Krishna and guided by him, and it was in obedience to Sri Krishna's *adesh* (command) that he left Calcutta for Chandernagore, and soon afterwards for Pondicherry. In this French enclave in South India he took up his study of the *Vedas* and discovered the secret of their esoteric contents. He now lived exclusively for his spiritual mission, as we know from his notebooks, published under the title *Record of Yoga*. (There are some striking correspondences or resonances in the lives of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. For instance, both began their yoga in the same year; as the Mother said: "I began my conscious yoga in 1908." And both began to note down their practice of yoga in 1912, Sri Aurobindo in his *Record of Yoga*, the Mother in her *Prières et Méditations*.)

Soon, in 1912-13, Sri Aurobindo started formulating his *Thoughts and Aphorisms* in a students' notebook that was deciphered and published almost half a century afterwards. The relevance of these concise formulations, and of the *Thoughts and Glimpses*, is that they provide an insight into the gigantic metamorphosis that was taking place in him. They illustrate the confrontation between his overwhelming spiritual

experiences and the worldview which had been his background before 1908. The dominant values and tenets of science, politics, history, sociology, psychology, religion and traditional spirituality were checked against his day-by-day exploration into the new realms of experience opening up before him. This thin booklet contains 572 thoughts and aphorisms which are glimpses of the greatest spiritual revolution in history ongoing in a single being.

As a politician, Aravinda Ghose had been a revolutionary extremist. It was at his instigation that the Congress Party had broken up into a moderate and an extremist wing. And from the very moment of his entrance on the political scene – when writing the series of articles *New Lamps for Old* in 1893 – he had stood for the unconditional independence of his motherland, at that time still a “chimaera.” Compromise had never been his way, and neither was it in the spiritual adventure of discovery to which he had now irrevocably and totally dedicated himself.

“We must look existence in the face in whatever aspect it confronts us and be strong to find within as well as behind it the Divine. ... To grow into the fullness of the divine is the true law of human life and to shape his earthly existence into its image is the meaning of his evolution. This is the fundamental tenet of the philosophy of the *Arya*.” These statements were found in his notes, now published as *Essays on Philosophy and Yoga*² and other volumes of his complete works. During the year of his imprisonment he had taken the *Upanishads* and the *Gita* as practical guidance in his yoga. “The supreme and final word of the *Gita* for the Yogin is that he should leave all conventional formulas of belief and action, all fixed and external rules of conduct, all constructions of the outward surface Nature, Dharmas, and take refuge in the Divine alone,” he will write in *The*

2 Sri Aurobindo: *Essays in Philosophy and Yoga*, pp. 191 and 107.

Synthesis of Yoga.³ "A partial realization, something mixed and inconclusive, does not meet the demand I make on life and yoga," he declared, but also: "It is true that I want the supramental not for myself but for the earth and souls born on the earth."⁴

When in 1914 Paul Richard proposed the publication of a monthly review to make their new worldview known, Sri Aurobindo had his material ready. The main concepts in which his vision was formulated filled the notebooks whose contents are only now becoming accessible to the general public. This is why, in the first issue of the *Arya*, he was able to start several of his major works without further ado. Although one should also consider that his writings were inspired "directly into the pen."

"Men are becoming more psychic..."

In 1925 the First World War – "the war to end all wars" – belonged to the past, the *Arya* had been written and successfully published, and the Mother had been residing with Sri Aurobindo already for a few years. At that time he still met regularly with some privileged disciples and answered their questions. On the 15th of August of that year – his birthday – the following question was put to him: "How are the universal conditions more ready for the coming down of the Supermind than they were before?"

Sri Aurobindo answered: "Firstly, the knowledge of the physical world has increased so much that it is on the verge of breaking its own bounds. Also, the world is becoming more united on account of the discoveries of modern science – the aeroplane, the railways, the wireless telegraph, etc. Such a union is the condition for the highest Truth coming down and it is also our difficulty.

3 Sri Aurobindo: *The Synthesis of Yoga*, p. 274.

4 Sri Aurobindo: *Letters on Yoga*, pp. 98 and 95.

“Secondly, there is an attempt all over the world towards breaking the veil between the outer and the inner mental, the outer and the inner vital and even the outer and the inner physical. Men are becoming more ‘psychic’.

“Thirdly, the vital is trying to lay its hold on the physical as it did never before. This is always the sign that whenever the higher Truth is coming down, it throws up the hostile vital world on the surface, and you see all sorts of abnormal vital manifestations, such as an increase in the number of persons who go mad, earth-quakes, etc.

“[Fourthly,] the rise of persons who wield a tremendous vital influence over large numbers of men.

“These are some of the signs to show that the universal condition may be more ready now.”⁵

Science and technology were not only integrating humanity into one world, they were also changing the living conditions to a degree which has created our post-modern surroundings, but which was hardly predictable a century ago. Sri Aurobindo and the Mother have said that the First World War caused a massive descent of the vital forces on our planet, an observation supported by the phenomena of a decade named “the roaring Twenties.” As to “the rise of persons who wield a tremendous vital influence over large numbers of men”: Benito Mussolini had marched on Rome in 1922 and Adolf Hitler had become the hero of a sedition trial in 1924; fascism raised its pompous head everywhere, also in Great Britain and the United States, and violence was seen as becoming of manhood, as the expression of the reality of life.

Had the knowledge of the physical world increased so much that, in 1925, it was on the verge of breaking its own bounds? In the century to come, scientific materialism

5 A.B. Purani: *Evening Talks with Sri Aurobindo*, p. 503. It should be kept in mind that these are reported words.

would dominate as never before. In fact scientism, "the belief that science is or can be the complete and only explanation," has occupied all the grounds which religion had to vacate, and is now a worldwide pseudo-religion to be accepted by every student in any academic institution. Religion and spirituality have not (yet) found the arguments to counter the physical arguments of science, and scientists like Stephen Hawking, Richard Dawkins and Steven Weinberg launch their pronouncements from the peaks of their popular fame. "A few years ago, Stephen Hawking summed up the scientists' prevailing attitude to the status of life in the universe. 'The human race is just a chemical scum on a moderate-sized planet,' is how he put it. Most physicists and cosmologists would echo Hawking, and regard life as a trivial, accidental embellishment to the physical world, of no particular significance in the overall cosmic scheme of things." (Paul Davies)

Were men becoming more psychic, and have they actually become so? Sri Aurobindo's reasons for saying this are now very little remembered, and some statements of his are therefore skipped over out of respect or convenience. It is not possible to understand his and the Mother's sayings and writings without putting them in their historical or biographical context. Although their Beings belonged to Eternity, they had chosen, once again, a particular time and place in history to incarnate. Moreover, it may be said that, because of their love for humanity and because of their avatatic Work, they took all facets of humanity more intimately into themselves than ordinary human beings would be capable of or even could imagine.

Some of the facts determining their historical background are the following. Spiritism, the belief that the soul survives death and can enter into contact with the living, was still at its height. In France, for instance, Allan Kardec

and his *Livre des esprits* (1857) had created a real spiritist mass movement. Theosophy had been founded in 1875 and spread almost instantaneously around the globe. Its influence, teaching the belief in the soul and reincarnation, and drawing attention to the oriental spiritualities, cannot be overestimated.

Friedrich Nietzsche, with his philosophy of the *Umwertung aller Werte* (revaluation of all values) and the *Übermensch* (literally “overman”) was the philosopher en vogue, together with Henri Bergson and his vitalism, and Sigmund Freud and his theory of the subconscious. Impressionism and the post-impressionist schools in painting destroyed the classical norms in the arts, as did the symbolist poets Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Mallarmé in literature. All this, and much more, really looked like “an attempt all over the world towards breaking the veil” between the outer and the inner realities, necessary for a rediscovery of the psychic – here understood as the “psychic being” or soul.

Science itself seemed to advance in the same direction. The sensational discoveries around 1900 are now integrated into the standard theories in physics, but at the time they were mysterious and spell-binding. “The detection of the interactions between matter and radiation – Crookes’ discovery of the cathode rays, radioactivity, X-rays and the electron – unveils a world of possibilities which expanded the domain of physics to the limits of what matter was deemed to be and, still further, to the frontiers of reality.” The magic, the transgression of supposedly unsurpassable limits, happened in the laboratories. Besides, “because one is accustomed to all this, it is difficult to evaluate today the effect on the imagination of the transmission at a distance of power, light or music by telephone, or of messages by telegraphy.”⁶

6 Bernadette Bensaude-Vincent and Christine Blondel: *Des savants face à l'occulte*, p. 11.

This is why Sri Aurobindo could write in *The Human Cycle*: "The Age of Reason is visibly drawing to an end; novel ideas are sweeping over the world and are being accepted with significant rapidity;" and he could point to the "dynamic ideas such as Nietzsche's Will-to-live, Bergson's exaltation of intuition above intellect, or the latest German philosophical tendency [German Idealism] to acknowledge a supramental faculty and a suprarational order of truths."⁷ In *The Life Divine* he wrote: "Now that we are outgrowing the superstition of the sole truth of Matter ... the outposts of the scientific knowledge come more and more to be set on the borders that divide the material from the immaterial ... In the present time itself, after an age of triumphant intellectuality and materialism, we can see evidence of this natural process – a return towards inner self-discovery, an inner seeking and thinking, a new attempt at mystic experience, a groping after the inner self, a reawakening to some sense of the truth and power of the spirit ..."⁸

All the signs were there, but the resistance – the vicious swoop of the Black Dragon's tail – was more resilient than apparently presumed. Ahead lay the continuation of the twentieth century with a series of cataclysms and wars on a global scale, and with an acceleration of change, scientific and social, in which humanity would integrate towards oneness in spite of all innate resistances caused by its evolutionary formation. This was the terrain of the battle to be fought out in the Yoga of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother.

The Word of Creation

In the later months of 1926, Sri Aurobindo spoke several times to the evening circle of disciples about the gods,

7 Sri Aurobindo: *The Human Cycle*, p. 23.

8 Sri Aurobindo: *The Life Divine*, pp. 909 and 900.

their world, and the way in which human beings potentially incarnate a portion (*amsha*) of a particular god. On the 6th of November he warned that his words should be understood without inflating their ego. And he continued: "I spoke about the world of the gods because not to speak of it would [now] be dangerous. I spoke of it so that the mind may understand the thing if it comes down. I am trying to bring it down into the physical, as it can no longer be delayed, and then [unusual] things may happen. Formerly, to speak of it would have been undesirable, but now not to speak might be dangerous."⁹

All this sounds quite intriguing. What was going on? Why was Sri Aurobindo trying to bring down the overmental world of the gods into the physical? In the reminiscences of disciples present around Sri Aurobindo in those days, we read about an increasing spiritual pressure, almost unbearable, and in some of them causing bizarre behaviour. "In 1926," said the Mother many years later, "I had begun a sort of overmental creation [the overmind is the world of the gods], that is, I had brought the overmind down into matter, here on earth. Miracles and all kinds of things were beginning to happen. I asked all those gods to incarnate, to identify themselves with a body [on earth]. Some of them absolutely refused. But with my very own eyes I saw Krishna, who had always been in rapport with Sri Aurobindo, consent to come down into his body. It was on the 24th November..."¹⁰

In the Sri Aurobindo Ashram 24 November 1926 is known as "Siddhi Day" and as the foundation date of the Ashram. It was the day that Sri Aurobindo put the Mother

9 A.B. Purani: *Evening Talks with Sri Aurobindo*, p. 481. The reader may be reminded once more that these are reported words.

10 Kireet Joshi: *Sri Aurobindo and the Mother*, pp. 89-90.

in charge, to withdraw soon afterwards into seclusion for the rest of his life. On this extraordinary day Sri Krishna took on an earthly body, consenting to descend into the *adhara* of Sri Aurobindo, making his withdrawal "indispensable". We have already mentioned the close connection between Sri Krishna and Sri Aurobindo's yoga. Some hints by the Mother even suggested that Sri Aurobindo had been Sri Krishna in "a formation of the past." The fact that the aura of both of them is the same, whitish blue, seems to confirm this. It may come as a surprise to many that Sri Krishna was bodily on the earth from 24 November 1926 till 5 December 1950.

The extraordinary situation went still much further. The Mother continued her overmental creation "for some months" after 24 November. Put in the simplest of terms, this creation would have brought down upon earth a set of circumstances enabling a direct reciprocal action between the humans and the incarnated gods, leading up to a world perhaps resembling Sri Krishna's *goloka*, in other words a heaven on earth. Later the Mother said to K.D. Sethna that at that time she had got "the Word of Creation." "When I looked a little puzzled," remembered Sethna, "she added: 'You know that Brahma is said to create by his Word. In the same way whatever I would express could take place. I had willed to express a whole new world of superhuman reality. Everything was prepared in the subtle dimension and was waiting to be precipitated upon earth.'" ¹¹

In 1958, the last year of her talks at the Ashram Playground, the Mother narrated that immediately after Sri Aurobindo's withdrawal "things took a certain shape: a very brilliant creation was worked out in extraordinary detail, with marvellous experiences, contacts with divine beings,

11 K.D. Sethna: *Aspects of Sri Aurobindo*, p. 97.

and all kinds of manifestations which are considered miraculous. Experiences followed upon experiences, and, well, things were unfolding altogether brilliantly and, I must say, in an extremely interesting way." When she went to report to Sri Aurobindo, "he looked at me and said: 'Yes, this is a creation of the overmind. It is very interesting, very well done. You will cause miracles which will make you famous throughout the world, you will be able to turn the course of events on earth upside down. In brief ...' and then he smiled and said: 'It will be a *great* success. But it is a creation of the overmind. And it is not the success that we want: we want to establish the Supermind upon earth. One must know how to renounce immediate success in order to create the new world, the supramental world in its integrality.' With my inner consciousness I understood at once," said the Mother. "A few hours later the creation did not exist any more, and from that moment we started upon another foundation." ¹²

Had the Mother continued this new creation with the direct participation of the gods, some of them incarnated in terrestrial bodies, a new religion would have been founded with a force and a lustre beyond our imagination. Now nobody knows about it. As K.D. Sethna reflects: "This was surely the mightiest act of renunciation in spiritual history."

No new edition of the old fiasco

Of Sri Aurobindo's battle in the following years to establish the new Consciousness of the Supermind on Earth, we have some ideas from his letters, his poetry, and Nirodbaran's *Correspondence with Sri Aurobindo*. At times his reports were very positive, to be followed by renewed obstacles and "tremendous resistance" soon after. But in spite of

12 The Mother: *Questions and Answers 1957-58*, pp. 147-148.

everything the supramental manifestation was expected in 1938, when in a direct attack by the hostile forces Sri Aurobindo fell and broke his right thigh. 1938 was also the year of the infamous conference at Munich, where Hitler bluffed the representatives of the rival powers into submission, ready to pounce on Czechoslovakia and conquer Europe and the world.

Then the war broke out. "There was such a constant tension for Sri Aurobindo and me," said the Mother afterwards, "that it interrupted the yoga completely during the whole war. And it was for that reason that the war had come: to stop the Work. For there was an extraordinary descent of the Supermind at that time, it came like this [massive gesture]! That was exactly in 1939. Then the war came and stopped everything, completely. For if we personally had gone on with the Work, we would not have been sure that we had the time to finish it before 'the other one' [the Asura of Falsehood behind Hitler] had made a mess of the world, and the whole affair would have been postponed for centuries. That had to be stopped first of all: that action of the Lord of Nations – the Lord of Falsehood."¹³ We find this confirmed in one of Sri Aurobindo's letters written in those days: "Now in these times of world-crisis when I have to be on guard and concentrated all the time to prevent irremediable catastrophes ..."¹⁴

At stake was more than was (and is) generally realized. "It is a struggle for an ideal that has to establish itself on earth in the life of humanity, for a Truth that has yet to realize itself fully and against a darkness and falsehood that are trying to overwhelm the earth and mankind in the immediate future. ... It is a struggle for the liberty of mankind

13 *Mother's Agenda II*, pp. 410-411.

14 Sri Aurobindo: *On Himself*, p. 188.

to develop, for conditions in which men have freedom and room to think and act according to the light in them and grow in the Truth, grow in the Spirit. There cannot be the slightest doubt that if one side wins, there will be an end of all such freedom and hope of light and truth and the work that has to be done will be subjected to conditions which would make it humanly impossible; there will be a reign of falsehood and darkness, a cruel oppression and degradation for most of the human race such as people in this country do not dream of and cannot yet at all realize." Thus wrote Sri Aurobindo in July 1942 when, according to his estimation, Hitler still had a fifty-fifty chance of being victorious. If he was, "the work that has to be done" would be postponed by centuries if not millennia, warned Sri Aurobindo.

He was not. Nirodbaran Talukdar and A.B. Purani have published their notes of Sri Aurobindo's conversations in the first months of the war. (After his accident in November 1938, Sri Aurobindo had allowed some disciples, most of them visiting his rooms for medical reasons, to stay a while and enter into conversation with him.) From these publications, and still more of what Sri Aurobindo and the Mother later told and wrote, we have some inkling of their constant occupation with the affairs of the war and their direct interventions in them.¹⁵

When the war was over, life could start anew again, as could the effort to bring down the Supermind and found the future. Or could it? In June 1946, less than a year after the unconditional surrender of Japan, Sri Aurobindo wrote: "There was a time when Hitler was victorious everywhere and it seemed certain that a black yoke of the Asura would be imposed on the whole world; but where is Hitler now

15 Cf. Georges Van Vrekhem: *Hitler and His God - The Background to the Nazi Phenomenon*.

and where is his rule? Berlin and Nuremberg [where the trial of the top Nazi criminals was taking place] have marked the end of that dreadful chapter in human history. Other blacknesses threaten to overshadow or even engulf mankind, but they too will end as that nightmare has ended." The threat, however, seemed to increase, for in April of the following year Sri Aurobindo wrote: "Things are bad, are growing worse and may at any time grow worst or worse than worst if that is possible."¹⁶

Something at the root of things was blocking the Work. And Sri Aurobindo had stated irrevocably: "I have no intention of giving my sanction to a new edition of the old fiasco."¹⁷ Once more he stood up for the future against all the past and the whole of the manifestation on Earth. What was the old fiasco, repeated time after time? "A partial and transient spiritual opening within with no true and radical change in the external nature."

A new spiritual approach with no lasting material effect, leaving the Earth and humanity as they were. Years ago, in his *Essays on the Gita*, Sri Aurobindo had already written: "Not till the Time-Spirit in man is ready, can the inner and ultimate prevail over the outer and immediate reality. Christ and Buddha have come and gone. But it is Rudra who still holds the world in the hollow of his hand. And meanwhile the fierce forward labour of mankind tormented and oppressed by the Powers that are profiteers of egoistic force and their servants cries for the sword of the Hero of the struggle and the word of the prophet."

Now here he stood – after a life of sacrifice and battle "to bring the fire to man," the burning sun of the Supermind –

16 Sri Aurobindo: *op. cit.*, pp. 168-169.

17 Sri Aurobindo: *Letters on Yoga*, p. 1306.

on the verge of another failure of which history shows us so many examples?

What the blockage at the root of things was, we cannot know. But its removal required a yogic master-act: to go and work behind the veil of Matter, in other words to descend consciously into death. True, many spiritual masters have had the knowledge to go voluntarily into death, but not for reprogramming the course of the terrestrial evolution.

Before leaving his body Sri Aurobindo wrote, at the Mother's request, the important series of articles titled *The Supramental Manifestation upon Earth*. In these articles he expounded the situation at that time of his Work, of the Integral Yoga, explaining the role of the "Mind of Light," and the necessity of a range of intermediary beings between the human and the future supramental species. These transitional species or subspecies in the making he gave no name, calling them in general "a new humanity," but the Mother did give them a name in French, "*surhommes*," literally meaning "overmen." "This was certainly what he expected of us: what he conceived of as the overman, who must be the intermediate being between humanity as it is and the supramental being created in the supramental way ... It is quite obvious that intermediary beings are necessary, and that it is these intermediary beings who must find the means to create beings of the Supermind. And there is no doubt that, when Sri Aurobindo wrote this, he was convinced that this is what we have to do." (*Questions and Answers 1957-58*)

And then he finished *Savitri*, his last bequest to those who would follow the path he had hewn in the virgin forest, going where none had gone. Gradually he prepared everything for his departure, especially taking into account its effect on the Mother, who had to remain behind for the

continuation of the transformative effort because "your body is better than mine." The significance of these words will become clear in the last years of the Mother's yoga, the years covered by the *Agenda*.

The dramatic but dignified happenings at the time of Sri Aurobindo's passing have been witnessed by many and narrated elsewhere.¹⁸ His "death" was interpreted by most as the result of illness and/or advanced age. Who realized at the time – and even now – that there, in those days and in that place on Earth, a sacred mystery without precedence was enacted on which humanity's future depended? In his poems we may find some predictive or relevant passages. In the 1930s he had already written in "A God's Labour:"

*A voice cried, "Go where none have gone.
Dig deeper, deeper yet
Till thou reach the grim foundation stone
And knock at the keyless gate."*

*I saw that a falsehood was planted deep
At the very root of things
Where the grey Sphinx guards God's riddle sleep
On the Dragon's outspread wings.*

*I left the surface gods of mind
And life's unsatisfied seas
And plunged through the body's alleys blind
To the nether mysteries.*

Perhaps we find the work that was to be done on pages 232-233 of *Savitri*, which have the lines:

*Into the abysmal secrecy he came ...
And stood on the last locked subconscious's floor*

18 Cf. Georges Van Vrekhem: *Beyond Man and The Mother - The Story of Her Life*.

*Where Being slept unconscious of its thoughts
 And built the world not knowing what it built ...
 He saw the secret key of Nature's change ...
 Then ...
 Torn were the formats of the primal Night
 And shattered the stereotypes of the Ignorance ...
 He imposed upon dark atom and dumb mass
 The diamond script of the Imperishable ...*

Sri Aurobindo's supreme intervention at the root of things must have been successful, for only six years later, on 29 February 1956, the Supermind manifested in the atmosphere of planet Earth. A new world was born. Its infant growth is causing the evolutionary acceleration expressed in the confusing phenomena of the present, perceptible for those who, as recommended by the Mother, have developed the necessary capacity of attention. In the years to come, and up to 1973 when she laid down what she had called "the residue" of her material body, the Mother will take up the Yoga of corporeal transformation, watched by all, understood by hardly anyone.

But our story ends here.

We have briefly followed three episodes in the avataric Yoga of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. All three illustrate to what extent their superhuman effort was an adventure into the unknown. Evolution is always a work in progress, and so is the evolutionary Yoga. Those whose souls have been made attentive to the true force currents in the world, and who have been called to consciously participate in their course, will be gifted with the eye that sees the meaning of yesterday, today and tomorrow.

3

Preparing for the Miraculous

Evolution, according to Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, is a long and difficult climb of Nature, in the organisms it creates, to regain its original divinity. Therefore humanity, given its imperfection, cannot be the ultimate step or crown of the evolution. Beyond the human gradation are the higher worlds and beings humans have always intuited or dreamed of, and still further beyond are the infinitudes of the Divine. "The animal is a living laboratory in which Nature has, it is said, worked out Man. Man himself may well be a thinking and living laboratory in whom and with

whose conscious co-operation she wills to work out the superman, the god.”¹ (Sri Aurobindo)

The next step in the evolution, announced by Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, is the “superman” or supramental being. The human is the mental being; therefore, what is more than human must be called supra-mental. As the mental consciousness has been incorporated into life on Earth from its pre-existent involutory level in the cosmic manifestation, so the supramental consciousness will incorporate from the supramental level or Supermind, which is the creative divine Consciousness.

As Sri Aurobindo and the Mother said, the difference between the human and the superhuman is much greater than between the animal and the human. Considering the intricacies it has taken for *Homo sapiens* to form on a physical basis prepared by his evolutionary predecessors, if the appearance of the supramental being on Earth is a still greater wonder, its realization will be vastly more complex. For what the incorporation of a supramental, i.e. divine consciousness in a material body demands, is that matter be divinized. Only then will the future species beyond the human become a possibility.

What such a transformed supramental body on our material planet will be, we cannot even try to imagine, for our mind is too limited. That matter, or the material living cell, can be refined is shown by the human body in its development from the body of the primate. Materialistic science, accepting to examine only the surface processes of things, is not a competent guide in this, and creates constantly more problems than it solves.

How did the human come to walk upright? Why is his body naked? How did he manage to reason and talk? Many

1 Sri Aurobindo: *The Life Divine*, p. 6.

questions with many more constantly changing “scientific” answers, some of them requiring minor miracles which science promises to explain later. How will the body and the mind of still half animal *Homo sapiens* be changed into the features of the gods? The only way seems to be a series of major miracles. But are the realizations of the soul and of the spirit, preconditions of the transformation, not already in themselves miracles?

When examining in *The Human Cycle* the communal life of the future supramental beings, “a spiritualized society ... the kingdom of God upon earth,” Sri Aurobindo wrote: “Certainly, this will not come about easily, or, as men have always vainly hoped ... by a sudden and at once entirely satisfying change and magical transformation. The advance, however it comes about, will be indeed of the nature of a miracle, as are all such profound changes and immense developments, for they have the appearance of a kind of realized impossibility. But God works all his miracles by an evolution of secret possibilities which have been long prepared ... at least in their elements, and in the end by a rapid bringing of all to a head, a throwing together of the elements so that in their fusion they produce a new form and name of things and reveal a new spirit. Often the decisive turn is preceded by an apparent emphasizing and raising to their extreme of things which seem the very denial, the most uncompromising opposite of the new principle and the new creation.”²

The biological sciences are actively propagating their positivist teaching that evolution is nothing but the work of chance in an accidental universe, and that it is not progressive. Consequently the appearance of the human being is purely a matter of luck. Stephen Jay Gould, for instance, “was adamantly opposed to progress, speaking of it as ‘a

2 Sri Aurobindo: *The Human Cycle*, p. 183.

noxious, culturally embedded, untestable, nonoperational, untractable idea' that must be replaced if we wish to understand the patterns of history." "It is a delusion engendered by our refusal to accept our insignificance when faced with the immensity of time." (Michael Ruse) The religious and spiritual view, on the contrary, has held of old that the human being is the masterpiece of the creation, and even that it was made in the image of God.

For Sri Aurobindo, in whose cosmic scheme evolution is the backbone, *Homo sapiens*, possessing a psychic being, is provisionally the highest step of evolution, although on the whole ladder back to the Divine he stands only somewhere halfway. Sri Aurobindo has explained that, if a new, supramental species is to be worked out, the process will resemble the emergence of the previous evolutionary stages. There will be the ascendant urge in the highest existing species (which in humanity translates as 'aspiration'); an answer will come from the corresponding next higher level in the pre-existing general manifestation (which Sri Aurobindo calls the 'involution'); and this response will create in the aspiring species a number of intermediary subspecies, leading up to the formation of the new main species.

As the gap between the human and the superhuman or divine is enormous, the variety of intermediary beings may be wide-ranging. Sri Aurobindo and the Mother had come to lay the foundations of this transformation. From 1956 onwards the Mother confirmed repeatedly that the appearance of the supramental being on Earth was certain.

The moment of humanity's transformation, she said, was now – by which she meant a "now" on an evolutionary timescale. In fact, the unification of humanity which causes the present unprecedented upheavals on our globe, resulting in an almost total disorientation among humans,

was predicted by Sri Aurobindo and the Mother as one of the inevitable phenomena of the Great Transition.

The path which Sri Aurobindo and the Mother called the Integral Yoga is therefore not a fixed system with a defined goal to be realized within the lifetime of the practitioner (as are other paths of yoga). What they have initiated is continuing now in ways humans cannot foresee, but to the general trend of which they can collaborate if they feel called to. The great evolutionary adventure of the past will be continued in unimaginable ways. Already a century ago, after the self-assuredness of the bourgeois era and before the explosions of the twentieth-century wars, Sri Aurobindo announced “the time of the unexpected.”

The present insecurity, posited by the post-modern intellectuals as an innate modality of the human mind, is general, except in the vision of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother which clearly and in detail defines the rationale behind ours and the coming times. If all is That – the fundamental premise of the *Upanishads* – then the present vortices in humanity are also That, and the most secure foothold must be the inner Presence, the Divine in us. On this basis one can be prepared for the unexpected – for the miraculous, which is the assured future definitively to come.

Of laws and miracles

Science tells us that the universe functions according to laws which the human mind can find out and formulate. “The scientific culture that arose in Western Europe, of which we are the inheritors, was dominated by adherence to the absolute invariance of laws of Nature, which thereby underwrote the meaningfulness of the scientific enterprise and assured its success.” (John Barrow)

In recent times, however, the laws of physics, “once regarded as cast in tablets of stone,” began to look less definitive. What was once the domain of a few “eccentric” scientists like David Bohm, Rupert Sheldrake or Ilya Prigogine, is now more and more accepted by scientific orthodoxy and may soon be integrated into the standard paradigm. “As soon as the laws are confined to some abstract realm of ideal mathematical forms, there is no problem,” writes Paul Davies, “but if the laws are considered to inhabit, not a transcendent Platonic realm, but the real universe, then it’s a very different story.” And a French scientist states squarely: “The fundamental laws [of physics] are now about possibilities and no longer about certitudes.”

Sri Aurobindo did not only rely on his yogic insight, he followed the evolution of science, including physics, from nearby, and in his writings one finds numerous references to Einstein’s relativity theories and the puzzling conclusions of quantum mechanics. It was part of the fundamental attitude of this “mystic” never to lose contact with reality and the world. This should be kept in mind when reading the following passages by him. Quite aware of the confirmations of science, he explains here that the reality of what science tries to grasp, describe and understand is much more complex than science even accepts. The simple but crucial reason is that physical science has in Galileo, Descartes and Newton reduced reality to the realm of matter, declaring the other principles of what constitutes reality – life, mind, spirit – to be reducible to matter, or otherwise to be outside the sphere of interest of serious science.

“If we look carefully at these workings of Nature,” Sri Aurobindo writes in *The Life Divine*, “once we put aside the veil of familiarity and our unthinking acquiescence in the process of things as natural because so they always happen, we discover that all she does in whole or in parts is a

miracle, an act of some incomprehensible magic.”³ And in a letter he writes: “Science, like most mental and external knowledge, gives you only truth of process. I would add that it cannot give you the whole truth of process; for you seize some of the ponderables, but miss the all-important imponderables ... After all the triumphs and marvels of Science the explaining principle, the rationale, the significance of the whole is left as dark, as mysterious and even more mysterious than ever.”⁴

“There is no fundamental significance in things if you miss the Divine Reality; for you remain embedded in a huge surface crust of manageable and utilizable appearance. It is the magic of the Magician [the Divine as Creator] you are trying to analyze, but only when you enter into the consciousness of the Magician himself can you begin to experience the true origination, significance and circles of the Lila. I say ‘begin’ because the Divine Reality is not so simple that at the first touch you can know all of it or put it into a single formula; it is the infinite and opens before you an infinite knowledge to which all Science put together is a bagatelle.”⁵

If reality consists of the hierarchical gradations which from old have been called the Chain of Being, modern science, with physics as its norm, has voluntarily blocked its own access to reality, for it has chosen as its fundamental premise that all existence is material and nothing else. In a future world of Truth, however, the whole of reality must be taken into account. As Sri Aurobindo writes: “If science is to turn her face towards the Divine, it must be a new science not yet developed which deals directly with the forces

3 Sri Aurobindo: *The Life Divine*, p. 341.

4 Sri Aurobindo: *Letters on Yoga*, p. 197.

5 *Ibid.*

of the life-world and of Mind [cf. the Chain of Being] and so arrives at what is beyond Mind; but present-day science cannot do that.”⁶

The self-assuredness, at times arrogance, of academic science and most of its practitioners has become part of the modern mentality. The foregoing reflections are therefore relevant to support an open attitude towards the present conditions in a rapidly changing world and the dramatic happenings all over the globe which are brought to our knowledge day by day. The events of history have never been predictable to the human mind. Still less is it capable of discerning the trends of our contemporary history and their possible consequences, now that we are constantly informed about the goings-on in the four corners of the world. If in the present crisis atmosphere we want to find some solid ground, we must not turn to science but inwards and find there what is the core of our existence, while on the outside we must have confidence in “the magic of the Magician,” inevitably working for a new and better world. From this standpoint all history, like all existence and manifestation, is one continuous miracle. This knowledge can help us to prepare for the future miracles capable of solving our global problems, miracles which, according to Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, will reveal the meaning of it all and are certain to happen.

The preparatory work of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother

What do we, Aurobindians, stand for? Is the vision of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother just another of those well-intentioned New Age fancies, or does it have a basis in fact which can be spelled out?

6 *Id.*, p. 205.

In the first place there are their abundant writings and transcribed sayings covering a period of nearly a century; this literature is considered by knowledgeable persons the richest in the history of modern spirituality. (Sri Aurobindo was nominated for the Nobel Prize of Literature in 1950, the year of his demise.) Then there is also the inner coherence of the facts of their spiritual adventure into the unknown, supported by a mass of direct and indirect evidence. It must be remembered that spiritual matters are not subject to scientific proof; they can only be confirmed through faith and direct experience. What Sri Aurobindo and the Mother are, what they have done, and what continues to happen as the continuation of the Work done during their lifetime, must ultimately be a matter of personal acceptance based on an open attitude in the mind, the gift of faith in the heart, and an inner empathy resulting from the long history of one's soul.

Until recently, that is until about 1970, little was known about the facts of their lives. Most of their letters and notes, conversations, Sri Aurobindo's *Record of Yoga* and *Mother's Agenda* were published after that date, which was also the time when serious research in archives and other documentary sources began to be made. This means, among other things, that the writings of most of the first commentators or exegetes remained limited mainly to Sri Aurobindo's works in the *Arya*, the *Mother's Prayers and Meditations*, and personal correspondence.

No doubt, this literature contained the foundations on which Sri Aurobindo's and the Mother's avataric mission could be understood. Books like *The Life Divine*, *The Synthesis of Yoga* and *Essays on the Gita* contained all essentials of the Aurobindian Revolution. But the Yoga of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother was an adventure into the unknown ⁷

7 See talk 2: "The Development of Sri Aurobindo's Thought".

which went through countless yogic crises, struggles and reversals many years after the *Arya* and the *Prayers and Meditations* had been written. For instance, Sri Aurobindo's battle in the 1930s to bring the Supermind down on Earth remained known only to a small circle of disciples around Dilip Kumar Roy and Nirodbaran Talukdar, to whom Sri Aurobindo gave some glimpses of his gigantic yogic effort in his correspondence with them. The important series of articles written for the *Bulletin* and later named *The Supramental Manifestation upon Earth* remains largely unappreciated even today. And one reads seldom about the intimations by the Mother about her work of physical transformation, which was, after all, her avataric Yoga in the last years of her life, the crucial step which would make the appearance of the overman and the supramental being possible.

It is a matter of importance that the creation of the supramental being, the next step in the terrestrial evolution, is not to happen according to a once-and-for-all fixed ideological scheme, but that it is an open, unknown process of transformation that has been started by Sri Aurobindo and the Mother during their lifetime, that is continuing now, and that will continue for a long time to come. It is a "pilgrim's progress" into the miraculous.

Overman

Sri Aurobindo, continuously occupied with completing *Savitri* and with the urgency of his avataric task, did not write essayistic prose any more in the last years of his life. The reason may have been that for this kind of literary work his consciousness had to descend again to the human level. Besides, his eyesight had deteriorated and he had to dictate everything to an amanuensis, poetry as well as prose. All the same, he could not refuse a request from the Mother for

a contribution to the *Bulletin* of Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education which she had newly founded. Therefore he dictated eight articles between 30 December 1948 and the time he left his body, on 5 December 1950.

What started as an encouragement of the students' ideals, and therefore a reminder to them of his and the Mother's Work, suddenly took another turn: for the first time Sri Aurobindo spoke about the necessity of intermediary beings between the existing species of *Homo sapiens* and the coming species of supermen, *Homo supramentalis*. This transitional being he gave no name, but called it "a new humanity." "It would not be the total transformation, the fullness of a divine life in a divine body. There would be a body still human and indeed animal in its origin and fundamental character, and this would impose its own inevitable limitations on the higher parts of the embodied being."

All the same, "its mentality would be an instrument of the Light and no longer of the Ignorance. At its highest it would be capable of passing into the supermind and from the new race would be recruited the race of supramental beings, who would appear as the leaders of the evolution in earth nature. Even, the highest manifestations of a mind of Light would be an instrumentality of the supermind, a part of or a projection from it, a stepping beyond humanity into the superhumanity of the supramental principle. Above all, its possession would enable the human being to rise beyond into those highest powers of the mind in its self-exceedings which intervene between our mentality and supermind, and can be regarded as steps leading towards the greater and more luminous principle [*i.e.* Supermind]."⁸

In April 1958 the Mother said: "It can be confirmed with certainty that there will be an intermediate specimen

8 Sri Aurobindo: *Essays in Philosophy and Yoga*, pp. 537 and 585.

between the mental and the supramental being, a kind of overman who will still have the qualities and in part the nature of man, that is, who will still belong in his most external form to the human species with its animal origin, but who will transform his consciousness sufficiently to belong in his realization and activity to a new race, a race of overmen [*surhommes*]. This species may be considered a transitional species, for one can foresee that it will discover the means of producing new beings without going through the old animal method ... So we could call overmen [*surhommes*] those who, in their origin, still belong to the old method of generation, but in their achievement are in conscious and active contact with the new world of supramental realization.”⁹

Two remarks are in order here.

Firstly, the above quotations of Sri Aurobindo clearly show the need of a series of “miraculous” transformations between our species of “animal man,” as Sri Aurobindo and the Mother called it, and the supramental being. In the course of the evolution of life on Earth the formation of a species with a higher consciousness, succeeding *Homo sapiens*, is inevitable. Between the primates and *Homo sapiens* in its various appearances the gap was enormous; between *Homo sapiens* and the supramental being the gap is unimaginable.

Secondly, where in the aforementioned quotation from the Mother there is written “overmen,” the English translators have used each and every time the term “supermen,” unaware of significance of the Mother’s words and of the contents of *The Supramental Manifestation*. The Mother gave her *Entretiens* in French, for those talks were actually French classes for the students of the Ashram School. What

9 The Mother: *Questions and Answers*, 16 April 1958.

Sri Aurobindo had called “a new humanity,” the Mother called *surhomme* which literally means “overman,” not “superman,” and which is the being corresponding to the *surmental*, the “overmind.” This error is unfortunately the source of an enormous confusion, for other translators follow by example and commit systematically the same error, e.g. throughout the English translation of the *Agenda*.

One result is that lots of texts are written on the future glories of the Supermind and supermanhood, but hardly anything about the transitional processes required to fashion the supramental being, that is: about our own participation in the Work. The effort of the practitioner of the Integral Yoga at present is to become, through his aspiration and surrender, one of the transitional beings which will make the appearance of the supramental being possible. As the Mother said: “This was certainly what Sri Aurobindo expected of us: what he conceived of as the overman, who must be the intermediate being between humanity as it is and the supramental being created in the supramental way – in other words, in no way part of the animal life any longer and freed from all animal needs ... It is quite obvious that intermediary beings are necessary, and that it is these intermediary beings who must find the means to create beings of the Supermind. And there is no doubt that, when Sri Aurobindo wrote this, he was convinced that this is what we have to do.”¹⁰

The manifestation of the Supermind

The avataric task of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother consisted in bringing down a new, higher consciousness into the Earth atmosphere: the consciousness of the Supermind. Life on Earth is still predominantly the fiefdom of the “hostile powers,” which are the direct descendants of

10 *Ibid.*

the Inconscient from which the evolution started. As these are powers of the Ego, it is in their nature to counter anything that would weaken the egoistic self-affirmation of Life, in other words they resist unconditionally any spiritual endeavour.

As Sri Aurobindo and the Mother have stated explicitly, the rather weak personality of Adolf Hitler got its strength and inspiration from an asuric power, the Lord of Falsehood who calls himself Lord of the Nations. It was at the inspiration of this occult personality that the Second World War took place, to counteract the avataric Work that would lead to the appearance of a divinized species on Earth. Even those who were aware of the interventions of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother in the war thought that, once the war was over, the crucial problem it posed for the ascendance of humanity was solved. On the contrary, the asuric powers still intensified their action, so much so that Sri Aurobindo wrote to a correspondent: "Other blacknesses threaten to overshadow or even engulf mankind..." and that he had to take the drastic decision to descend into death in order to change things in the occult depths at the roots of existence.¹¹

What this yogic, or rather avataric, master-act actually meant, we cannot even guess. But its result was that only six years later the Supramental Manifestation took place, and the evolutionary progress was guaranteed forever. After a lifetime of unprecedented spiritual effort for humanity, Sri Aurobindo had seen that the result of his and the Mother's Work was not assured. Not intending "to give his sanction to a new edition of the old fiasco," he had to do what none had done before: remove whatever blocked the development of the evolution and kept the Earth bound to its origin in the Ignorance. The success of his act was confirmed on 29 February 1956.

11 See talk 2: "The Development of Sri Aurobindo's Thought".

On that day the Mother noted down: "This evening the Divine Presence, concrete and material, was there present amongst you. I had a form of living gold, bigger than the universe, and I was facing a huge and massive golden door which separated the world from the Divine. As I looked at the door, I knew and willed, in a single movement of consciousness, that "the time has come," and lifting with both hands a mighty golden hammer I struck one blow, one single blow on the door and the door was shattered to pieces. Then the supramental Light and Force and Consciousness rushed down upon earth in an uninterrupted flow."¹²

Before this universal event all was possibility; after it all had become certainty.

This event should not be seen only in the context of the lives of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, or of the twentieth century. Its significance was much, much more encompassing. To be possible the past of humanity, and in humanity of the Earth, had to be sufficiently prepared; the potential of all the cycles of the evolution and of human history in its various known or lost civilizations had to be worked out. In this event the Work of all Avatars, and of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother in their previous lives, was finally justified. (Once, when asked what he had done in his previous lives, Sri Aurobindo answered simply: "Carrying on the evolution.") Events in the material and the occult worlds always take place against a background where time and space are quite different from the dimensions we move in. The supramental manifestation, or the beginning of the new age, in 1956, should be seen in this kind of perspective. One could interpret the preceding centuries as leading up to it, and in the succeeding decennia things have undoubtedly accelerated under its influence. But 29 February 1956, at that point in our space and time, was "the moment."

12 The Mother: *Words of the Mother III*, p. 102.

The ship from the new world

On 3 February 1958, the Mother had an experience which she deemed sufficiently important to dictate it immediately afterwards. "The supramental world exists permanently and I am there permanently in a supramental body. I had proof of it this very day, when my earth-consciousness went there and remained there consciously between two and three o'clock in the afternoon. Now I know that what was lacking for the two worlds to join in a constant and conscious relation is an intermediate zone between the physical world as it is and the supramental world as it is. This zone is to be built both in the individual consciousness and in the objective world, and it is being built ...

"I was on a huge ship which was a symbolic representation of the place where this work is going on. This ship, as large as a city, is fully organized, and it had already been functioning for some time, for its organization was perfect. It is the place where the people are being trained who are destined for the supramental life. These people, or at least part of their being, had already undergone a supramental transformation, for the ship itself and everything on board was neither material, subtle-physical, vital or mental: everything consisted of a supramental substance ...

"The light was a mixture of gold and red, forming a uniform substance of a luminous orange. Everything was like that. The light was like that, the people were like that – everything had that colour, although in various shades, which made it possible to distinguish things from each other. The general impression was of a world without shadows. The atmosphere was full of joy, calm, order. Everything went in an orderly way and in silence ...

"This immense ship had just reached the shore of the supramental world and a first group of people, who were

destined to become the future inhabitants of the supramental world, were to go ashore. Everything had been arranged for this first disembarkation. ... I was in charge of the whole enterprise from the beginning and throughout the proceedings. I had prepared all the groups myself. I stood on the ship at the head of the gangway, calling the groups one by one and sending them ashore. ... Things continued in this way until suddenly the clock here [in her room at the Ashram] struck three, and this brought me back violently. There was a sensation of suddenly falling into my body. I came back with a shock but with the full memory...

“When I was called back [into her material body] ... I had a brief glimpse of myself – of my form in the supramental world, that is. ... My upper part, particularly the head, was not much more than a silhouette of which the contents were white with an orange fringe. The more down towards the feet the more the colour looked like that of the people on the ship, that is to say orange; the more upwards the more it was translucent and white, with less red [red is the colour of Matter]. The head was only a contour with a brilliant sun in it. Rays of light radiated from it, which were actions of the will.

“As for the people I saw on board the ship, I recognized them all. Some were from here, from the Ashram, others were from elsewhere, but I know them too. ... Most of the people who went ashore were middle-aged, except a few ...

“When I came back I knew, simultaneously with the recollection of the experience, that the supramental world is permanent, that my presence there is permanent, and that only a missing link was needed for enabling the connection in the consciousness and in the substance, and it is this link which is now being established. There I had the impression of an extreme relativity – no, more exactly the impression that the relation of this world with the other one completely

changed the standpoint from which things must be evaluated or appraised. The standpoint was not at all mental, and it gave the strange inner feeling that lots of things we consider good or bad are not really so ... What was obvious is that our opinion of what is divine or not divine is not right ... In the people too I saw that what helps them become supramental, or prevents them from it, is very different from what we, with our habitual moral notions, imagine. I felt how ridiculous we are.”¹³

The big pulsations

At the end of 1958 the time of withdrawal into her room had come for the Mother too. She was now 80, and would say later on that the outward signs of her Yoga of transformation were by most people understood as symptoms of her advanced age. Of the heroic, superhuman battle with the old world to create the new, and with the old body to create the new, we have the conversations published under the misleading title *Mother's Agenda*. For under the lemma “agenda” the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* has “a list of items of business to be discussed at a meeting ... a list of matters to be addressed.” Even the *Nouveau Petit Robert* has under the same lemma “*carnet sur lequel on inscrit jour par jour ce qu'on doit faire, ses rendez-vous, ses dépenses, etc.* – which means “small notebook in which one enters day by day what one has to do, one's appointments, one's expenses, etc.” What *Mother's Agenda* actually does report is what had been done by her, her experiences, struggles, battles, encounters, and much more. It was actually the diary of her conversations with Satprem, a French disciple.

One of the most important events in the Mother's Yoga of those years took place on 3 April 1962, “after several weeks of grave illness.” Again she dictated a report of

13 *Id.*, pp. 103-104.

the event immediately afterwards, and it was published in *Words of the Mother III*, pp. 408 ff. In this report, seldom if ever commented upon, the Mother tells about “a group of people who want to create a religion based on the revelation of Sri Aurobindo. But they have taken only the side of power and force, a certain kind of knowledge and all that could be utilized by asuric forces.”¹⁴ In this group there was “a big asuric being that has succeeded in taking the appearance of Sri Aurobindo. ... This appearance of Sri Aurobindo has declared to me that the work I am doing is not his [*i.e.* Sri Aurobindo’s]. It has declared that I have been a traitor to him and to his work, and has refused to have anything to do with me.”

And the report goes on: “I woke up at 2 o’clock [in the night] and noticed that the heart had been affected by the attack of this group that wants to take the life away from this body ... They would have liked me dead years ago. It is they who are responsible for these attacks on my life. Up till now I am alive because the Lord wanted me to be alive, otherwise I would have gone long ago.

“I am no more in my body. I have left it to the Lord to take care of it, to decide if it is to have the Supramental or not. I know and I have said also that now is the last fight. ... This is the Lord’s decision. I am not even asking what he has decided. If the body is incapable of bearing the fight, if it has to be dissolved, then humanity will pass through a critical time. What the asuric Force that has succeeded in

14 In *The Mother - The Story of Her Life*, Georges Van Vrekhem has the following footnote on p. 466: “It would indeed be easy to concoct a sectarian or totalitarian creed or cult from the teaching of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. One has only to put the accent on the new race of supermen in the making, to leave out the individuality of the way and the primary necessity of the realization of the soul, and to extract a mythos from their writings, *Savitri* containing all necessary material to this end.”

taking the appearance of Sri Aurobindo will create is a new religion or thought, perhaps cruel and merciless, in the name of the supramental Realization. But everybody must know that it is not true, it is not Sri Aurobindo's teaching, not the truth of his teaching. ...

"The fight is within the body. ..."

This dramatic fight must have gone on for several days till the Mother, on 13 April, dictated the following victory bulletin in French, probably to Pavitra, another French disciple: "Suddenly in the night I woke with the full awareness of what we could call the Yoga of the World. The Supreme Love was manifesting through big pulsations, and each pulsation was bringing the world further in its manifestation. They were the formidable pulsations of the eternal stupendous Love, only Love. Each pulsation of the Love was carrying the universe further in the manifestation.

"And there was the certitude that what had to be done is done, and that the Supramental Manifestation is realized. ...

"This was going on and on and on.

"The certitude that what had to be done *is done*. ..."

Then the Mother switched to her native French: "And we set out again on the way, sure of the Victory.

"The skies are full of hymns of Victory.

"The Truth alone exists, it alone shall be manifested. Forward! Forward!

"*Gloire à Toi, Seigneur, Triomphateur suprême ! ...*" Glory to Thee, o Lord, supreme Triumpher! (This was one of the Mother's mantric formulas which we find already in her *Prayers and Meditations*.)

The evocation of this episode, of the extended Yogic battle on the verge of life and death of which so much depended for humanity, including ourselves, may lead to reflections of the following kind. Firstly, the surroundings of the Mother, visible and invisible, were rather different from what most people who were present at the time knew or prefer to remember. She, who took everything into herself, had apparently to swallow more poison than nectar. Each time her life was in danger, she would point out an attack of black magic as the cause. The Asura, using human persons, was at his tricks maybe more than ever, as the avataric Yoga approached the stage where the first supramental body was in the process of formation. Secondly, this phase of the Yoga, being the attempt at transformation for which Sri Aurobindo had ordered the Mother to remain in her body, is hardly ever remembered or commented upon, as if it were of little or no importance. Thirdly, all great spiritual innovations have been diminished, disfigured, reduced to a lower level and torn to sectarian shreds by human lack of understanding and blind or ambitious ego. Fourthly, the end of the Mother's transformational Yoga, if at that time her heart had failed, would not have meant the failure of the supramental transformation, assured since 1956; it would however have meant a cancellation of possibilities which could only be worked out by the Mother, and consequently a postponement of the transformative process for an indeterminate time. Lastly, rare are the souls able to discern the Asuric forces at work, for they are more subtle than the ignorant humans, have powers which humans deem to be divine, and do deeds the consequences of which humans cannot estimate.

The Overman Consciousness

In the first hours of the very first day of 1969, the Mother had another special experience. "In the night it came slowly,

and on waking up this morning there was as it were a golden dawn, and the atmosphere was very light. The body felt: "Well, this is truly, truly new." A golden light, imponderous and benevolent. 'Benevolent' in the sense of a certainty, a harmonious certainty. It was new. *Voilà*. And when I say '*Bonne année*', to the people, it is this that I pass on to them ...

"On the 1st something truly strange happened, and I wasn't the only one to feel it, some others felt it too. It was just after midnight ... What is surprising is that it didn't correspond at all with anything I was expecting – I was expecting nothing – [or] to other things I had felt. It was something very material, by which I mean that it was very external – very external – and it was luminous, with a golden light. It was very strong, very powerful. But even so its character was a smiling benevolence, a peaceful joy and a kind of unfolding into joy and light. And it was like a '*bonne année*', like a wish. ... I don't know what it is, but it's a kind of benevolence, therefore it was something very close to the human. And it was so concrete, so concrete! ... It has not gone away. One does not feel it to be something that has come to go away again ...

"My own impression was that of an immense personality – immense! That is to say that for [that personality] the Earth was small, small like this [gesture as if holding a small ball in the hollow of her hand], like a ball. ... It gave the impression of a personal divinity who comes to help. And so strong, so strong, and at the same time so gentle, so all-embracing ... I have the impression that it is the formation which is going to enter, which is going to express itself ... which is going to enter and express itself in the bodies which will be the bodies of the Supramental. Or perhaps – perhaps – the overman [*le surhomme*], I don't know, the intermediary between the two [between the human and the supramental being]. Perhaps the overman. It was very

human, but human in divine proportions, you see, human without weaknesses and without shadows. ... Yes, perhaps the overman.”¹⁵

The Mother has always warned that, if one has a spiritual experience, one should let it work itself out, without limiting and thereby fixing it through a mental formulation or interpretation. This is one of many examples how she proceeded herself, evoking the experience without defining it, by carefully letting it continue to have its effect till it might become comprehensible by the mind.

The confirmation came eight days after the fact: “Yes, that’s what it is: it is the descent of the consciousness of the overman. I had the assurance later on.” On the 1st of January “it lasted, absolutely concrete, *there*, for two or three hours, and afterwards it spread out and went in search of people who could receive it. And I knew that it was the consciousness of the overman, that’s to say, the intermediary between man and the supramental being.” And ten days later she said: “Yes, it’s very consciously active. It’s as it were a projection of power. And it has now become something habitual ... In one of the old *entretiens*, I said when I was speaking there at the Playground: ‘There is no doubt that the overman will in the first place be a being of power, so that he may be able to defend himself.’ It’s that. It’s that experience. It came back as an experience. And it’s because it came back as an experience that I remembered having said it.”

This statement about the spreading activity of the Overman Consciousness could not be clearer and more complete – and important in the development of the Integral Yoga.

15 This and the following quotations in this section: The Mother: *Notes on the Way*, pp. 148 ff.

Nonetheless one has yet to read reflections or comments on it in the Aurobindian literature, where the existence of the Overman Consciousness and the existence of the overman him- and herself is barely acknowledged.

We should be aware that behind our existence and our tiniest effort there are: 1. the presence of Sri Aurobindo, for the Avatar never deserts his Work; 2. the presence of the Mother, who exists in the archetype of an immortal, omnipresent supramental body; 3. the Supermind, active in the Earth-atmosphere since 1956; 4. since 1 January 1969 the presence of the Overman Consciousness "in search of people who can receive it." The people called to participate in the realization of the new world should be aware of these extraordinary Forces. The miraculous is present now as it was during the lifetime of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, but to perceive it one has to be prepared for it.

Five confirmations

Is there any confirmation that Sri Aurobindo's and the Mother's vision is not another "mystic" chimera? This is a common and valid question from the few, among the mass of humanity, who have heard of them. In answer one could point to Auroville, "the utopia of all utopias" continuing to exist and growing against all odds, and to the Matrimandir, that place "out of this world" at the centre of Auroville. But bizarre or impressive buildings have been built in many places on the globe, by groups or movements counted as no more than eccentric sects.

In 1947, on the occasion of India's independence, Sri Aurobindo was invited to address the nation in a radio broadcast, which he read from his room. On that occasion he talked about his "five dreams," these dreams being five prominent tasks he had set himself to be accomplished

through his avataric work. The five dreams were: the freedom of India; the awakening of Asia; the formation of conglomerates of nations leading up to a worldwide community; world unity; and India's spiritual treasure to be shared by all humanity, the precondition to enable the appearance of a supramental species.

Now, in 2010, the status of the realization of those five avataric tasks may be evaluated as follows.

It was on the occasion of India's freedom that Sri Aurobindo made his broadcast. (It might here be recalled that he was the very first to publicly demand unconditional independence for his motherland.) However, his categorical condition of India's full and effective participation in the one world of tomorrow – the complete unity of her physical body – has not yet been fulfilled, for Bharat Mata remains divided into India, Pakistan and Bangladesh.

What seemed just after the Second World War an idealist's fancy, has now become a daily item on the world's news bulletins: Asia has awoken with such rapidity that experts think it should slow down. India and China, in 1947 part of the third world, are now rivals of the rich nations in the international market and have to be taken into account politically.

Conglomerates of nations are now in place, mostly constituted along geographical lines. The European Union, where at the time of writing 27 nations are learning to live together and cooperate, stands out as an example. Other conglomerates have been formed in South Asia, in Africa and in the Americas. The necessity of consultation and cooperation is now acute in a world where everything depends on everything else, and the well-being of all seems to hang by a thread.

Humanity has to re-awake to the essential values which are spiritual, and which of old have been treasured in the East, more specifically in India, "the heart of Asia." As Sri Aurobindo has stressed time and again, a better world cannot come about without a change in the beings who constitute that world. This is not a question of philosophy or morals; it is a question of the way the human being exists, not by chance or as a material organism, but as an incarnated soul. The new way in which the humans have to learn to see themselves, and which is the knowledge or "gnosis" India has to offer, is not a new dogmatic or ritualistic religion; it is the way of self-exploration leading to self-knowledge leading in its turn to knowledge and realization of the All. For this is how the macrocosm and the microcosm (the human being) exist: as a reality much larger and complex than strict rationalism and materialism can grasp.

The world is growing receptive of these verities. Their synthesis is the integral vision of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, the "perennial philosophy" worded for the present times. The knowledge of this revelation should not result in another systematization or be calcified in the dogmas of a new religion; it should provide the guidance for the adventure of consciousness into which humanity is engaging – the adventure into the miraculous.

*Thus will the masked Transcendent mount his throne.
When darkness deepens strangling the earth's breast
And man's corporeal mind is the only lamp,
As a thief's in the night shall be the covert tread
Of one who steps unseen into his house.
A Voice ill-heard shall speak, the soul obey,
A Power into mind's inner chamber steal,
A charm and sweetness open life's closed doors
And beauty conquer the resisting world,
The Truth-Light capture Nature by surprise,*

*A stealth of God compel the heart to bliss
And earth grow unexpectedly divine.
In Matter shall be lit the spirit's glow,
In body and body kindled the sacred birth ...
A few shall see what none yet understands;
God shall grow up while the wise men talk and sleep;
For man shall not know the coming till its hour
And belief shall be not till the work is done.¹⁶*

16 Sri Aurobindo: *Savitri*, p. 55.

4

What Arjuna saw: the Dark Side of the Force

1. Kurukshetra: the field of the Kurus

The *Bhagavad Gita*, a part of the ancient Indian epos *Mahabharata*, is one of the great creations of the human spirit, if not the greatest. Indeed, when compared with the most brilliant passages of the *Gilgamesh* epic, Homer's *Iliad and Odyssey*, the works of the Greek tragedians, Dante's *Divina Commedia* or the best of Shakespeare, the *Gita* soars above them all because of its philosophical and spiritual depth, its representative significance for the human condition, and the tragic though glorious setting of its action.

Arjuna, one of the five Pandavas, is the foremost *kshatriya* or knight of his time. His charioteer is his friend and mentor Krishna, king of the Vrishnis and in fact the avatar Sri Krishna. In the internecine quarrel within the Kuru clan, to which the Pandavas as well as the Kauravas belong, most kingdoms of the subcontinent have chosen sides and the day of the great confrontation, the battle in Kurukshetra, the field of the Kurus, has dawned. Of this great slaughter Arjuna is to be the chief instrument. Among the principal enemies are close relatives, former friends and even his former gurus. Many of them he will have to kill. Arjuna "finds suddenly that he has been led to become the protagonist of a terrific and unparalleled slaughter, a monstrous civil war involving all the cultured Aryan nations which must lead to the complete destruction of the flower of their manhood and threatens their ordered civilization with chaos and collapse."¹

Overwhelmed by the tragic purport of the moment, Arjuna asks Sri Krishna to drive his chariot into the space between the two battle-ready armies, "for he wishes to look upon all these kings of men who have come here to champion against him the cause of unrighteousness and establish as a rule of life the disregard of law, justice and truth which they would replace by the rule of a selfish and arrogant egoism."² Being well aware of the importance and the righteousness of his cause, he is yet suddenly overwhelmed by dejection. "O Krishna, I behold these kinsmen and friends arrayed in hostile armies, and my limbs sink beneath me and my face grows dry, and there are shudderings in my body, and my hair stands on end. Gandiva [his bow] falls from my hand and my very skin is on fire. Yea, I cannot stand and my brain whirls ..." (*Gita* I, 28-32) Arjuna

1 Sri Aurobindo: *Essays on the Gita*, p. 23.

2 *Id.*, p. 54.

“thus lapsed into unheroic weakness,” a weakness which might cause him to fail in his dharma, his inherent duty as a warrior. And this is where Sri Krishna at first rebukes him, and then, making him see the essential, divine justification of it all, instructs him in the yoga. Arjuna receives his initiation on the battlefield.

That the *Mahabharata*, the great war of the Bharatas, has been a historic event is not in doubt, but the date of the war is still under discussion. In the introduction to his *Search for the Historical Krishna*, Navaratna S. Rajaram writes: “It is beginning to be seen that even the chronology of ancient India based on the so-called Kali Date (3102 BC) for the *Mahabharata* period is not lacking in scientific support, falling as it does at the beginning of what we now call the Harappan Civilization. The Kali Age – especially its harbingers, the Mahabharata War – may be seen as marking the end of the spiritual age of the *Vedas* to be replaced by the materialistic age in which we live. Its origins go back some 5 000 years. The Mahabharata War stands at the threshold of this transition.”

The historic significance of this war was therefore considerable. No less is its significance in the spiritual progress of humanity, as it constitutes the background of the avataric Work of Sri Krishna. And the lasting significance of Sri Krishna’s teaching to the present day – witness the role it played in Sri Aurobindo’s Yoga and his marvellous *Essays on the Gita* – is that it remains an inexhaustible guide for spiritual practice, especially useful on the daily “battlefield” of us, present-day humans.

2. Dharmakshetra: the field of dharma

The *Gita*, together with the *Upanishads*, was the text which Sri Aurobindo constantly studied and worked out

in the practice of his Yoga during the year of his imprisonment in Alipore Jail (starting in May 1908). His realizations resulted in a completely new understanding of the rationale and destiny of the world and humanity. Considering the Vedantic premise that "All is That," he drew the ineluctable conclusion that the Earth and life on it also were That, that their essence and their meaning must be spiritual, and that therefore the aim of life and yoga could not be an egoistic escape into a Hereafter or a Nirvana, but that the aim of earthly existence had to be the evolutionary recovery of the Divine.

As the Mother once said, Sri Aurobindo's avataric action was "an immense spiritual revolution rehabilitating Matter and the creation." Sri Aurobindo himself wrote in a letter: "I am concerned with the earth, not with worlds beyond for their own sake; it is a terrestrial realization that I seek and not a flight to distant summits. All other yogas regard this life as an illusion or a passing phase; the supramental yoga alone regards it as a thing created by the Divine for a progressive manifestation and takes the fulfilment of the life and the body for its object."³

Although the evolutionary and supramental vision of Sri Aurobindo is well known, his radical attitude towards Reality, including material reality, is sometimes forgotten or diluted in ways more in line with traditional views. The following passages from *Essays on the Gita* may remind us of the true contents of his teaching.

"From a clash of material or other forces everything in this world, if not the world itself, seems to be born; by a struggle of forces, tendencies, principles, beings it seems to proceed, ever creating new things, ever destroying the old, marching one knows not very well whither. However that

3 Sri Aurobindo: *Letters on Yoga*, p. 91.

may be, this is certain that there is not only no construction here without destruction, no harmony except by a poise of contending forces won out of many actual and potential discords, but also no continued existence of life except by a constant self-feeding and devouring of other life. The command seems to have gone out from the beginning, 'Thou shalt not conquer except by battle with thy fellows and thy surroundings; thou shalt not even live except by battle and struggle and by absorbing into thyself other life. The first law of this world that I have made is creation and preservation by destruction.'

"Ancient thought accepted this starting-point so far as it could see it by scrutiny of the universe. The old *Upanishads* saw it very clearly and phrased it with an uncompromising thoroughness which will have nothing to do with any honeyed glosses or optimistic scuttlings of the truth. Hunger that is Death, they said, is the creator and master of this world, and they figured vital existence in the image of the Horse of the sacrifice. Matter they described by a name which means ordinarily food and they said, we call it food because it is devoured and devours creatures. The eater eating is eaten, this is the formula of the material world."⁴

"War, said Heraclitus, is the father of all things, war is the king of all; and the saying, like most of the apophthegms of the Greek thinker, suggests a profound truth. From a clash of material or other forces everything in this world, if not the world itself, seems to be born; by a struggle of forces, tendencies, principles, beings it seems to proceed, ever creating new things, ever destroying the old ..." ⁵ Words like these are rarely found in books on spirituality and yoga. Still the truth is that the world can only be changed by confronting it without excluding any of its problems, not by sidestepping

4 Sri Aurobindo: *Essays on the Gita*, pp. 40-41.

5 *Id.*, p. 40.

them or trying to escape from them in what is fundamentally an act of egoism.

“It is only a few religions which have had the courage to say without any reserve, like the Indian, that this enigmatic World-Power is one Deity, one Trinity, to lift up the image of the Force that acts in the world in the figure not only of the beneficent Durga, but of the terrible Kali in her blood-stained dance of destruction and to say, ‘This too is the Mother; this also know to be God; this too, if thou hast the strength, adore.’”⁶ Therefore: “We must acknowledge Kurukshetra; we must submit to the law of life by Death before we can find our way to the life immortal; we must open our eyes, with a less appalled gaze than Arjuna’s, to the vision of our Lord of Time and Death and cease to deny, hate or recoil from the universal Destroyer.”⁷

Which brings us to what Arjuna was given to see on the battlefield, between two armies lined up to attack each other.

3. What Arjuna saw

After having been told by Sri Krishna that his dejection is unworthy of his *dharma* as a fighter, Arjuna, “the representative man of a great world-struggle and divinely guided movement of men and nations,” is initiated in yoga on the battlefield. Now he learns “what is the sense of the birth and passing away of existences. He knows that the imperishable greatness of the divine conscious Soul is the secret of all these appearances.”⁸

As a confirmation of the revelation he has received from the Avatar, the Master of the Yoga himself, “he would

6 *Id.*, p. 45.

7 *Id.*, p. 46.

8 *Id.*, p. 377.

see too the very form and body of this Godhead," of the Absolute Existence about whom he has been told and who has done the telling.

"Thou shalt see, replies the Avatar, my hundreds and thousands of divine forms, various in kind, various in shape and hue ... Thou shalt see wonders that none has beheld. Thou shalt see today the whole world related and unified in my body and whatever else thou wilt to behold." Yet what Arjuna has to see, the human eye cannot grasp. "But there is a divine eye, an inmost seeing, by which the supreme Godhead in his Yoga can be beheld, and that eye I now give to thee," says Sri Krishna.⁹

The glory of the Supreme is disclosed to the warrior. "The supreme Form is then made visible. It is that of the infinite Godhead whose faces are everywhere and in whom are all the wonders of existence, who multiplies all the many marvellous revelations of his being, a world-wide Divinity seeing with innumerable eyes, speaking through innumerable mouths, armed for battle with numberless divine uplifted weapons, glorious with divine ornaments of beauty, robed in heavenly raiment of deity, lovely with garlands of divine flowers, fragrant with divine perfumes. Such is the light of this body of God as if a thousand suns had risen at once in heaven. The whole world multitudinously divided and yet unified is visible in the body of the God of Gods." Arjuna, in ecstasy, cries out: "Thou art the supreme Immutable whom we have to know, thou art the high foundation and abode of the universe, thou art the imperishable guardian of the eternal laws, thou art the sempiternal soul of existence!"

However, in the absoluteness of the God of Gods there is also the opposite side, the terrible dark side completing

9 These quotations and the following in this section are from *Essays on the Gita*, pp. 377 ff.

the glorious bright side. This aspect of his being too Sri Krishna reveals to Arjuna, "this Godhead who embraces the worlds with his numberless arms and destroys with his million hands, whose eyes are suns and moons, has a face of blazing fire and is ever burning up the whole universe with the flame of his energy ... The companies of the gods enter [that Being] ... It has enormous burning eyes; it has mouths that gape to devour, terrible with many tusks of destruction; it has faces like the fires of Death and Time. The kings and the captains and the heroes on both sides of the world-battle are hastening into its tusked and terrible jaws, and some are seen with crushed and bleeding heads caught between its teeth of power; the nations are rushing to destruction with helpless speed into its mouths of flame ... With those burning mouths the Form of Dread is licking all the regions around; the whole world is full of his burning energies and baked in the fierceness of his lustres ..."

Arjuna, the protagonist in the world-battle at that time in human history, receives the full initiation. "This is the figure of the supreme and universal Being," writes Sri Aurobindo, "the Ancient of Days who is for ever, *sanatanam purusham puranam*, this is he who for ever creates ... he who keeps the world always in existence, for he is the guardian of the eternal laws, but who is always too destroying in order that he may new-create, who is Time, who is Death, who is Rudra the Dancer of the calm and awful dance, who is Kali with her garland of skulls trampling naked in battle and flecked with the blood of the slaughtered Titans, who is the cyclone and the fire and the earthquake and pain and famine and revolution and ruin and the swallowing ocean." This aspect of the Divine "is an aspect from which the mind in men willingly turns away and ostrich-like hides its head so that perchance, not seeing, it may not be seen by the Terrible. *The weakness of the human heart wants only fair and comforting truths or in their absence pleasant fables; it will not have*

the truth in its entirety because there there is much that is not clear and pleasant and comfortable but hard to understand and harder to bear.”¹⁰

4. The battle that is our battle

In the words of Sri Aurobindo, “Arjuna is the representative man of his age.” “In the *Gita* he typifies the human soul of action brought face to face through that action in its highest and most violent crisis with the problem of human life and its apparent incompatibility with the spiritual state or even with a purely ethical ideal of perfection.”¹¹ When putting the teachings of the *Gita* into practice, Sri Aurobindo himself was constantly guided by Sri Krishna whom afterwards he declared to have been the Master of his Yoga (and who later incarnated into him¹²). The *Gita* formed an integral part of the foundation of his avataric realization – which is one reason why his *Essays on the Gita* remain an essential source of inspiration for all who want to follow in his footsteps. The battle on the field of the Kurus is the battle of striving humanity; it is our battle.

“The world of our battle and labour is a fierce dangerous destructive devouring world in which life exists precariously and the soul and body of man move among enormous perils, a world in which by every step forward, whether we will it or no, something is crushed and broken, in which every breath of life is a breath too of death. To put away the responsibility for all that seems to us evil or terrible on the shoulders of a semi-omnipotent Devil, or to put it aside as part of Nature, making an unbridgeable opposition between world-nature and God-Nature, as if Nature

10 Sri Aurobindo: *Essays on the Gita*, p. 381 (emphasis added).

11 *Id.*, p. 21.

12 See talk 2, “The Development of Sri Aurobindo’s Thought”.

were independent of God, or to throw the responsibility on man and his sins, as if he had a preponderant voice in the making of this world or could create anything against the will of God, are clumsily comfortable devices.

“We have to look courageously in the face of the reality and see that it is God and none else who has made this world in his being and that so he has made it. We have to see that Nature devouring her children, Time eating up the lives of creatures, Death universal and ineluctable and the violence of the Rudra forces in man and Nature are also the supreme Godhead in one of his cosmic figures. We have to see that God the bountiful and prodigal creator, God the helpful, strong and benignant preserver is also God the devourer and destroyer. The torment of the couch of pain and evil on which we are racked is his touch as much as happiness and sweetness and pleasure. It is only when we see with the eye of the complete union and feel his truth in the depths of our being that we can entirely discover behind that mask too the calm and beautiful face of the all-blissful Godhead and in this touch that tests our imperfection the touch of the friend and builder of the spirit in man. The discords of the world are God’s discords and it is only by accepting and proceeding through them that we can arrive at the greater concords of his supreme harmony, the summits and thrilled vastnesses of his transcendent and his cosmic Ananda.”¹³

Sri Aurobindo touches here upon the question that has been on the mind of all humans since their appearance on the Earth, and to which all religions have to provide an answer: the justification of a benevolent, omnipotent and omniscient God in view of the existence of evil and suffering.¹⁴

13 Sri Aurobindo: *Essays on the Gita*, pp. 381-382.

14 See talk 10: “Theodicy: Nature Makes no Mistakes”.

In *The Life Divine* he formulates the problem as follows: "God being All-Good, who created pain and evil? If we say that pain is a trial and an ordeal, we do not solve the moral problem, we arrive at an immoral or non-moral God – an excellent world-mechanist perhaps, a cunning psychologist, but not a God of Good and Love whom we can worship, only a God of might to whose law we must submit or whose caprice we may hope to propitiate. For one who invents torture as a means of test and ordeal, stands convicted either of deliberate cruelty or of moral insensibility and, if a moral being at all, is inferior to the highest instinct of his own creatures."¹⁵

As Sri Aurobindo writes in the letters of which *The Riddle of This World* is composed: no answer has ever been given to satisfy the human mind because the answer requires a consciousness vaster than ours, a cosmic consciousness, only obtainable in an advanced state of yoga. The path towards such understanding is the path of faith and surrender, warranted by the Vedantic affirmation that all is the Brahman and that our souls have chosen to incarnate in this evolutionary universe. "If it be true that the Self alone exists, it must also be true that all is the Self."

"The gospel of universal peace and goodwill among men – for without a universal and entire mutual goodwill there can be no real and abiding peace – has never succeeded for a moment in possessing itself of human life during the historic cycle of our progress, because morally, socially, spiritually the race was not prepared and the poise of Nature in its evolution would not admit of its being immediately prepared for any such transcendence. ... A day may come, must surely come, we will say, when humanity will be ready spiritually, morally, socially for the reign of universal peace;

15 Sri Aurobindo: *The Life Divine*, p. 101.

meanwhile the aspect of battle and the nature and function of man as a fighter have to be accepted and accounted for by any practical philosophy and religion." (*Essays on the Gita*, p. 49)

5. The Work of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother

In September 1943, when the Second World War was at its height and undecided, Sri Aurobindo wrote in a letter: "Ours is a Sadhana which involves not only devotion or union with the Divine or a perception of Him in all things, but also action as workers and instruments and a work to be done in the world or a force to be brought in the world under difficult conditions ... It does not seem to me that X is wrong in seeing in it [*i.e.* the Second World War] the same problem as in Kurukshetra." "In this yoga," he wrote on another occasion, "all sides of the Truth are taken up, not in the systematic forms given them formerly but in their essence, and carried to the fullest and highest significance."¹⁶

It cannot be overstressed that the Integral Yoga of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother is a radical, revolutionary effort to change human nature. As it is "integral," it takes up the essence and many processes of the old yogas, but it is new in its aim (the transformation and divinization of human nature); its standpoint (if all is the Brahman, the world and the body in which we are incarnated is also the Brahman; instead of the search for escape, the appreciation of their Work must lead to an understanding and realization of their purposes); and the totality of its method (including the yogas of devotion, knowledge and works).

The Integral Yoga is also new "because the object sought after is not an individual achievement of divine realization for the sake of the individual, but something to be gained for

16 Sri Aurobindo: *Letters on Yoga*, p. 73.

the earth-consciousness here, a cosmic, not solely a supra-cosmic achievement." And it is new "because a method has been preconized for achieving this purpose which is as total and integral as the aim set before it, viz., the total and integral change of consciousness and nature ... I have not found this method (as a whole) or anything like it professed or realized in the old yogas," writes Sri Aurobindo. "If I had, I should not have wasted my time in hewing out a road and in thirty years of search and inner creation when I could have hastened home safely to my goal in an easy canter over paths already blazed out, laid down, perfectly mapped, macadamized, made secure and public. Our yoga is not a retreading of old walks, but a spiritual adventure."¹⁷

Hewing out a new road, broadening and deepening the destiny of humankind, is the task of the Avatar. In Sri Aurobindo's words: "The Avatar is one who comes to open the Way for humanity to a higher consciousness. ... The Divine being all-powerful can lift people up without bothering to come down on earth. It is only if it is a part of the world-arrangement that he should take upon himself the burden of humanity and open the Way that Avatarhood has any meaning... The Avatar is not bound to do extraordinary actions, but he is bound to give his acts or his work or what he is – any of these or all – a significance and an effective power that are part of something essential to be done in the history of the earth and its races. ... The Avatar is necessary when a special work is to be done and in crises of the evolution," as Sri Krishna himself gives Arjuna to understand, saying that he incarnates as an Avatar *yuge yuge*, from age to age.¹⁸

Extraordinary actions abounded in the lives of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, the most extraordinary being of

17 *Id.*, p. 101.

18 *Id.*, pp. 408, 409, 414, 401.

course that they hewed out the road by preparing the Earth for the descent and action of the Supermind. To this end they had to fight the good fight as no incarnated beings before them had done, for – and this is essential – the Avatar, to achieve the change he has come down for, has to take upon him the entire burden of the past, the burden of the evolution. In *Savitri* we find the lines:

*But when God's messenger comes to heal the world
And lead the soul of earth to higher things,
He too must carry the yoke he came to unloose ...
But though to the outward eye no sign appears
And peace is given to our torn human hearts,
The struggle is there and paid the unseen price;
The fire, the strife, the wrestle are within.
He carries the suffering world in his own breast ...*¹⁹

[He]

*Fought shadowy combats in mute eyeless depths,
Assaults of Hell endured and Titan strokes
And bore the fierce inner wounds that are slow to heal.*²⁰

And in that marvellous poem “A God’s Labour,” which could also be called “The Avatar’s Song,” we read:

*My gaping wounds are a thousand and one
And the Titan kings assail,
But I dare not rest till my task is done
And wrought the eternal will.*²¹

Although in a case like this comparisons are otiose, we might say that the Mother’s burden has been no less, as witnessed for instance by some of her conversations in *The Mother’s Agenda*. At that time her transformational work in

19 Sri Aurobindo: *Savitri*, p. 446.

20 *Id.*, p. 230.

21 Sri Aurobindo: *Collected Poems*, p. 535.

the depths of the subconscious had its repercussions in her physical body, while she had to perform what she called *la besogne obscure*, the obscure chore, and to confront *toutes les horreurs de la création*, all the horrors of creation. Now Sri Aurobindo and the Mother are accepted and adored as Gods by many; few realize that they were also the Great Warriors – Kalki with the sword, Kali doing battle – who had, unknown, to fight the crusade for the future of humanity. The reality of their Work, even of the little we know of it, is much more epochal than any of the religious myths.

“Krishna calls upon Arjuna to carry on war of the most terrible kind and by his example encourage men to do every kind of human work, *sarvakārmani*. Do you contend that Krishna was an unspiritual man and that his advice to Arjuna was mistaken or wrong in principle?” asked Sri Aurobindo in a letter to a disciple. Each spiritual effort attracts automatically the adverse forces, who do not want that change and progress should occur in their dominion on Earth. It was so at the time of the Vedic Rishis; it was so at the time of the *Mahabharata*; it is so today in the experience of anybody who sincerely steps upon the path of yoga. “This yoga is a spiritual battle,” wrote Sri Aurobindo to a disciple, “its very attempt raises all sorts of adverse forces.”²²

Fighting, war, courage and heroism are not among the favourite social occurrences and virtues of the civilized mind at present, and, as mentioned above, the practice of “yoga” is usually associated with the search for tranquillity, peace and feeling well. Such, however, is not the path of the Integral Yoga, although some of its professed practitioners seek to level the path in imitation of more familiar traditional ways. Referring to the quotations from Sri Aurobindo, such an attitude cannot agree with the Integral Yoga because Sri Aurobindo’s and the Mother’s Yoga is about changing the

22 Sri Aurobindo: *Letters on Yoga*, p. 1639.

human nature, which is such a difficult undertaking that formerly no spiritual path, and certainly no religious one, has even tried to attempt it.

As every aspirant is soon to find out: "This yoga is a spiritual battle; its very attempt raises all sorts of adverse forces." The battlefield, however, is we ourselves, we composite, complex human beings. It is a "war of our members" in which every member, like every creature, has the right of its highest possible development. It is "a battle, a long war with ourselves and with opposing forces around us."

Without heroism, avers Sri Aurobindo, no human can grow into the Godhead. "Courage, energy and strength are among the very first principles of the divine nature in action." And the Mother had the following prayer printed in the Ashram School notebooks: "Make of us the hero-warriors we aspire to become. May we fight successfully the great battle of the future that is to be born, against the past that seeks to endure, so that the new things may manifest and we be ready to receive them."

*O soul, intruder in Nature's ignorance,
Armed traveller to the unseen supernal heights,
Thy spirit's fate is a battle and ceaseless march
Against invisible opponent Powers ...
All who would raise the fallen world must come
Under the dangerous arches of their power;
For even the radiant children of the gods
To darken their privilege is and dreadful right.
None can reach heaven who has not passed through hell.*²³

6. Kurukshetra in the twentieth century

The Second World War is long past and is by most people today but vaguely remembered. Countless books have

23 Sri Aurobindo: *Savitri*, pp. 458, 227.

been written about it, but its true significance is to be found in the sparse comments and statements by Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, providing us with a glimpse of the crucial importance of that war for humanity, and of their part in it. It may therefore be apposite here to quote once again the following lines from a letter by Sri Aurobindo to a disciple, written in September 1943, when the situation was critical not only for the world, but also for Sri Aurobindo, the Mother and the Ashram: "Ours is a Sadhana which involves not only devotion or union with the Divine or a perception of Him in all things, but also action as workers and instruments and a work to be done in the world or a force to be brought in the world under difficult conditions ... It does not seem to me that X is wrong in seeing in it [*i.e.* the ongoing war] the same problem as in Kurukshetra."

When "more than half" of the Ashram inmates were sympathetic towards Hitler, most of them out of hatred towards the British colonial regime, Sri Aurobindo made his and the Mother's standpoint clear: "I affirm again to you most strongly that this is the Mother's war ... It is a struggle for an ideal that has to establish itself on earth in the life of humanity, for a Truth that has yet to realize itself fully and against a darkness and falsehood that are trying to overwhelm the earth and mankind in the immediate future. It is the forces behind the battle that have to be seen and not this or that superficial circumstance ...

"It is a struggle for the liberty of mankind to develop, for conditions in which men have freedom and room to think and act according to the light in them and grow in the Truth, grow in the Spirit. There cannot be the slightest doubt that if one side wins, there will be an end of all such freedom and hope of light and truth and the work that has to be done will be subjected to conditions which would make it humanly impossible; there will be a reign of falsehood and darkness,

a cruel oppression and degradation for most of the human race such as people in this country do not dream of and cannot yet at all realize." (29.7.1942)

"The victory of one side (the Allies) would keep the path open for the evolutionary forces; the victory of the other side would drag back humanity, degrade it horribly and might lead even, at the worst, to its eventual failure as a race, as others in the past evolution failed and perished." (3.9.1943)

This was the Avatar speaking in defence of the Work he had come to do, to "keep the path open for the evolutionary forces." It is at the vital, decisive evolutionary moments that the Avatar incarnates, *yuge yuge*, to create the possibility of an evolutionary step forwards and to do battle with the Forces who oppose his action with all their terrific, egoistic powers. Sri Rama had to fight Ravana at the time of the mentalization of humanity; Sri Krishna led the fight of the Mahabharata war, supporting with his physical presence and his spiritual Power the Pandavas against the ill-intentioned Kauravas. Sri Aurobindo and the Mother were for the first time in human history the complete, bi-poled male-female Avatar. May it at last be realized that their crucial avataric effort of transforming humanity, to make a better world possible, impelled the Hostile Forces to retaliate and caused the twentieth-century wars. Actually the First and Second World War, together with the third Cold War, are closely interrelated and should be seen as one.

A direct result of the Second World War was that it brought the Yoga of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother to a halt, and this at the moment that they expected the supramental Descent to take place. Sri Aurobindo wrote later on about "these times of world-crisis when I have to be on guard and concentrated all the time to prevent irremediable

catastrophes.”²⁴ The Mother reminisced more explicitly: “There was such a constant tension for Sri Aurobindo and me that it interrupted the yoga completely during the whole war. And it was for that reason that the war had come: to stop the Work. For there was an extraordinary descent of the Supermind at that time, it came like this [massive gesture]! That was exactly in 1939. Then the war came and brought everything to a standstill, completely. For if we had gone on with the Work personally, we would not have been sure that there was enough time to finish it before ‘the other one’ [the Asura of Falsehood, “Hitler’s God”] had made a mess of the world, and the whole affair would have been postponed for centuries. This had to be stopped first of all: the action of the Lord of Nations – the Lord of Falsehood.”²⁵

Hitler, his Nazis and the supporting Fascists of several countries lost the war. Yet the Lord of the Nations is not bound to any country or personality, and while the Allied nations were at their victory jig, he intensified his action in the knowledge that, if he did not win one way or another, there would come an end to his reign over the peoples. The situation was “as clear as a pike-staff” to Sri Aurobindo’s yogic knowledge and insight. “There was a time when Hitler was victorious everywhere and it seemed certain that a black yoke of the Asura would be imposed on the whole world; but where is Hitler now and where is his rule?” However: “Other blacknesses threaten to overshadow or even engulf mankind ...”²⁶

May Aurobindians bear these words of Sri Aurobindo in mind: “It is not enough that our own hands should remain clean and our souls unstained for the law of strife

24 Sri Aurobindo: *On Himself*, p. 188.

25 *L’Agenda de Mère 1961*, pp. 410-411.

26 Sri Aurobindo: *On Himself*, p. 169.

and destruction to die out in the world; that which is its root must first disappear out of humanity." "Not till the Time-Spirit in man is ready, can the inner and ultimate prevail over the outer and immediate reality. Christ and Buddha have come and gone. But it is Rudra who still holds the world in the hollow of his hand. And meanwhile the fierce forward labour of mankind tormented and oppressed by the Powers that are profiteers of egoistic force and their servants cries for the sword of the Hero of the struggle and the word of the prophet." ²⁷

"The gospel of universal peace and goodwill among men – for without a universal and entire mutual goodwill there can be no real and abiding peace – has never succeeded for a moment in possessing itself of human life during the historic cycle of our progress, because morally, socially, spiritually the race was not prepared and the poise of Nature in its evolution would not admit of its being immediately prepared for any such transcendence. ... A day may come, must surely come, we will say, when humanity will be ready spiritually, morally, socially for the reign of universal peace; meanwhile the aspect of battle and the nature and function of man as a fighter have to be accepted and accounted for by any practical philosophy and religion." ²⁸

"The Yoga having come down against the bed-rock of Inconscience which is the fundamental basis of all resistance in the individual and in the world," ²⁹ the situation of the world worsened because the resistance against the avatatic Work intensified. "Things are bad, are growing worse and may at any time grow worst or worse than worst if that is possible – and anything however paradoxical seems

27 Sri Aurobindo: *Essays on the Gita*, p. 386.

28 *Id.*, pp. 48-49.

29 Sri Aurobindo: *On Himself*, p. 169.

possible in the present perturbed world," wrote Sri Aurobindo in July 1948.³⁰ And, after a life of avataric effort, he wrote the fateful words: "I have no intention of giving my sanction to a new edition of the old fiasco, a partial and transient spiritual opening within with no true and radical change in the external nature"³¹ – as had happened when Christ and the Buddha had come and were gone.

"It is not enough that our own hands should remain clean and our souls unstained for the law of strife and destruction to die out of the world; that which is its root must first disappear out of humanity."³² And Sri Aurobindo, the Avatar and Warrior of the Supermind, prepared to descend into death to extirpate, at the root of the human condition, that which on all previous occasions had barred the way of Progress. This act was the ultimate condition of the descent of a greater, a divine Consciousness on Earth. Only six years after his voluntary descent into death (1950) the Supramental Consciousness manifested in the earth atmosphere (1956).³³

Coda

Years before he performed the yogic Master Act of consciously descending into death to purify and change the occult foundations of the world, Sri Aurobindo had written:

*And yet I know my footprints' track shall be
A pathway towards Immortality.*³⁴

30 *Id.*, p. 171.

31 Sri Aurobindo: *Letters on Yoga*, p. 130.

32 Sri Aurobindo: *Essays on the Gita*, p. 43.

33 See talk 8: "Sri Aurobindo's Descent into Death".

34 Sri Aurobindo: *Collected Poems*, p. 603.

It is good for those who follow in his footprints to remember that they continue the arduous pilgrimage of so many predecessors, all of them belonging to the Fellowship of the Aspiration:

- the *sadhu* conquering himself on the dusty or muddy roads of the world;
- the gnostic in his quest for the knowledge of his soul and its redemption;
- the hermetist pondering the teachings of his secret divinity;
- the spiritual alchemist experimenting in his laboratory to realize his own transformation;
- the Zen-monk battering his mind against the glass walls of insanity while trying to become truly sane, enlightened;
- the nun and monk kneeling in their solitary cell till their prayer is answered by a touch of God;
- and so many others, whenever and wherever, who were or are carried by the aspiration that animates our lives.

5

2012 and 1956: Doomsday?

*The Iron Age is ended. Only now
The last fierce spasm of the dying past
Shall shake the nations ...*

Sri Aurobindo, "In the Moonlight"

The 2012 phenomenon

The 2012 phenomenon, simply put, consists in the worldwide expectation that on 21 December 2012 an event will take place, beneficial or detrimental, which will change the Earth and humanity on it. This eschatological belief has intensified in the last decades and snowballed into a media event. It originates in the finding, scientific or not, that the

fourth 5,125 year-long cycle or “sun” in the Mayan Long Count calendar will end on that day.

A New Age interpretation of this presumed event tells us that on that day Earth and her inhabitants will undergo a physical and/or spiritual transformation which will initiate a new era. Others expect that event to bring the world to an end, or something of similar importance, which may be caused by cosmic catastrophes, e.g. a collision with a passing planet (Nibiru?) or with a black hole, a failure of the Earth’s magnetic field, or a hit by a massive expulsion of matter from the Sun ...

In *2012: Universal Doom or New Age*, Ashok Sharma writes: “All the so-called Mayan prophecies about 2012 are nothing more than wildly speculative extrapolations, which are based on yet uncertain interpretations by scholars of Maya hieroglyphs.” Carlos Barrios, a Mayan anthropologist who has extensively enquired about the prediction among his people, is of the following opinion: “There are some who announce the end of the world for December 2012. This is nothing but imagination. The Mayas are not happy with this interpretation. The world is not going to end: it will be transformed. The Indians have their calendars and know how to interpret them, but not the Westerners. Humanity will continue to exist, but in another way. The material structures will change. From then onwards, we will have the opportunity to be more human.”¹

The doomsday prediction or expectation is a tradition which the West inherited together with its Judeo-Christian religion, more specifically from the biblical *Book of Daniel* and *Revelation*. Norman Cohn writes in his classic work *The Pursuit of the Millennium*: “Already in the Prophetic Books there are passages that foretell how, out of an immense

1 In Sylvie Simon: *2012 – Le rendez-vous*, p. 45.

cosmic catastrophe, there will arise a Palestine which will be nothing less than a new Eden, Paradise regained" – a Palestine to which the whole world would consent to bow or which would gradually dominate the whole world.² It should be remembered that the Hebrews were the first to interpret history not as cyclic but as linear, with a beginning at Creation and an end when evil will be conquered and Earth become an eternal Paradise.

The following words from *Revelation*, written by the visionary John of Patmos, have had an enormous influence in Christianity: "And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away; and there was no more sea. And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. ... And God shall wipe all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain; for the former things are passed away. And he that sat upon the throne said, Behold, I make all things new. ... And he carried me away in the spirit to a great and high mountain, and showed me that great city, the holy Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God, having the glory of God ..." ³

It is rather remarkable that Jesus is seldom remembered as having been an apocalyptic himself, the reason probably being that the Catholic Church had to do its utmost to cover the fact because his predictions did not become true. Bart Ehrman writes in his *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium*: "Jesus thought that the history of the world would come to a screeching halt, and that God would intervene in the affairs of the planet, overthrow the forces of

2 Norman Cohn: *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, p. 20.

3 As quoted in Cohn, p. 25.

evil in a cosmic act of judgment, and establish his utopian Kingdom here on earth. And this was to happen within his own generation. ... Jesus stood within a long line of Jewish prophets who understood that God was soon going to intervene in this world, overthrow the forces of evil that ran it, and bring in a new kingdom in which there would be no more war, disease, catastrophe, despair, hatred, sin, or death.”⁴

For instance in the gospel of Mark, now generally accepted as the earliest of the four gospels, we find Jesus quoted as having said: “Truly I tell you, some of you standing here will not taste death before they have seen the Kingdom of God having come in power.” (9:1) “Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away before all these things take place.” (13:30) “Truly I tell you, you will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven.” (14:62) Moreover, the gnostic Paul of Tarsus, considered by many the second founder of Christianity, was of the same conviction and wrote in his first letter to the Thessalonians: “We who are alive, we who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with [the resurrected] to meet the Lord in the air.” (4:15-17)

It is hardly an exaggeration to say that, since those times, the end of the world has been foretold at least once every other year. At present, however, the imagery of the expectations has changed considerably. Nobody is coming or going on the clouds any more, and if heaven is a concrete place, it must be located somewhere beyond the farthest galaxies and quasars 13.7 billion light years away instead of beyond the orbit of the planet Saturn. The feared causes of doomsday are now asteroid and comet impacts,

4 Bart Ehrman: *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium*, pp. 3 and 21.

the change of our planet's spin rate, solar fireworks, nearby supernovae, gamma-ray bursts, black holes, alien attacks, monstrous mutations on the Earth itself, or biological or nuclear terrorism.

This does not mean, nevertheless, that the present situation of planet Earth and its denizens should not be taken seriously. The interpretation of the Mayan long-count calendar is not the only prediction of an imminent best or direst. Our moment in time is also supposed to be the end of the Iron Age, the dawn of the Age of Aquarius, the momentous change predicted by Edgar Cayce, and, according to Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, the time of upheaval inevitable in the transition to a new stage of the terrestrial evolution. The bewildering circumstances caused by this transition are clearly expressed in the extreme phenomena which seem to threaten life on Earth; in the mental, religious and spiritual confusion of the "postmodern" period; in the vulnerability of our planet as perceived by science; and, not least, in the astounding increase of the human population which seems unstoppable.

Gaia in trouble

James Lovelock (°1919) is a scientist and inventor who at one time collaborated with NASA in their search for life on Mars. He became sincerely worried because of the damage done to the terrestrial environment by a careless humanity, increasing beyond all proportions. He formulated the analysis of his worries in *Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth*, published in 1979. By the name "Gaia" – the Greek name of the Goddess of the Earth, proposed by his friend William Golding – Lovelock wanted to make his readers aware that the surface and the atmosphere of the Earth, if not the planet as a whole, looked, acted and was as vulnerable as a living being.

Initially Lovelock's hypothesis was stridently attacked by the Neo-Darwinists, especially by Richard Dawkins, the firebrand among them. They dismissed the Gaia hypothesis as "vitalist," thereby declaring it anathema in serious, academic, materialist science. After Lovelock had pruned his hypothesis and its formulations somewhat, turning it into a proper scientific theory, Gaia became more respectable. In the year 2000 the first international conference, "Gaia 2000," was held; the updated proceedings were published in 2004 under the title *Scientists Debate Gaia*.

According to Lovelock, Gaia is a thin spherical shell of matter that surrounds the incandescent interior of planet Earth, almost entirely made of hot or molten rock and metal. That spherical shell "begins where the crystal rocks meet the magma of the Earth's hot interior, about 100 miles below the surface, and proceeds another 100 miles upwards through the ocean and air to the even hotter thermosphere at the edge of space. ... I call Gaia a physiological system."⁵ Lynn Margulis, the biologist who together with Lovelock formulated the idea of Gaia, writes: "The entire planetary surface, not just the living bodies but the atmosphere that we think of as an inert background, is so far from chemical equilibrium that the entire planetary surface is best regarded as alive."⁶ And the science writer John Gribbin defines the theory as follows: "Gaia is the name given to a theory which describes how the different components of the Earth System, living and non-living, have worked together for eons to maintain conditions suitable for life."⁷

It should however be stressed that the authors of all three quotes took their distances from the romantic and

5 James Lovelock: *The Revenge of Gaia*, p. 19.

6 Lynn Margulis: *The Symbiotic Planet - A New Look at Evolution*, p. 154.

7 John Gribbin: *He Knew He Was Right - The Irrepressible Life of James Lovelock*, p. x.

New Age interpretations of the Gaia hypothesis, in their effort to conform to scientific norms and make the hypothesis generally acceptable. The original *hypothesis* postulated, according to Lovelock himself, “that life on Earth actively keeps the surface conditions always favourable for whatever is the contemporary ensemble of organisms.” Promoted to a scientific *theory*, this “supposition” was reworded and Gaia became “a view of the Earth that sees it as a self-regulating system made up from the totality of organisms, the surface rocks, the ocean and the atmosphere tightly coupled as an evolving system. The theory sees this system as having a goal: the regulation of surface conditions so as always to be as favourable as possible for contemporary life. It is based on observations and theoretical models; it is fruitful and has made ten successful predictions”⁸ – predictions being a prerequisite to render any theory scientific.

Behind it all is the conviction that Gaia and her denizens are in serious trouble. In *The Revenge of Gaia*, Lovelock wrote as recently as 2006: “I make no apologies for repeating that Gaia is an evolutionary system in which any species, including humans, that persists with changes to the environment that lessen the survival of its progeny is doomed to extinction. By massively taking land to feed people and by fouling the air and water we are hampering Gaia’s ability to regulate the Earth’s climate and chemistry, and if we continue to do it we are in danger of extinction. We have in a sense stumbled into a war with Gaia, a war that we have no hope of winning. All that we can do is to make peace while we are still strong and not a broken rabble.”⁹ His warning is grave: “Now humanity and the Earth face a deadly peril, with little time left to escape.”

8 James Lovelock: *op. cit.*, p. 208.

9 *Id.*, pp. 139-140.

Margulis, in *The Symbiotic Planet*, sounds even more draconian: “To me, the human move to take responsibility for the living Earth is laughable – the rhetoric of the powerless. The planet takes care of us, not we of it. Our self-inflated moral imperative to guide a wayward Earth or heal our sick planet is evidence of our immense capacity for self-delusion. Rather, we need to protect us from ourselves. ... No human culture, despite its inventiveness, can kill life on this planet, were it even to try. ... Humans are not the centre of life, nor is any other single species. Humans are not even central to life. We are a recent, rapidly growing part of an enormous ancient whole.”

“It may already be too late to avert the looming climate catastrophe that Lovelock warns about,” opines John Gribbin. And the senior biologist Edward Wilson, one of the most respected living scientists, concludes his analysis of the Gaia situation with this paragraph: “The juggernaut of technology-based capitalism will not be stopped. Its momentum is reinforced by the billions of poor people in developing countries anxious to participate in order to share the material wealth of the industrialized nations. But its directions can be changed by mandate of a generally shared long-term environmental ethic. The choice is clear: the juggernaut will very soon either chew up what remains of the living world, or it will be redirected to save it. ... Humanity is in a final struggle with the rest of life.”¹⁰

Breakdown or breakthrough

Ervin Laszlo (°1932) is the founder and president of the Club of Budapest, “an informal association of creative [and famous] people in diverse fields of human creativity”. The Club is “dedicated to the proposition that only by changing ourselves can we change the world,” or variously put: “A

10 Edward Wilson: *The Future of Life*, pp. 156 and 43.

revolution of consciousness is perhaps the last, and certainly the best, hope of humankind.” They want to bring about a worldwide spiritual renaissance. In Laszlo’s words: “We now live in a period of transformation when a new world is struggling to be born.”¹¹

Laszlo is convinced that the present situation of Planet Earth is as critical as the scientists in the previous section (together with most reasonable people) think it is. In addition he accepts 2012, the end of the running period of one of the Mayan calendars, as a given. This date will, according to him, mark a total breakdown of all life-systems on the planet if no conscious and collaborative effort is made to prevent it. However, if such an effort is made, what looms on our horizon as a breakdown may turn out to be a breakthrough.

The finding of a solution is urgent, for the window of opportunity for new thinking is now reduced to a single lifetime. The present tendencies move at high speed towards irreversibility. The estimation of the critical points at which going back is no longer possible have shrunk terrifyingly: from the end of this century to its middle, then to the next twenty years, and in some cases even to the next five to twenty years. In *The Reenchanted Cosmos* Laszlo’s “window of decision” is 2005-2012, which means that at the present moment this window has narrowed further to two years.

The physical or natural threats able to cause a global breakdown are now well known. The sea level in the whole world could rise by more than one meter, with the result that many very populated cities, towns and regions would

11 The quotations in this section are from the following books by Ervin Laszlo: *The Reenchanted Cosmos – Welcome Home in the Universe* (2005), *The Chaos Point – The World at the Crossroads* (2006), and *Worldshift 2012: Making Green Business, New Politics & Higher Consciousness Work Together* (2009).

be drowned and disappear from the map. The CO² emission might be greater than predicted, causing the hole in the ozone layer to enlarge dramatically, doing untold harm. The increase in the temperature of the earth atmosphere might reach 3 to 6 degrees Celsius, which would make countless life-forms extinct. The Sun's activity might reach a peak in 2012, producing solar storms of unequalled intensity. A change of the magnetic poles is feared to be imminent.

In this critical situation Laszlo sees the possibility of a worldwide spiritual renaissance. In *Worldshift 2012* he states: "The completion of [the fourth Mayan] cycle in 2012 is the beginning of nothing less than an evolutionary jump in the earthly life. On that day a phase change of the frequency resonance [?] will take place, which opens the way for a post-2012 radiant golden age in our galactic-solar-planetary realization. ... We will have made the transition not only to a post-historical, but to a superhuman phase in our evolution. ... An immense change of consciousness will start on that day." And he quotes José Arguelles: "It will be as if we see ourselves for the first time, and we will no longer recognize ourselves as human." Laszlo is sure: "Something will happen. What will happen, however, depends on ourselves."

A more realistic Vaclav Havel, prominent Czech intellectual and politician, has said when addressing the USA Congress: "Without a worldwide revolution in the human consciousness nothing will change for the better." This agrees with Sri Aurobindo's declaration that "an inner change is needed in human nature," and that "if this is not the solution, then there is no solution, if this is not the way, then there is no way for the human kind."¹² Laszlo seems to share this conviction, but two turns in his thought render

12 Sri Aurobindo: *The Human Cycle*, p. 221.

his argumentation questionable, not to say naive: that an immense change in the consciousness of humanity will start on a given day; and that the collective mind of humanity might be capable of undergoing such a sea-change in five years or less.

Our final century?

Another voice in the debate is that of a distinguished scientist, Martin Rees, Astronomer Royal since 1995 and Master of Trinity College, Cambridge, since 2004. He has published a book with the ominous title *Our Final Century: Will Civilization Survive the Twenty-First Century?* "The theme of this book is that humanity is more at risk than at any other phase in its history," writes Rees. "The wider cosmos has a potential future that could even be infinite. But will these vast expanses of time be filled with life, or be as empty of the Earth's first sterile seas? The choice may depend on us, this century."

It is a fact that scientific materialism revels in the denigration and degradation of all humanistic, religious and spiritual values (although it will readily use them when deemed handy to promote its cause). It finds pleasure in repeating that being born is beginning to die, as it does in reminding us of the Copernican Principle, which reduces the status of the Earth to nothing but one planet among others and the status of the human beings to nothing but one kind of animals among others. Bertrand Russell, at one time the mouthpiece of scientific rationalism, wrote already many years ago: "If you accept the ordinary laws of science, you have to suppose that human life in general will die out in due course. You see in the moon the sort of thing towards which the earth is tending, something dead, cold and lifeless." And: "Brief and powerless is Man's life; on him and all his race the slow sure doom falls pitiless

and dark. Blind to good and evil, reckless of destruction, omnipotent matter rolls on its relentless way.”¹³

This macabre gospel of what might be called “black science” has found a fertile field in the contemporary crisis mood of fear and uncertainty. It is divulged in practically each and every issue of the science magazines, followed in this by the other media. *The Earth is going to die*. “The surface of the Sun, at a temperature of several thousand degrees, will come extremely close. The Earth will be charred; it will be a cinder.” *The Sun is going to die*. “We can foresee with certainty that our Sun, about five billion years old, and which transforms its hydrogen into helium slowly but irreversibly, will soon be exhausted, and that it will explode like the Crab Nebula in 1054.” (Here “soon” means at the earliest in another five billion years!) *The universe is going to die*. It began with the Big Bang and will end with the Big Crunch. “The stars begin to fade like guttering candles and are snuffed out one by one. In the depths of space the great celestial cities, the galaxies, cluttered with the memorabilia of ages, are gradually dying. Tens of billions of years pass in the growing darkness. Occasional flickers of light pierce the fall of cosmic night, and spurts of activity delay the sentence of a universe condemned to become a galactic graveyard.”

“What happens in far-future eons may seem blazingly irrelevant to the practicalities of our lives,” finds Rees. Indeed so. But in the meantime he contributes to the prevailing mentality by commenting on all the well-known causes of eventual doom by adding some of his own, staking for instance one thousand dollars on a bet: that by the year 2020 an instance of bio-error, *i.e.* a mistake or negligence involving biological matter (like a deadly virus or bacterium), will have killed a million people. “I think,” he writes, “the odds

13 In *Russell on Religion*, pp. 9 and 38.

are no better than fifty-fifty that our present civilization on Earth will survive to the end of the present century without a serious setback.”¹⁴

The Curve

However scientifically well-founded or eloquent the above illustrations of the threat to planet Earth and its denizens may be, most striking is no doubt the curve of its human population growth. “Ten thousand years ago there may have been at most 2 to 3 million humans scattered around the globe. There were no cities, no great population centers. There were fewer people on the globe than are now found in virtually any large city. Two thousand years ago the number had swelled to perhaps 130 to 200 million people. Our first billion was reached in the year 1800 [*i.e.* at the time of the first Industrial Revolution]. If we take the time of origin of our species [*Homo sapiens sapiens*] as about 100,000 years ago, it seems that it took our species 100,000 years to reach the billion-person population plateau. Then things sped up considerably. We reached 2 billion people in 1930, about 1 000 times faster than it took to reach the first billion. But the rate of increase kept accelerating. By 1950, only twenty years later, we had reached 2.5 billion souls. In 1999, we hit 6 billion. There will be approximately 7 billion people by 2020 and perhaps 11 billion by 2050 to 2100.”¹⁵ If the evolution has an aim, it cannot be to provide standing place only for the humans on our globe.

Once again we turn to Edward Wilson: “The problem before us is how to feed billions of new mouths over the next several decades and save the rest of life at the same time, without being wrapped in a Faustian bargain that

14 Martin Rees: *Our Final Century*, p. 8.

15 Peter Ward and Donald Brownlee: *Rare Earth: Why Complex Life is Uncommon in the Universe*, p. 284.

threatens freedom and security. No one knows the exact solution to this dilemma," he writes in *The Future of Life*. "During the twentieth century more people were added to the world than in all previous human history. ... We and the rest of life cannot afford another hundred years like that. ... It should be obvious to anyone not in a euphoric delirium that whatever humanity does or does not do, Earth's capacity to support our species is approaching the limit."¹⁶

To conclude with James Lovelock: "The ultimate cause of the problem is that there are too many people – six or seven times too many people – on Earth today." This raises the mega-question: if there is a meaning in it all, if the evolution has a goal, if the Curve is more than a curse, what is it that is happening and makes us look for an explanation of an Earth changing into one habitat for a unified humanity?

Is the Earth special?

According to Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, the Earth is a very special body in the universe. Speaking to the Ashram students in 1953, the Mother made this quite clear: "In the immensity of the astronomical skies, earth is a thing absolutely without interest and without importance, but from the occult and spiritual points of view the Earth is the concentrated symbol of the universe. ... For the convenience and necessity of the work, the whole universe has been concentrated and condensed symbolically in a grain of sand which is called the Earth. And therefore it is the symbol of all – all that is to be changed, all that is to be transformed, all that is to be converted is here. This means that if one concentrates on this work and does it here, all the rest will follow automatically." By the "work" she meant the effort of conscious spiritual evolution.

16 Edward Wilson: *op.cit.*, pp. 28-33, *passim*.

On another occasion, in 1951, she had said: "It is only upon earth that the Presence is found, this direct contact with the supreme Origin, this presence of the divine Consciousness hidden in all things. ... All action on this special point has its irradiation into the whole universe ... All knowledge in all traditions, from every part of the earth, says that the psychic formation is a terrestrial formation and that the growth of the psychic being is something that takes place upon earth. But once they are formed and free in their movement, they can go anywhere in the universe, they are not limited in their movement. But their formation and growth belong to the terrestrial life, for reasons of concentration."

"What happens on Earth," said the Mother, "has its repercussion in the entire universe." Inversely, Sri Aurobindo wrote in *Savitri*: "The powers of all the worlds have entrance here."¹⁷ And in his correspondence he wrote: "Earth is the foundation and all the worlds are on the earth and to imagine a clean-cut or irreconcilable difference between them is ignorance; here and not elsewhere, not by going to some other world, the divine realization must come. ... Evolution takes place on earth and therefore the earth is the proper field of progress. ... I am concerned with the earth, not with worlds beyond for their own sake; it is a terrestrial realization that I seek and not a flight to distant summits. All other yogas regard this life as an illusion or a passing phase; the supramental yoga alone regards it as a thing created by the Divine for a progressive manifestation and takes the fulfilment of the life and the body for its object."

It goes without saying that a full interpretation of these words is only possible in the context of the Aurobindian teaching. The fundamental message, in the words of the

17 Sri Aurobindo: *Savitri*, p. 153.

Mother, is all the same quite clear: *La Terre, on ne la détruit pas*, the Earth will not be destroyed.¹⁸

Such a conviction contradicts directly most of the scientific knowledge about planet Earth in particular and about the universe in general. It can easily be seen as another instance of “mystic” or New Age imagination, especially at a time that the search for “exoplanets” is in full swing. At the time of writing more than 500 have been discovered, and their number is supposed to be, well, astronomical. Behind this expensive scientific search, and quite useful for its promotion, lingers the curiosity whether there is life elsewhere in the universe. The ancient Greek philosophers already asked the question; Giordano Bruno answered it positively, and so did Fontenelle, in his *Entretiens sur la pluralité des mondes* during the Enlightenment, and the French astronomer Camille Flammarion in the 19th century.

The popular opinion on key enigmas, even the supposedly scientific popular explanations in the media and in most popularizing books, should be taken with a substantial grain of salt. For example, the explanation that our gigantic universe originated in the miraculous explosion of something smaller than an atom – the Big Bang – has now been generally accepted for something like half a century, and most people would be surprised to hear that there are serious scientists who still have doubts about this, while others talk about multiple universes, baby universes, or an all-in-one multiverse. The atom is still commonly depicted as a miniature solar system, a view abandoned by science in 1927. Darwin was the father of the theory of evolution? Jean-Baptiste de Lamarck and others formulated coherent evolutionary theories before him, and Alfred Wallace at the same time as he. The big apes were our direct ancestors?

18 *L'Agenda de Mère*, vol. 12, p. 330.

Paleoanthropology has not yet been able to pinpoint the origin of the real *Homo* species (see e.g. Pascal Picq: *Les origines de l'homme*, and Friedemann Schrenk: *Die Frühzeit des Menschen*, both recent publications). Humanity appeared in Africa? The age of fossils of *Homo sapiens* found in Europe and China increases year by year and puts the "out of Africa" theory in serious doubt. And so on.

Another item on this list is the status of planet Earth and of life on it. Life has not yet been found anywhere except on the Earth, although the countless articles about the *possibility* of life existing on other planets at times turns the possibility into an apparent certainty. "A new age of planetary exploration and exobiology dawned in the seventh decade of the twentieth century," wrote the late Carl Sagan, who built a glamorous career on his much-professed enthusiasm for the subject. "We live in a time of adventure and high intellectual excitement, but also in the midst of an endeavour which promises great practical benefits." He estimated in 1974 that a million civilizations may exist in our Milky Way alone. Given that our galaxy is but one of hundreds of billions of galaxies in the Universe, the number of intelligent alien species would be enormous. "The study of a single instance of extraterrestrial life will deprovincialize biology," wrote Sagan in his best-selling *Cosmos*. "For the first time, the biologists will know what other kinds of life are possible. ... Every star may be a sun to someone. Within a galaxy there are stars and worlds and, it may be, a proliferation of living things and intelligent beings and spacefaring civilizations."

Everyone does not share this enthusiasm. "Those searching for extraterrestrial intelligence have published copiously, in almost total absence of data and in complete absence of any direct data," notes Henry Bauer dryly. But, as mentioned before, the search for exoplanets is on and

many are being detected, thanks to the marvellous orbiting telescopes and other advanced instruments cosmologists have now at their disposal. Yet, the question is whether life will be found on one or some of them. Experts have openly expressed their doubts, so for instance Peter Ward and Donald Brownlee in their *Rare Earth*, Paul Davies in *The Eerie Silence* and *The Goldilocks Enigma*, and Guillermo Gonzalez and Jay Richards in *The Privileged Planet*.

“Of all yet known celestial bodies, Earth is unique in both its physical properties and its proven ability to sustain life,” write Ward and Brownlee. Our planet has “a highly fortuitous set of circumstances that could not be expected to exist commonly on other planets.” Of what kind are these circumstances? For instance Earth has a Moon which is the largest of the moons of all other solar planets, large enough to stabilize Earth’s spin. Earth is protected by Jupiter, which may be called its guardian because, enormous in size, it catches most of the potentially catastrophic debris headed for the Earth. Our solar system is located in the galactic habitable zone, so called because most of the Milky Way and other galaxies is not favourable for life-carrying planets; moreover, Earth’s orbit itself is located in the habitable zone around the Sun – closer would be too hot for life, farther away would be too cold.

A last factor of importance (there are more): our Sun does not seem to be as common as ordinarily supposed, but on the contrary to be a rarity, “not only within the Milky Way but also compared to the majority of other galaxies. It is often said that the Sun is a typical star, but this is entirely untrue. The mere fact that 95% of all stars are less massive than the Sun makes our planetary system quite rare. Besides, approximately two-thirds of solar-type stars in the solar neighbourhood are members of binary or multiple star systems.” (Lewis Dartnell: *Life in the Universe*)

“In the very few places [in the universe] that aren’t in a vacuum, too hot or too cold, we really know of only one: Earth,” concludes astronomer Philip Plait in his book with the spooky title *Death from the Skies! – The Science behind the End of the World*. “I honestly don’t know if we’re alone in the Universe; no one does. ... Maybe, just maybe, we really are alone. In all the galaxy, in all the vast trillions of cubic light years of emptiness, ours is the very first planet to harbour creatures that can ponder their own existence.”

Taking all this into account, the statements of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother about planet Earth, which a few decades ago may have appeared “occult” or “mystic” to many, no longer seem so other-worldly. The scientific debate is on and its conclusion is not yet out to see. If scientific materialism is the only truth, the whole matter is worthy of little consideration, for then everything is anyway a matter of contingency destined to end badly. But if there are other means of knowledge, based on capacities and realms which scientific materialism refuses to recognize in principle, then our Earth, life on it, and its destiny may be unique and look forward to a future evolution which will not be cut short in the near future.

Future positive

The Aurobindian scheme of things is in essence evolutionary. Accepting the gradual physiological development of the life forms on Earth, but as an expression of an increasing consciousness, it asks the pertinent question why *Homo sapiens* would be the ultimate species, for it is clear that the possibilities of nature are not exhausted by the human being. “The animal is a living laboratory in which Nature has, it is said, worked out man. Man himself may well be a thinking and living laboratory in whom and with whose conscious cooperation she wills to work out the superman,

the god.”¹⁹ As the incorporation of the mental consciousness in the scale of evolution led to the formation of *Homo sapiens*, so a higher consciousness, called “supermind” by Sri Aurobindo, is necessary to form the new, higher species in the scale.

The yogic effort of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother consisted in preparing humanity and the Earth for the descent of this higher consciousness. The literature and testimonies they have left behind provide anybody interested with a concrete, detailed idea of that lofty and difficult ambition, for which Sri Aurobindo had to descend voluntarily into death. Six years later, in 1956, the Mother announced the first manifestation of the Supermind in the Earth atmosphere, equivalent to the beginning of a new stage in the terrestrial evolution, of a new world.²⁰

The effects of this manifestation were immediate, for instance in the phenomenon called “the Sixties”: the decade of the New Age movement, the student revolts of ‘68, and the Velvet Revolution of the same year in Prague. There was also the technological acceleration resulting in the global spread of television, the space technology of Sputnik, Apollo 11 and the nuclear rockets, the computer, and an increasing miniaturization of things technological. The desegregation movement in the US gave equal rights to all. The the colonial countries of “the third world” became independent.

The common impulse behind all these phenomena was the need of “unity for the human race by an inner oneness,” without which, according to Sri Aurobindo, the new world would not be possible. For “all mankind may be regarded

19 Sri Aurobindo: *The Life Divine*, p. 4.

20 See talk 8: “Sri Aurobindo’s Descent into Death”.

as a collective being," as "all mankind is one in its nature, physical, vital, emotional, mental and ever has been in spite of all differences of intellectual development ranging from the poverty of the Bushman and negroid to the rich cultures of Asia and Europe, and the whole race has, as the human totality, one destiny which it seeks and increasingly approaches in the cycles of progression and retrogression it describes through the countless millenniums of its history."²¹

The recent decades in the history of humanity must of course be seen in the perspective of "a cycle of progression" which started in ancient Greece and the cultures around the eastern Mediterranean. Christianity played an important role in this cycle, as did the Renaissance, the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution. Then – "war being the father of all things" according to Heraclitus – the great War of the Twentieth Century, in its three parts of World War One and Two, and the Cold War, was the dramatic upheaval that led directly to the unification of the world.

Evolutionary progression seems always to come at what is to our human awareness an enormous cost. Here we may remember "what Arjuna saw" on the battlefield of Kurukshetra: the Divine in all his glory, but also as Time the Devourer.²² Each positive evolutionary movement induces inevitably "an enormous force [of resistance] commensurable with the magnitude of the thing that has to be done. But always these resistances turn out to have assisted by the resistance much more than they have impeded the intention of the great Creatrix and her Mover."²³ Such seems to have been the process throughout the evolution of life on Earth. Even when global catastrophes threatened life with

21 Sri Aurobindo: *The Human Cycle*, p. 66.

22 See talk 4: "What Arjuna Saw: the Dark Side of the Force".

23 Sri Aurobindo: *The Ideal of Human Unity*, p. 311.

total extinction, it not only survived in astonishing ways but gained in the ordeal and made an evolutionary step forward. This happened when our planet almost completely froze over at least twice in its history (once 2.45 billion years ago and a second time between 800 and 600 million years ago), when asteroid impacts or volcanic eruptions turned it into a blazing hell, as well as at the time of the great biological extinctions.

Behind the evolution of our universe and life in it, there is a meaning: the adventure of the recovering of the Godhead which is its origin and its sustaining Principle. Starting from darkest matter, a movement of acceleration and intensification is discernible. "The first obscure material movement of the evolutionary Force is marked by an aeonic graduality; the movement of life-progress proceeds slowly but still with a quicker step, it is concentrated into the figure of millenniums; mind can still further compress the tardy leisureliness of Time and make long paces of the centuries; but when the conscious Spirit intervenes, a supremely concentrated pace of evolutionary swiftness becomes possible."²⁴

This is where we stand now: at the point where the conscious Spirit has become active. And this is why Sri Aurobindo and the Mother too foresaw the inevitable crisis which the action of the Spirit and its repercussions would cause among humans.

No, the world will not end. Yes, the world will change – and is changing at an ever accelerating pace. "What is happening now is something that never happened before, and therefore nobody understands it," said the Mother. "There is like a golden Force which presses on the [material] world, which has no material consistency but nevertheless seems

24 Sri Aurobindo: *The Life Divine*, p. 932.

terribly heavy and which presses on Matter. And the apparent result is as if catastrophes were inevitable. And together with this impression of inevitable catastrophes there are solutions to the situation, events which seem to be utterly miraculous. ... It is no longer like it was: this really is a new world ... It is the descent of the supramental world, which is not something purely imaginary: it is an absolutely material Power but which has no need of material means. A world which wants to incarnate into the [existing material] world.”²⁵

“Mankind has a habit of surviving the worst catastrophes created by its own errors or by the violent turns of Nature and it must be so if there is any meaning in its existence, if its long history and continuous survival is not the accident of a fortuitously self-organizing Chance, which it must be in a purely materialistic view of the nature of the world.” Thus wrote Sri Aurobindo in 1949, in a postscript chapter to his *Ideal of Human Unity*.

*The Iron Age is ended. Only now
The last fierce spasm of the dying past
Shall shake the nations, and when that has passed,
Earth washed of ills shall raise a fairer brow.*

*It comes at last, the day foreseen of old,
What John in Patmos saw, what Shelley dreamed,
Vision and vain imagination deemed,
The City of Delight, the Age of Gold.*²⁶

25 *L'Agenda de Mère*, vol. 3, p. 484.

26 Sri Aurobindo: *Collected Poems*, p. 244.

6

Being Human and the Copernican Principle

Science and Scientism

In the path of the Integral Yoga each person has his or her own way, for the simple reason that in each person the constitutional and incarnational difficulties to become aware of and master vary. Yet the integrality of the Aurobindian Yoga should never be overlooked, however limited and fractional our individual effort still may be. In the attempt at self-perfection based on the combined psychological faculties of the human being – knowledge, devotion or works – each of these faculties can only be neglected at

the peril of gross reduction of the integrality, the condition of the intended divine transformation.

Sri Aurobindo and the Mother have often stressed the need for a clear mind and ever expanding knowledge. Sri Aurobindo writes e.g. in *The Life Divine*: "In any total advance or evolution of the Spirit, not only the intuition, insight, inner sense, the heart's devotion, a deep and direct life-experience of the things of the Spirit have to be developed, but the intellect also must be enlightened and satisfied, our thinking and reflecting mind must be helped to understand, to form a reasoned and systematized idea of the goal, the method, the principle of this highest development and activity of our nature and the truth of all that lies behind it."¹

Science is fundamentally a form of knowledge, it is the mind searching for the Truth behind the workings of Nature. Its importance, combined with the wonders of technology, is evident in the world in which we live. Unfortunately its unprejudiced search for Truth was turned into a dogmatized positivist or materialistic system, for historical reasons which we will see later. The result has been that academic science has divided the integrality of the human experience into two separate spheres: the sphere of the materially perceptible and the sphere of the non-material, at best treated agnostically but more often with supercilious disdain. Science metaphysically dogmatized became Scientism.

The hypothetical gap between science and religion or spirituality turned into a cause of serious tension, for instance during the late Renaissance when Galileo Galilei was put on trial by the Inquisition of the Catholic Church. "The Galileo Affair had a catastrophic effect on the Church,

1 Sri Aurobindo: *The Life Divine*, p. 910.

putting her in discredit for her inability to accept the development of the sciences. Her condemnation of Galileo remains the big mistake which nothing can efface and makes the Church into an enemy of science for ever." (Jacques Arsac)² The nineteenth century hardened the standpoint of Scientism while generally weakening religious faith. The polemical tension between both survives in the present, witness the quarrel between Scientism on the one hand and Creationism or Intelligent Design on the other.

Science is now thought by many to be the only source of true knowledge, which should be clear from the fact that it can prove its affirmations mathematically and experimentally, and that it has conquered the Earth. Yet the first affirmation is contradicted by the many discredited scientific theories left by the wayside, and by the recently gained awareness that scientific systems depend on the temporarily dominant paradigm. The second affirmation, that of science's worldwide triumph, can also be questioned if one realizes how much technology differs from theoretical science, which may lead to the conclusion that the triumph should not be claimed by the theoretical scientist but by the engineer. Although nowadays the two often overlap, science is about abstract knowing, technology about practical making.

Science is also the privileged domain of people with a knack for complicated mathematics and an extensive training in them. This has led to the image of the scientist, more specifically the physicist, as a sort of higher being with an intellect out of the ordinary, who indeed sometimes seeks "to understand the mind of God" (cf. Albert Einstein and Stephen Hawking). The acceptance of such a view would put science and the crucial decisions made by scientists

2 Jacques Arsac: *La science et le sens de la vie*, p. 15.

in our societies beyond the reach of the general public. It would also mean certain defeat for religion and spirituality in any comparison or confrontation with science, for science has the hard arguments at its disposal, while religion and spirituality seem to reason in the clouds or apparently have to resort to wondrous, improbable experiences.

It is, moreover, from their high perch and relying on their mathematical training that some scientists perorate about matters outside their formulas or laboratories, matters about which they know just as much or as little as anybody else. In other words, their scientific training does not substantiate their ideas about psychology, religion or spirituality. Thinking that they are putting down the “mysticism, superstitions and hallucinations” of religion and spirituality, they are in fact depreciating their own search for Truth which, if it exists, is One, approached in whatever way. The West, because of its centuries old Judeo-Christian tradition, is only familiar with religion as a matter of knowledge and prayer, and with a God outside his creation. The scientists and science writers who have any notion of a divine Presence within, and of a possible identification with this Presence, are still exceptions.

Sri Aurobindo’s appreciation of science:

“But, first, it is well that we should recognize the enormous, the indispensable utility of the very brief period of rationalistic Materialism through which humanity has been passing. For that vast field of evidence and experience which now begins to reopen its gates to us, can only be safely entered when the intellect has been severely trained to a clear austerity.”³

“The scientist is man the thinker mastering the forces of material Nature by knowing them. Life and Matter are

3 *Id.*, p. 10.

after all our standing-ground, our lower basis, and to know their processes and their own proper possibilities and the opportunities they give to the human being is part of the knowledge necessary for transcending them.”⁴

“Three things will remain from the labour of the secularist centuries: truth of the physical world and its importance, the scientific method of knowledge – which is to induce Nature and Being to reveal their own way of being and proceeding ... – and last, though very far from least, the truth and importance of the earth life and the human endeavour, its evolutionary meaning.”⁵

La nuova scienza

As mentioned in passing above, an integral and usually overlooked factor in the thinking of modern science is its Judeo-Christian background. The science of the so-called Hellenistic period in Greece and Alexandria had reached a high level of development with figures of genius like Archimedes, Eratosthenes, Aristarchus of Samos, Hipparchus and Ptolemy. Marvin Minsky regrets the course history has taken, for he is of the opinion that science could now already have been much more advanced “if its progress had not succumbed to the spread of monotheistic religions. As early as 250 BC, Archimedes was well on the way toward modern physics and calculus. So, in an alternate version of history (in which the pursuits of science did not decline), just a few more centuries could have allowed the likes of Newton, Maxwell, Gauss, and Pasteur to anticipate our present state of knowledge about physics, mathematics, and biology.”⁶

4 Sri Aurobindo: *The Human Cycle*, p. 78.

5 Sri Aurobindo: *Essays in Philosophy and Yoga*, p. 195.

6 In John Brockman (ed.): *What Are You Optimistic About?* p. 195.

Out of the originally quite diverse Christian movement grew a structured and authoritarian Catholic Church which became, from about 400 CE, the official religion of the Roman Empire. This organization, because of its hierarchical structure and its faith, survived the collapse of the Empire and became the dominant institution in the Middle Ages. Its holy book, the *Bible*, was supposed to be the Word of God and therefore indubitable truth, together with its interpretations by the Church Fathers. What remained of the former Greek and Roman culture was used as a source of reference, integrated to a certain degree into the belief system of the Church. Any culture has its myths, legends and explanations which support and give meaning to its life. The myths and legends of the *Old* and *New Testament* became the mental baggage and source of reference of Western thought, which is still heavily influenced by them even today.

However, for the Catholic Church too, as for all life and its manifestations on Earth, the time arrived that its hierarchical structure and authority began to falter. This period of questioning, roughly from the 14th to the 17th century, we call the Renaissance, synonymous with the urge of re-discovery and exploration in matters intellectual and artistic as well as physical. New continents on the globe were discovered, and so were new realms of the mind. What existed on Earth was so much more, and apparently equally worthy and humane, than the limited world which until then had been thought the only civilized one. A new spirit of astonishment, exaltation and daring led to the *nuova scienza*, a new science eagerly connecting with the forgotten or forbidden knowledge of the ancients, but also with previously discarded occult practices and wisdom traditions.

The stuff of ancient Hebrew tribes and of the alleged reminiscences about Christ and primitive Christianity was

now put to the test of reason and found for the most part to be invention, superstition, fabulation, and sometimes outright errors or lies. Intellectuals invested themselves with the right of scepticism and dared to exert it publicly and in their writings, even at the risk of their possessions, their career, or their lives. The Enlightenment was a period of heroism, fully aware that the negation of an old intellectual and religious paradigm and the construction of a new one would result in revolt as the precondition of a new world. Few people of the present day realize how much they owe to the activist thinkers of centuries not that long past.

It was against this 17th century background that the scientific revolution took place. The principles then formulated by Galileo, Kepler, Descartes, Newton, and a host of less well-known “natural philosophers,” are still the pillars supporting positivist or materialistic science today. All can be found, worded in various ways, in the works of Galileo⁷, the Catholic scientist to whom they were the keys to decipher the book of Nature.

1. *Science must be about matter.*

This tenet is nowadays so self-evident that one hardly finds it mentioned any more in writings on science. Yet at the time it was a hard-won rule which created a split between things material and non-material. Then the prevalent view was still that of the Chain of Being, the hierarchical ladder of (in ascending order) matter, the life force, mental consciousness, and the spirit. The new, materialistic statement directly implicated the definition and interpretation of Reality, and therefore of God. It was one of the main causes in the attitude of the Church towards the “new science” of which Galileo was seen as the harbinger and figurehead. The sole

⁷ It is a strange fact that, while all scientists are normally referred to by their last name, Galileo Galilei is always mentioned by his first name.

validation of matter or, in other words, of that which could be perceived by the senses, would gradually lead to distrust and doubt of the non-material, of religion (more specifically Catholic authoritarianism), and ultimately of God. The principle of the sole validity of matter is still the cause of widespread dispute among philosophers, theologians, and people living the spiritual life.

2. *Science has no grasp of wholes, but reduces all things to parts consisting of smaller parts consisting of still smaller parts.*

This is called *reductionism*. The reason of its central utility in science is, again, that science is an activity of the mind, and that the mind cannot handle wholes. Sri Aurobindo has explained this aspect of the mind quite clearly on many occasions. Its way of functioning is analytic or dividing (*i.e.* reductionist) because “it can only know by separation and distinction, and has at the most a vague and secondary apprehension of unity and infinity – for though it can synthesize its divisions, it cannot arrive at a true totality.”⁸ Nonetheless the biologist Richard Lewontin warns: “Whatever the faults of reductionism, we have accomplished a great deal by employing reductionism as a methodological strategy.” It is, after all, reductionist science that has made our modern world. Yet the increasing awareness that we need much more comprehensive [*i.e.* holistic] and much less reductionist understanding may be a sign of “a new sort of science that is being forged at the moment.”

3. *All changes in matter are brought about by external forces.*

This excludes any kind of internal movement or life. The history of the formulation of the laws of motion is fascinating, if only because of the difficulties Galileo and his predecessors had to reckon with. The principle of the external forces is closely connected with the principle of the exclusivity of matter. Here again a drastic cut is made

8 Sri Aurobindo: *The Life Divine*, p. 133.

between matter and everything else. The reason seems to be the physiological restrictions of the evolutionary human being, who can only measure things perceived by the senses. The phenomena of life are obvious but for the most part indefinable, and this goes still more for the phenomena of the mind and the spirit. The result will be that living beings are studied as complex compounds of material elements, and that the mind will be declared a function of a material brain. Any time scientific materialists tackle matters of the spirit with the concepts and instruments of their science, they venture beyond their ken and produce for the most part nonsense.

4. *Science can only work with the "primary" qualities of things: extension, motion, and mass. "Secondary" qualities, like colour, scent or taste, are effects of the primary qualities.*

This principle illustrates clearly how the scientific method – by which is mostly understood the method of physics – reduces the world to a kind of abstract rendition of its real appearance, a black-and-white version of the fantastic diversity it really shows. Here again a reduction is made to what is measurable and quantifiable, in other words usable in the composition of mathematical formulae.

5. *The language of science is mathematics, based on measurement.*

According to this principle what cannot be measured cannot be known exactly. However, each measurement is the application of a theoretical mindset, as is the registration of each fact. Consequently, the way Reality is seen by scientific materialism is the outcome of a complex prejudice originated within the framework of a scientific theory – a temporarily accepted consensus now called "paradigm." Where once (around the year 1900) the science of physics was assumed to be complete, without anything basically new to be expected, the growing awareness of the relative

value of any theory of physics has changed that outlook completely, and led to the realization that the science of tomorrow may be quite different from the science of today.

6. *In science all guesses, hypotheses or theories have to be tested as to their truth and validity.*

This was the principle of the unconditional necessity of *the experiment* which has remained and will remain forever valid. The need of the experiment was the direct consequence of the doubt of any affirmations by any authority, until the Renaissance so docilely accepted in all places of learning and teaching. The "natural philosopher" (as Isaac Newton still called himself) became an experimenter who communicated the results of his findings to other experimenters; they, in their turn, could then examine and try to repeat them. The experiment is at the heart of the "scientific method." It was the experiment, supported by novel scientific instruments, that opened a whole new world first in cosmology and physics, then in biology.

The intellectual adventure of the Renaissance evolving into the Enlightenment, also called "the Age of Reason," is one of the great episodes in the history of a part of humanity, Western Europe, which would become of importance to the whole of it. It was a struggle to bring life in phase with reality, more particularly material reality, this against a religious worldview which disdained life on Earth and supported its dogmatic affirmations with a literature from bygone times, outmoded despite being declared the eternal Word of God. It seems rather paradoxical that the *Bible* throughout the history of Christianity remained intertwined with the "heathen" literature and philosophy of the ancient Greeks and Romans. The Renaissance brought these classical treasures to the fore again, and the Enlightenment would rely on them as the basis for its humanistic outlook on life.

The radical materialism of some Enlightenment philosophers, added to the general attitude of pragmatism and scepticism – the right to question anything now declared to be the birthright of any human – led inevitably to the decline of the angry and vengeful God of the Hebrews, whom Christ's Father of Love had not succeeded in replacing. Moreover, experts now investigated the text of the *Bible* with the same objectivity as they examined any other text, and found numerous surprisingly human features in the "Word of God." This, and the increasing resistance against the very human and corrupt mammoth institution that was the Catholic Church, led in the 19th century to "God's funeral," the title of a book by A.N. Wilson in which he writes: "It seemed as if there were no good arguments left for religion. If, either for emotional reasons or because you believed in religion as a socially conservative cement, you wished to preserve the forms, you could only do so at the expense of the intellect."⁹

In the present era of "postmodern" confusion, according to the Aurobindian view not the symptom of decadence but the sign of transition and rebirth, most of these problems and unresolved tensions between science, religion and spirituality remain not only alive, they also spread, carried by the necessity of scientific education or training, throughout our technological world. In this situation the words of George Tyrell are worth remembering: "One has to pass through atheism to faith; the old God must be pulverized and forgotten before the new can reveal himself to us."¹⁰

"Knocking Man off his pedestal"

In 1543 Nicolaus Copernicus, in his *Revolutionibus de Orbium Coelestium* published when on his deathbed,

9 A.N. Wilson: *God's Funeral*, p. 441.

10 *Id.*, p. 461.

showed mathematically that the Earth orbiting around the Sun was a more correct proposition than the Sun orbiting around the Earth. As at that time the general belief was that the Earth was the centre of the cosmos, a belief that was an article of faith, Copernicus' demonstration came as a severe shock, for if it proved to be true Earth would lose its privileged position in God's creation, of which the Human would no longer be the king.

Especially the Catholic Church, appointed custodian by Jesus Christ of everything true, reacted vehemently to defend verities contained in the books of the *Ancient Testament*. Did one not read there: "On that day when the Lord delivered the Amorites into the hands of Israel, Joshua spoke with the Lord, and he said in the presence of Israel: 'Stand Still, O Sun, over Gideon, and Moon, you also, over the Valley of Aijalon.' And the Sun stood still and the Moon halted, till the people had vengeance on their enemies." Was this not sufficient proof for all believers that it was the Sun that was moving, not the Earth? And could not anybody see this on any day with his own eyes?

Nevertheless, the Aristotelian and Ptolemaic system had to make place for the Copernican, but only after much conflict and confrontation, the best-known episode of which is Galileo's trial and condemnation by the Inquisition. In the long run science triumphed over superstition, something Scientism vividly remembers and keeps reminding humanity of. For what it calls "the Copernican Principle" means that, as in nature there are no values, everything consists of the same elementary matter and nothing is more or less, higher or lower than anything else. For this reason the Copernican Principle is also called "the Principle of Mediocrity."

In a previous talk¹¹ we have already wondered about the strange pleasure some positivist scientists seem to find

11 See talk 5, "2012 and 1956: Doomsday?"

in denigrating all values and targeting especially humanity for degradation. To quote one example among innumerable ones: the biologist Lynn Margulis writes about “the tenacious illusion of special dispensation” which humanity imagines it possesses, but which “belies its true status as upright mammalian weeds.” “Earth is going to die ... the Sun is going to die ... the Universe is going to die ...” is in our contemporary science literature an often repeated litany of perdition. That this is going to happen in billions of years, while the very first life-forms on Earth are thought to have appeared 3.8 billion years ago, and *Homo sapiens* only 2 million years ago, is not taken into account. Such pronouncements do indeed substantiate the truth of the Mother’s saying: “Materialism is the gospel of death.” What is the fun a certain breed of scientists may find in divulging a conviction meant to belittle and to hurt, while they should be aware that Science is a matter of process which has no room for metaphysical conclusions?

The *New Scientist* of 20 December 2008 examined the question: “Who did most to knock man off his pedestal?” Was it the tandem Copernicus-Galileo who removed us from the centre of the universe? Or was it the tandem Linnaeus-Darwin who put an end to the illusion that humans are created in the image of God and placed them among the animals? But then there is also the question: what *is* a human being, and what kind of human being is Science talking about?

The Copernican theory

Copernicus’ world and reasoning were much more complex and varied than generally assumed. He was after all a man of the Renaissance trying to make sense of the old and new cultural influences crisscrossing through his time. For the central position of the Sun, for instance, he argued in the following way: “In the middle of everything stands

the Sun. For in this most beautiful temple who could place this lamp in any other better place than one from which it can illuminate all other things at the same time? This Sun some people call appropriately the light of the World, others its Soul or Ruler. [Hermes] Trismegistos calls it the Visible God, Sophocles' Electra calls it the All-Seeing. Thus the Sun, sitting on its Royal Throne, guides the revolving family of the stars."¹² The mentality of Nicolaus Copernicus seems to have been rather different from the gross materialistic evaluation of nature which uses his name in the formulation of the Copernican Principle.

What is more, Copernicus, as often thought, did not reduce the Ptolemaic number of circles required to make the solar system go round, he *increased* it from forty to forty-eight, as painstakingly counted by Arthur Koestler in *Sleepwalkers*. And Copernicus stuck to the inviolability of the circle, since classical times the paragon of heavenly perfection and the reason why Copernicus still needed so many cycles and epicycles to make his model fit the data of observation. Therefore, "when we talk today about 'the Copernican system' we usually mean a system of the universe quite different from that described in Copernicus' *De revolutionibus* ... It should be more properly be called 'Keplerian' or at least 'Keplero-Copernican' ... It has been well said that the significance of Copernicus lay not so much in the system he propounded as in the fact that the system he did propound would ignite the great revolution in physics that we associate with the names of Galileo, Johannes Kepler, and Isaac Newton. The so-called Copernican revolution was really a later revolution of Galileo, Kepler, and Newton."¹³ In fact, Galileo's "spyglass" or "optick tube" did more for the acceptance of the heliocentric system than Copernicus' famous book.

12 Derek Gjertsen: *Science and Philosophy*, p. 155.

13 J. Bernard Cohen: *The Birth of a New Physics*, pp. 25 and 52.

It may therefore be concluded that the Copernican Principle or the Principle of Mediocrity could never have been devised by Copernicus himself nor by one of his contemporaries. It is a weapon in the arsenal of Scientism forged during the decline of Western religion and the ascendancy of positivist science. Bertrand Russell, formerly the mouthpiece of anti-religious rationalism, defined the Principle as follows: "The earth is one of the smaller planets of a not particularly important star, a very minor portion of the Milky Way which is one of a very large number of galaxies; and altogether the idea that we who crawl about on this little planet are really the centre of the universe is one which I don't think would occur to anybody except us."¹⁴ Here Russell was speaking about a universe with a very large number of galaxies of which Copernicus could not have had an idea – and Russell himself would probably wonder at the cosmological marvels and riddles that have been discovered since he made his voice heard.

The picture of the cosmos has changed in amazing ways since Aristotle, then Ptolemy, then Copernicus, Galileo and Newton, then Einstein, and it is changing today with the powerful telescopes on and above earth. Another question altogether is whether all this has taken the human being out of the centre of the universe. If the humans were only material things on planet earth, one could say yes. But as they are mental and spiritual beings, they will always perceive "the world," including its picture as developed by Science, from the centre that they are themselves.

The naked ape

Was it Charles Darwin, more than Nicolaus Copernicus, who knocked man from his pedestal? In the public mind nowadays Charles Darwin is the giant who thought

14 *Russell on Religion*, p. 93.

out the theory of evolution and thereby initiated a radical shift in the conception humans had of themselves. This, like so much else in popular science, is a misconception. It might be said that Darwin was the midwife who, in 1859, presented the theory of evolution to the world, or that he was the cause that all of a sudden the evolution theory became the focus of attention and consternation. For how to admit that among our ancestors and those of Christ there had been a monkey?

In the first half of the 19th century theories of evolution were in the air. What was more, the great French biologist Jean-Baptiste de Lamarck had formulated one that was fully worked out and coherent, although not fully justified – which was not possible with the means at the disposal of biologists at the time (and even now). Secondly, Darwin's own theory was far from fully justified scientifically. He never touched on the origin of species, even though so proclaiming in the title of *On the Origin of Species*, could only sketch the formation of species by natural selection, and had not a clue about the inheritance of the natural characteristics in animals, now called genetics.

Darwin was also a recluse who did not undertake any long-distance travels after his adventurous five-year voyage on the *Beagle*. The ones who did campaign to spread his ideas were his friends and admirers, most of them ardent freethinkers with T.H. Huxley as their ringmaster. They enjoyed shocking the prim moralistic Victorian society of their time with the new message: that all living beings consisted of nothing but matter, should be studied in the way physics studied material things, and that in the course of the evolution everything had always developed from a previous material something, like the primates from the monkeys and consequently the humans from the primates. The human became nothing but an animal, an evolved

“naked ape” living in a society which was a “human zoo” (titles of books by Desmond Morris).

The human media repeat day by day how animal-like humans are, and those animalized humans, on an average, seem to care little about it. If scientists say so, it must be true. Besides, who still cares about values, metaphysics, or – God forbid! – “mysticism”? The late Stephen Jay Gould, a Harvard biologist and science writer of world-fame, was one of the chief propagators of the idea that human beings were a fluke, not an inevitable outcome of increasing mammal intelligence. He wrote for instance that, if *Pikaia* had not survived, we would not have been here. *Pikaia*, an animal from the Cambrian era, was a soft-bodied darting swimmer, now thought to be the ultimate grandparent of all vertebrate animals. But if any other strategic link in the evolutionary chain had not been there before or after *Pikaia*, we would not have been here either!

Gould: “We are here because an odd group of fishes had a peculiar fin anatomy that could transform into legs for terrestrial creatures; because the earth never froze entirely during an ice age¹⁵; because a small and tenuous species [*Homo sapiens*], arising in Africa a quarter of a million years ago, has managed, so far, to survive by hook and by crook. We may yearn for a ‘higher’ answer – but none exists.” And Richard Dawkins, whose name is now often associated in importance with the name of Darwin, wrote in *The Selfish Gene*: “The argument of this book is that we, and all other animals, are machines created by our genes. ... We are all survival machines for the same kind of replicator – molecules called DNA.”

15 At the time Gould wrote these words, it was not yet known that the earth had frozen over (“snowball earth”) at least two times, 2.5 billion and 800 to 600 million years ago.

It is now increasingly recognized that the past of the terrestrial evolution has been a concatenation of huge catastrophes and extinctions, but also that after each of those catastrophes life made a step forward, as if the ordeal had been a precondition for its growth. "The evolution of consciousness and knowledge cannot be accounted for unless there is already a concealed consciousness in things with its inherent and native powers emerging little by little," wrote Sri Aurobindo already in *The Life Divine*. "Further, the facts of animal life and the operations of the emergent mind in life impose on us the conclusion that there is in this concealed consciousness an underlying Knowledge or power of knowledge which by the necessity of the life-contacts with the environment comes to the surface."¹⁶ To be able to accept such a conclusion, however, one must have an open, plastic mind, not a mind brainwashed by authority, professional (de)formation or historical formulation of any kind, even scientific. For if the search for knowledge and truth is ineradicable from the human mind, its findings have without exception been proven to be partial or provisional.

The second law of thermodynamics

A third, less often noted argument in the negative view propagated by Scientism is the second law of thermodynamics, the study of the transformations of energy. The first law of thermodynamics is the law of conservation of energy. Its second law is the law of increase of entropy or molecular disorder, which states that, over time, closed systems tend toward greater states of disorder. This increase in entropy must, in the opinion of positivist science, inevitably lead to universal degradation.

"The secrets of evolution," which are the secrets of life, "are time and death," wrote Carl Sagan. (Once again we

16 Sri Aurobindo: *The Life Divine*, p. 635.

are reminded of the Mother's saying that materialism is the gospel of death.) The Earth, the Sun, our galaxy, the billions of galaxies of our universe: all that is not living but dying. "Indeed, life is about half over. Our estimates are that the first living organisms appeared on earth in the order of 3 to 4 billion years ago, and we know from stellar evolution that our Sun will expand and burn up the Earth in another 3 to 4 billion years, putting an end to everything," writes Richard Lewontin. George Smoot is even more explicit: "*Coraggio, domani sará peggio!* (Be courageous, tomorrow will be worse!) ... The long-term future is bleak: entropy will continue to increase ... Every physical process in the universe follows the second law of thermodynamics ... We face a continuous downward spiral of no return." Entropy is unforgiving. "Many scientists look worried these days ... To become even a guarded optimist, you have to think hard."¹⁷ (William Calvin)

However, the consequences of the second law are valid and verifiable only in case of the evolution of a system that is energetically isolated, in other words: closed. Biological systems are not closed. And is the universe a closed system? ... "When the laws of thermodynamics are applied to living organisms there seems to be a problem," writes Paul Davies. "One of the basic properties of life is its high degree of order, so when an organism develops or reproduces, the order increases. This is the opposite of the second law's bidding. The growth of an embryo, the formation of a DNA molecule, the appearance of a new species and the increasing elaboration of the biosphere as a whole are all examples of an increase of order and a decrease of entropy."¹⁸ "The famous law of increase of entropy describes the world as

17 The last quotes are from a collection of short essays by scientists, edited by John Brockman: *What Are You Optimistic About?*

18 Paul Davies: *The Origin of Life*, p. 28.

evolving from order to disorder; still, biological or social evolution shows us the complex emerging from the simple. How is this possible? How can structure arise from disorder? ... There is an obvious contradiction between the static view of dynamics and the evolutionary paradigm of thermodynamics.”¹⁹ (Ilya Prigogine)

In one of his first though least known books, *Quantum Questions*, Ken Wilber examines the metaphysics of the 20th century physicists, quoting some of them extensively. His conclusion is clear and convincing. The physicists who worked out the two great revolutions of relativity and quantum mechanics – Einstein, Bohr, Heisenberg, Schrödinger, Eddington, and others – were also profound philosophers and even, Wilber writes, mystics. The reason was that they felt themselves confronted with the essence of things, with Reality as such and with everything Reality may stand for. For some three decades they were rethinking the foundations of existence, and although their vantage point was that of scientific materialism, they were capable of expanding their horizon sufficiently to encompass the big questions within it, even those beyond Judeo-Christianity.

The great theoretical physicists of the following generation – Dirac, Feynman, Weinberg, Hawking – were very differently focused (at least most of them). To them the big questions led to nothing but confrontational and useless verbiage; what counted was to solve the mathematical problems posed by the accepted paradigms. The rest one could speculate or joke about, but it could only be meaningfully approached after the bases of physics (fundamentally the Grand Unified Theory) would be found. As they saw it, everything had come about by the universal laws and constants, obeying Chance. The following are two examples of

19 Ilya Prigogine and Isabelle Stengers: *Order out of Chaos*, p. xxix.

this mentality. Steven Weinberg: "The more the universe seems comprehensible, the more it also seems pointless. ... The effect to understand the universe is one of the very few things that lifts human life a little above the level of farce, and gives it some of the grace of tragedy."²⁰ Peter Atkins: "We are the children of chaos, and the deep structure of change is decay. At root there is only corruption and the unstemmable tide of chaos. Gone is purpose; all that is left is direction. This is the bleakness we have to accept as we peer deeply and dispassionately into the heart of the Universe."²¹

The biologists, eager to insert the various branches of their science within the framework of physics, have adopted this view with a vengeance. "If the human accepts this message of science [actually of Scientism] in its full meaning, then he must wake up from his dream lasting thousands of years to discover his total solitude, his radical foreignness. He knows now that, like a Gypsy, his place is in the margin of the universe where he has to live – in a universe deaf to his music, indifferent to his hopes as it is to his sufferings and crimes."²² This is a paragraph from Jacques Monod's famous *Chance and Necessity*, called "a book of desperate metaphysics."

The way scientists like Stephen Hawking have become superstars, whose slightest pronouncements are regurgitated by the media *ad nauseam*, is pathetic. About Hawking's latest bestseller, *The Grand Design*, one finds in *Scientific American* of November 2010: "Physics, the book states, can now explain where the universe came from and why the laws of nature are what they are. The universe arose 'from

20 Steven Weinberg: *The First Three Minutes*, p. 155.

21 In Richard Dawkins: *Unweaving the Rainbow*, p. xi.

22 Jacques Monod: *Le hasard et la nécessité*, p. 216.

nothing' courtesy of the force of gravity, and the laws of nature are an accident of the particular slice of universe we happen to inhabit. 'God may exist', Hawking told Larry King, adding, 'but science can explain the universe without the need for a creator.'"

Paul Davies has put it all together: "There is a sizeable group of scientists who ... wish to diminish or even besmirch human significance, and with it the significance of human qualities such as intelligence and understanding. For these scientists any suggestion of a teleological trend or progressive evolution towards consciousness, or even towards greater complexity, is anathema. Their arguments, however, also carry barely concealed overtones of an ideological agenda [Scientism]. In this respect they are little different from those who have decided in advance on this or that religious interpretation of nature, and then shoehorn the scientific facts to fit their preconceived beliefs. Meanwhile, it has to be admitted, most scientists stick with something like position A [the absurd universe] and get on with their work, leaving the big questions to philosophers and priests."²³

Two notes in the margin

In conclusion of this section, the following notes may throw a special light on its contents.

What was the real centre of the universe?

In his classic work *The Great Chain of Being*, Arthur Lovejoy has the following remark: "The geocentric cosmography served rather for man's humiliation than for his exaltation, and Copernicanism was opposed partly on the ground that it assigned too dignified and lofty a position

23 Paul Davies: *The Goldilocks Enigma*, p. 303.

to his dwelling-place ... The centre of the world was not a place of honour; it was rather the place farthest removed from the Empyrean, the bottom of the creation, to which its dregs and baser elements sank. The actual centre, indeed, was Hell; in the spatial sense the medieval world was literally diabolocentric." Though surprising, this is logical because hell, the abyss or bottomless pit, was always felt to be located *below* the earthly life. And Lovejoy quotes John Wilkins, who wrote in 1640 about "the vileness of our earth, because it consists of a more sordid and base matter than any other part of the world; and therefore must be situated in the centre, which is the worst place, and at the greatest distance from those purer incorruptible bodies, the heavens."²⁴

Galileo Galilei seems at one time to have been of the same opinion, if only for matters of expediency. "Galileo circulated *La Bilancetta* in manuscript form and it became a success. It established him as a mathematician to be reckoned with. The academic establishment welcomed him with open arms, and asked him to apply his mathematical ability to what was to them a far more important problem: the calculation of the exact location and dimensions of Hell, as described in Dante's *Inferno*. Galileo took his assigned task seriously ... Over the course of two lectures to the Florentine Academy he used mathematical arguments to demonstrate that Hell must have a shape like a cone, with the point at the centre of the earth and the circular boundary of the surface passing through Jerusalem. ... His argument convinced the aristocratic audience, and he was rewarded with a lectureship in mathematics at the University of Pisa, where he soon realized that he had got the mathematics of Hell badly wrong." (Len Fisher)²⁵

24 Arthur Lovejoy: *The Great Chain of Being*, pp. 101-02.

25 Len Fisher: *Weighing the Soul – The Evolution of Scientific Beliefs*, p. 94.

Earth special

As we have seen, it is the main tenet of the Copernican Principle that there is nothing special or privileged about our location in the universe. The spiritual view of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother says exactly the opposite, as has been considered in another talk.²⁶ In the present context the following quotations must suffice.

The Mother: “In the immensity of the astronomical skies, earth is a thing absolutely without interest and without importance, but from the occult and spiritual point of view, earth is the concentrated symbol of the universe. ... For the convenience and necessity of the work, the whole universe has been concentrated and condensed symbolically in a grain of sand which is called the earth. And therefore it is the symbol of all: all that is to be changed, all that is to be transformed, all that is to be converted is here. This means that if one concentrates on this work and does it here, all the rest will follow automatically.”²⁷

Sri Aurobindo: “Earth is the foundation and all the worlds are on the earth and to imagine a clean-cut or irrec-
oncilable difference between them is ignorance; here and not elsewhere, not by going to some other world, the divine realization must come.”

“Evolution takes place on earth and therefore the earth is the proper field for progress.”²⁸

The Mother’s strong statement speaks volumes: *La terre, on ne la détruit pas !* – the Earth will not be destroyed!

26 See talk 5, “2012 and 1956: Doomsday?”

27 The Mother: *Entretiens 1953*, 23 September.

28 Sri Aurobindo: *Letters on Yoga*, pp. 178 and 111.

What is a human being?

Scientific materialism reduced the human being to a complex chance agglomeration of material elements, emerging as forms in a coincidental evolution. The image it found pleasure in destroying in the Western mind was that of an original human being given form by a Creator in his own image from the dust of the Earth. This is one of the numerous mythical stories about the origin of man. In this case the image after which he was made must have been that of an anthropomorphic God, in other words a God himself made in the image of man!

Still there is a truth behind this myth.²⁹ When writing about the four *varnas* – *brahmins*, *kshatriyas*, *vaishyas*, and *shudras* – Sri Aurobindo mentioned the *Purushasukta* of the *Vedas* “where the four orders are described as having sprung from the body of the creative Deity, from his head, arms, thighs and feet.” To us, he comments, this is merely a poetical image, but to the seers among the ancient forefathers it was “a revelative symbol of the unrevealed ... To them this symbol of the Creator’s body was more than an image, it expressed a divine reality. Human society was for them an attempt to express in life the cosmic Purusha ... Man and the cosmos are both of them symbols and expression of the same hidden reality.”³⁰

What Sri Aurobindo calls here “the cosmic Purusha” was also known in various ancient occult traditions. Gnosticism knew an Anthropos, Protanthropos, Adam or Adamas. The Kabbalah knew Adam Kadmon, the Primal or Primordial Man, sometimes also called the High Man or the Heavenly Man. Whatever the names given, all could be considered to be the same divine archetype from whose

29 See talk 1: “Adam Kadmon and the Evolution”.

30 Sri Aurobindo: *The Human Cycle*, pp. 9-10.

supernatural body the manifestation, the macrocosm, continuously came forth, as well as the human being in his structural complexity, the microcosm. It is because of the existence of this archetype that life in the evolution has gradually taken on the shape which, for the time being, culminates in the human body. Far from being a gratuitous outgrowth somewhere in the universe, the evolution is a process of Consciousness and has an aim, directed or projected by the cosmic Purusha. This Sri Aurobindo called the Supramental Being. Everything in existence is supported by it, guided by it, and will ultimately be fulfilled by it.

According to Sri Aurobindo the human is “the mental being” who appeared on earth at a certain moment in its evolution. In the popular mind man, as Darwin said, is still a descendant of the ape, but today paleoanthropology could neither tell you which ape nor when the event took place. Sri Aurobindo had already written in the *Arya*: “With regard to man especially there is still an enormous uncertainty as to how he, so like and yet so different from the other sons of Nature, came into existence.”³¹ One finds this now confirmed in some of the most recent publications by experts in this matter, e.g. Friedemann Schrenk in *Die Frühzeit des Menschen* [the early times of the human being], and Pascal Picq in *Les origines de l’homme* [the origins of the human being]. Schrenk writes: “The origin of the species *Homo* is one of the most controversial problems in paleoanthropology, despite or because of all the new [fossil] finds.” And Picq: “The human does not descend from the chimpanzee or the bonobo, nor the other way around. If we share that many common characteristics, it is because they have been transmitted to us by a common ancestor who lived in Africa some 7 million years ago.” That ancestor remains unknown.

31 *Arya*, vol. V, p. 506.

Most important in this context is the Aurobindian view of what one might call “the double movement” in evolution. The manifestation is the result of a plunge by the Divine into his contrary, thereby creating the glorious scale of the worlds, from the highest expressions of the divine Consciousness to the lowest, those of the Inconscient. Thus was established “the Chain of Being:” in descending order spirit, mind, the life forces, and matter. In its urge to regain the divine Origin, the evolution is the slow re-conquest of the original and central Consciousness, ascending the existing scale step by step. The downward movement Sri Aurobindo has called “involution” and the upward movement “evolution.” To accede to a new, higher step in the evolution a double movement is needed: the inner urge on the existing level, obeying the evolutionary aim of re-conquest, and an answer from the corresponding higher step in the involution. What is here summarized in an abstract way means that, in order to realize the urge in Nature to exceed the level of the primates, a response from the worlds of the mind was needed, and not only an answer but a participation, an incarnation of the mental life in the life of the primates. The human is that being that has in him the mental characteristics from the worlds of the mind incarnated in the material unfolding of the terrestrial evolution.

Human beings are the sons and daughters of Mother Earth. As such they carry in them the evolutionary gradations of their formation – matter, the life forces, mind. Because these evolutionary gradations correspond to the cosmic gradations, the human being is rightly called a “microcosm.” The gradations are concretely expressed in what yogic experience has called the “chakras,” lined up in the subtle body along the backbone. Through the chakras, the human being is tuned to the universal forces, even though unaware of it. “All the time the universal forces are pouring into him without his knowing it. He is aware only of

thoughts, feelings, etc., that rise to the surface and these he takes for his own. Really they come from outside in mind waves, vital waves, waves of feeling and sensation, etc., which take particular form in him and rise to the surface after they have got inside.”³² (Sri Aurobindo)

So what is a human being? Present-day scientific materialism assures us that “there is no reason to single out the human line [in the evolution] as special, except for our chauvinistic interest in it. ... There is no way in which we can claim to be ‘better’ than Aegytopithecus [an early monkey] or the Miocene apes, only different. They were well adapted to the world in which they lived, and we are well suited to the world in which we live.”³³ (Mary and John Gribbin)

The great Persian mystical poet, Rumi, saw the human otherwise – but that was still in what the West calls its “Dark Ages:”

*First man appeared in the class of inorganic things,
Next he passed therefrom into that of plants.
For ages he lived as one of the plants,
Remembering naught of his inorganic state so different;
And when he passed from the vegetative to the animal state
He had no remembrance of his state as a plant ...
Again, the great Creator, as you know,
Drew man out of the animal into the human state.
Thus man passed from one order of nature to another,
Till he became wise and knowing and strong as he is now.
Of his first souls he has now no remembrance,
And he will be again changed from his present soul ...*³⁴

32 Sri Aurobindo: *Letters on Yoga*, p. 313.

33 Mary and John Gribbin: *Being Human*, p. 119.

34 Translation E.H. Winfield, 1898.

In the Western "Age of Reason," Alexander Pope wrote in his famous *Essay on Man* (1733):

*He hangs between; in doubt to act or rest;
In doubt to deem himself a god, or beast ...
Created half to rise, and half to fall;
Great lord of all things, yet a prey of all;
Sole judge of truth, in endless error hurl'd;
The glory, jest, and riddle of the world!*

In the spiritual view, now as well as in the past, the human being is an incarnated soul, in other words the Divine incarnated to fulfil His purposes on Earth. This has always been sensed and even concretely experienced by people in all climes called seers, great souls, yogis or mystics, even when their mentality was restricted by the knowledge and thought patterns proper to their ages. Now the times seem to have ripened and may bear fruit in the realization by mature souls of their presence in this material world, transformed by a higher Consciousness. The "anthropocentric illusion" will then be changed into a divine Reality. Which is why Sri Aurobindo had Narad say to Savitri's royal father:

*Earth is the chosen place of mightiest souls;
Earth is the heroic spirit's battlefield ...
Thy servitudes on earth are greater, king,
Than all the glorious liberties of heaven.*³⁵

"This alone [the realization of the Divine] is man's real business in the world and the justification of his existence, without which he would be only an insect crawling among other ephemeral insects on a speck of surface mud and water which has managed to form itself amid the appalling immensities of the physical universe."³⁶

35 Sri Aurobindo: *Savitri*, p. 686.

36 Sri Aurobindo: *The Life Divine*, p. 48.

7

*Bridges across the Afterlife*¹

In 1961 the Mother spoke in a private conversation about a certain activity of hers, began when she was in her early twenties and continued since then without interruption. "It must be part of the work for which I have come on the Earth. For even before meeting Théon [her temporary teacher in occultism and the Kabbalah], before having any knowledge, I had experiences during the night, experiences of certain activities during the night in which I looked after people who were leaving their body. And I

¹ This talk was given in Savitri Bhavan at Auroville, on 18 November 2010, in commemoration of the Mother's passing on 17 November 1973.

did that with a knowledge! – although I did not know anything, and neither did I try to know anything, or whatever. I knew exactly what had to be done, and I did it. I was about twenty at the time. ...

“As soon as I discovered the teaching of Théon – even before I met him in person – as soon as I read him and came to understand all kinds of things which I did not know before, I started working quite systematically. Every night at the same time I performed a work which consisted in constructing, between the purely terrestrial atmosphere and the psychic atmosphere, *a sort of protective pathways through the vital*, so that the people [who had just left their material body] would not have to traverse it any more. Because, for those who are conscient but do not have the knowledge, that is really very difficult: it is infernal.” (It is precisely this knowledge which was provided in the Egyptian and Tibetan “books of the dead.”) “It is infernal. So I built that. That was perhaps in 1902-1903 or 1904, I do not remember exactly. But month after month after month I worked at it.

“Afterwards, when I went to Tlemcen, I told all that to madame Théon. She said: ‘Yes, this is part of the work you have come to do on Earth. All those whose psychic being is a little bit awake, and who are able to perceive your Light, will go to your Light at the moment of death, wherever they may die, and you will help them cross beyond.’ And that is a constant work. Constant.”² Madame Théon was an even greater occultist than her husband. The Mother went two times to Tlemcen, in Algeria, in 1906 and 1907.

The “pathways” the Mother built are what is described by many persons who have been clinically dead as tunnels, bridges or narrow mountain passes by which they feel

2 *L’Agenda de Mère*, vol. II, pp. 258-259.

protected and which they use to cross over directly into the Light. They are able to report this kind of experience because, after having been clinically dead, they came back to life. Although the first reports date from the Second World War, “near-death experiences” started drawing the interest of the general public because of the 1975 book *Life After Life* by Raymond Moody, a medical doctor. According to a later Gallup poll no less than 8 million Americans claim to have had a near-death experience. Students of the phenomenon claim that the number of near-death experiencers may be much higher, as many persons who have gone through the experience are reluctant to talk about it for fear of ridicule.

The *Britannica Concise Encyclopedia* defines “near-death experience” as follows: “Mystical or transcendent experience reported by people who have been on the threshold of death. The near-death experience varies with each individual, but characteristics frequently include hearing oneself declared dead, feelings of peacefulness, the sense of leaving one's body, the sense of moving through a dark tunnel toward a bright light, a life review, the crossing of a border, and meetings with other spiritual beings, often deceased friends and relatives. Near-death experiences are reported by about one-third of those who come close to death. Cultural and physiological explanations have been offered, but the causes remain uncertain. Typical aftereffects include greater spirituality and decreased fear of death.”

As this definition indicates, “the near-death experience varies with each individual.”

Yet Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, “after listening to thousands and thousands of people,” found that there are four successive main phases.³

3 Elisabeth Kübler-Ross: *The Wheel of Life*, pp. 195 ff.

1. People float out of their bodies; they are totally aware of the scene he or she has left and assume an ethereal shape; they experience wholeness.

2. They are able to go anywhere with the speed of thought; they meet their guardian angels or guides who comfort them with love and introduce them to the presence of previously deceased dear ones.

3. Guided by their guardian angel they enter what is commonly described as a tunnel, bridge or mountain pass; at the end they see a bright light which some call God; everybody agrees on one thing: that they were enveloped by overwhelming love, the purest of love. None wants to return to his or her physical body. All lives are changed after the experience.

4. They are in the presence of the Highest Source some call God; they no longer need their ethereal shape for they become spiritual energy; they experience a oneness, a completeness of existence. Some remember going through a life review, a process in which they confronted the totality of their life; they were made to understand the reason for every decision, thought and action they had had in life.

It will surprise nobody that this subject, however well-documented and confirmed by reliable persons, is the target of doubt and ridicule by scientific and other positivist-minded people. They object, for instance, that the immaterial is in principle unseen, unheard, and unable to be sensed or measured empirically, and therefore improvable. Then they use anything, positivist or not, that might explain those experiences, including dreams arising from Carl Jung's collective unconscious; recollections of the birth experience, "an explanation proposed by the late Carl Sagan" (who was a cosmologist calling himself an "exobiologist"); the effects of drugs and medicines; carbon dioxide

intoxication or oxygen starvation; or a flood of endorphins released by the dying brain. Etc.

Obviously, this flood of experiences exceeds the boundaries of physical science, which by now at least should be used to the astonishing and apparently impossible in its own backyard. Only the science of yoga, and its experiential knowledge of reality and the human personality, can explain them.

A human being consists of more than a body, and even more than a body-plus-mind, as has been the belief in the West since its classical times. To this body-plus-mind may be added a soul, although the Western philosophers and theologians have generally identified the soul with the mind, both being "non-material." According to the common yogic experience, however, a human being consists of several bodies or sheaths, material, vital, and mental, contained in each other. At the center of this complex being sits the soul or psychic being, which has taken up its bodies in reverse order when descending into a new terrestrial incarnation.

The material body is the one that dies, while the vital and mental bodies survive for some time, still enveloping the soul. It is in this condition that everyone has to traverse the worlds that correspond to the state of his vital body and the development of his mental body. In most cultures and individual cases the mental body does not possess the necessary knowledge to protect the transiting person. The lower regions of the vital plane can be, as the Mother said, "infernal" or hellish, inhabited by hellish beings. (The concept of hell originated from the remembrance of this kind of post mortem experiences.) The Mother constructed the "protective pathways" precisely to protect the deceased against such hellish experiences and to have them transit directly to the plane of the psychic, which is a divine plane.

These protecting pathways are what gives the impression of a tunnel, a bridge, or a narrow mountain pass. Still carried by his vital and mental body sheaths, the transiting person perceives the Light of the higher, spiritual hemisphere (in fact the Mother's Light). The more he comes nearer to it, the more intense it becomes. As Kübler-Ross writes, that light "radiates intense warmth, energy, spirit and love – love most of all, unconditional love; they feel peace, tranquility and the anticipation of finally going home." The experiencers who have gone that far do not want to return to the dark, difficult and painful world which they have left behind; they want to discard their vital and mental sheaths too and enter there where all is existence, consciousness and bliss: the psychic world.

The mind-body problem

As mentioned before in passing, "a Gallup poll published in 1982 estimates that one in twenty adult Americans has had a near-death experience. (This would translate today to more than 15 million out of 312 million adults.) Furthermore, of those people who came close to death, thirty-five percent could report a NDE [near-death experience]. Researchers believe that these figures are conservative estimates. Moreover, these figures indicate the pervasiveness of the experience in the general population. It's important to add that there is no relationship between a person's gender, age, socioeconomic class, or religious orientation. NDE seems to be a universal phenomenon."⁴

"On 15 December 2001, an unusual article appeared in the medical journal *The Lancet*. Written by Pim van Lommel, a cardiologist at the Rijnstate Hospital in Arnhem, the Netherlands, it described the results and findings of a series of interviews that took place over a period of eight

4 See Wikipedia, on the lemma "near-death experience."

years. Its subjects were 344 patients who had been successfully resuscitated after suffering a cardiac arrest. The article reported that 18% of the patients told interviewers that they experienced what is commonly termed a 'near-death experience', with 12% having what Van Lommel termed a 'core experience' – an elaborate perception of the beginning of an afterlife. This result mystified both Van Lommel and his assistants. Van Lommel argued that if there is a purely physiological or medical reason for the experience then 'most patients who have been clinically dead should report one'." (Anthony Peake in *Is There Life After Death?*)

The problem of the strange and immaterial thing that is "consciousness," and the way immaterial consciousness can relate to a material brain and have an impact on it, haunts the biological and neurological sciences since Descartes. He had tried to get rid of it by declaring consciousness an "epiphenomenon" of matter, thus sticking a label on a bottle without known contents. Neurology in the present day has not advanced much further. Consciousness is now declared to be "a function" of the material brain. "Most psychologists now believe that consciousness is tied to the activity of neurons in the central nervous system." (John Holland)

But "most" does not mean all, and some scientists have strongly reacted against such academic obscurantism. Roger Trigg e.g. states: "Science is itself the product of human reason. It can't, in the end, explain human reason away without explaining itself away."⁵ And the eminently reasonable Brian Pippard wrote in a letter: "Too many physicists (and others) take for granted that in due course an explanation will be found of conscious mind in terms of the material operations of the brain. This is to put the cart before the horse – it is through our minds that we know of the brain, and we are more likely to find how they are related by concentrating on

5 In Russell Stannard: *Science and Wonders*, p. 60.

the fundamental thing (conscious knowledge) rather than on its derivative (material brain)."⁶

These questions appear again on the scientific agenda because of the solid evidence of so many near-death experiences. Cardiologist Pim van Lommel concluded: "This experience forces us to reconsider the localization of the consciousness. Is it really in our brain? ... All patients mentioned in our paper were clinically dead – one-line EEG, no more activity of the cortex, pupils fixed and dilated, no reflexes left. Still their consciousness remained totally clear and their sensations defined." And on the Wikipedia website we find the following comment: "Many view the NDE as the precursor to an afterlife experience, claiming that the NDE cannot be adequately explained by physiological or psychological causes, and that the phenomenon conclusively demonstrates that human consciousness can function independently of brain activity. Many NDE-accounts seem to include elements which, according to several theorists, can only be explained by an out-of-body consciousness. For example, Michael Sabom states that one of his contacts accurately described a surgical instrument [used after she was clinically dead] which she had not seen previously." In other cases persons and their actions and conversations are accurately described under the same conditions, and one NDE-experiencer even remembered the number plate of the truck which had hit and killed him instantly.

Three illustrations

There is already a wide-ranging literature about the near-death experience, a topic which, if true, will concern all of us at one moment or other. The following three illustrations are chosen because they highlight the phenomenon from various angles.

6 Kitty Ferguson: *The Fire in the Equations*, p. 182.

The 1979 movie *All that Jazz*, with Roy Scheider and Jessica Lange, was scripted and directed by Bob Fosse, and based on his own life-story. Fosse, “all-round movie and show business man,” won an unprecedented eight Tony Awards for choreography, as well as one for direction. He was nominated for an Academy Award four times and won for his direction of *Cabaret*.

All that Jazz tells the story of a choreographer and movie director, Joe Gideon, who has led the life many well-known show business people lead, or are supposed to lead, with the relationships, the pills, drinks and drugs, the love, hate and indifference, and the ups and downs of success. Striking for an American movie, and therefore mentioned here, is the fact that, in his moments with himself before the make-up mirror, this professional showman – “It’s show time, folks!” – often finds himself in the company of a beautiful, mysterious lady-in-white with whom he can be totally spontaneous and sincere.

A loose and fast life like his leads slowly but surely to heart problems and the inevitable attack. Still Joe Gideon cannot manage the discipline to bring some order to his life, although he knows full well that his condition is serious. Actually the problem and fear of death obsess him, for he cannot stop viewing and editing his own movie about a stand-up who parodies the successive standard reactions of people when given the news of their imminent death. (The enumeration of these reactions is part of the work of Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, who is mentioned by name.) The result of Gideon’s desperate carelessness is more attacks leading up to the fatal one, when in a drugged or comatose state, and a magnificently staged finale, he sees his life as one grand show. Then, when it is all over and the body bag is zipped up, comes the surprise: waiting for him is the beautiful smiling lady-in-white again, to help him on to another world.

The second illustration is a case history from the February 2002 issue of the French science magazine *Science et Avenir*. Christiane, in her early thirties and pregnant, had a miscarriage resulting in massive bleeding. She was declared clinically dead. In her own words: "I left my envelope of flesh, I slid out of it and rose to the ceiling ... I saw my body lying there, with three persons in white blouses very busy around it ... Amazed I said to myself: 'But I am dead!' This did not upset me. I felt good and that poor body did no longer interest me. I did not regret having left it. ... I entered a long, dark corridor. At the end there was a point of light increasing more and more, till it became an immense light that enveloped me, fabulous, warm, full of love and an indescribable happiness. I felt around me an immense, indestructible love. It had nothing in common with the love one may experience here below. I had no longer any other desire than to melt into that infinite light of love ..."

And after she had come back: "Why did I not go to the other side? I would have liked to go there so much. ... I am no longer afraid of death."

The third illustration is a historical episode of the Second World War, with Albert Speer as its protagonist. Speer, an architect, is one of two persons who at one time were closest to Adolf Hitler, the other one being Rudolf Hess. In the last phase of the war Speer was Minister for Production, which means that he was the boss of some 12 million slaves – forced workers from conquered countries, among them the Jews who, still more or less healthy, temporarily escaped extermination. In the rapidly worsening circumstances Hitler expected Speer to perform miracles, in other words to continue producing the aircraft, tanks, submarines and canon needed to stem the invasion of the Allies who, from the east and the west, were squeezing Germany in a pincer movement.

In January 1944 Speer had to be hospitalized for a serious knee and lung infection. The moment was not opportune for him because Göring, always covetous of more power, had been intriguing against him, using the sinister Bormann to manoeuvre Speer into disfavour with Hitler. The medical institution where Speer's condition had grown critical was a state-of-the-art Party hospital at Hochenlychen, near Berlin, run by Dr Karl Gebhardt. This was an SS-Gruppenführer and the personal physician of Himmler, who, as Speer said later, had directed Gebhardt to eliminate him.

In *Inside the Third Reich*, his memoirs, Speer wrote: "The doctors prepared my wife for the worst. But in contrast to this pessimism, I myself was feeling a remarkable euphoria. The little room expanded into a magnificent hall. A plain wardrobe I had been staring at for three weeks turned into a richly carved display piece, inlaid with rare woods. Hovering between living and dying, I had a sense of well-being such as I had only rarely experienced."

In Speer's conversations with Gitta Sereny, however, we read what *really* happened: he, the very ambitious, very materialistic and very matter-of-fact architect, powerful minister and top Nazi, had had a near-death experience! As Sereny reports the particular conversation: "'I have never been so happy in my life', Speer said. He was 'above', he said, looking down at himself in the hospital bed. 'I saw everything very clearly. The doctors and nurses hovering, and [his wife] Margaret looking sort of soft and slim, her face small and pale ... What Professor Koch and the nurses were doing', Speer continued, 'looked like a silent dance to me. The room was so beautiful ...' He smiled at the memory. 'I was not alone; there were many figures, all in white and light grey, and there was music ... And then somebody said: "Not yet." And I realized I had to go back and I said I didn't want to. But I was told I had to – it was not yet my time.

What I felt then was not something I know how to describe. It wasn't just sadness, or disappointment – it was a long feeling of loss ... To this day I think that I felt things in those hours which the man I know myself to be cannot feel, or see, or say. I tell you one thing: I've never been afraid of death since. I'm certain it will be wonderful."

Then why hadn't he written all this in his memoirs? Speer's answer: "Well, I was supposed to be that super-rational man, you know, writing a definitive book on this terrible history of our time. What do you think readers would have said if in the middle of that book I had suddenly written that I am sure, sure to this day, that I died that night and came back to life? Can you imagine the fun the critics would have had with that?"⁷

This extraordinary testimony, the authenticity of which is beyond doubt, not only confirms the reality of the near-death experiences, it also raises several interesting questions. For Albert Speer was without any doubt a war criminal responsible for the suffering and death of many thousands of slave workers, and he was as responsible for the slaughter on the battlefields as were Göring (who committed suicide) and the Nazi heads executed at Nuremberg. Although he escaped the gallows by convincing his interrogators that he was a decent man and denouncing his Nazi cronies, most historians today agree that his twenty years of imprisonment, in comparison with the other sentences, was too lenient.

Then why was such a person sent back, obviously by a direct decision of the Highest Authority, at the crucial period of the war when he was irreplaceable in his ministerial position, and when his leadership contributed directly to the prolongation of the fighting and the cruel death of

7 Gitta Sereny: *Albert Speer: His Battle with Truth*, pp. 416-417.

uncountable lives, military and civilian? Why was he, at that tragic juncture, sent back even against his own will? It would seem that “in heaven” the norms for making the accounts differ from those “here below.” It would also seem that events, whether insignificant or on a world scale – wars, mass deportations and massive catastrophes – are elements or links in processes beyond our understanding.

Knowledge physical and spiritual, and its seasons

If one had read earlier about the Mother’s protective pathways across the afterlife, say before the publication of the first books on NDE, her narrative of what she had accomplished in the beginning of the 20th century might have looked like another of those chimerical experiences mystics think they have. Yet this is only one of many elements in Sri Aurobindo and the Mother’s writings which have in the meantime come within the compass of science, and there will no doubt be more to come. For there is a spiritual knowledge which is independent of and more true than scientific materialism, bound by the limitations of the human mind. Spiritual insight is based on direct knowledge; mental activity remains inexorably restricted by the human constitution, as has been recognized by philosophers like Plato, Berkeley and Kant.

Another example of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother’s “foreknowledge” is the very special nature and purpose of the Earth, as commented upon in the talk “2012 and 1956: Doomsday?” It must suffice here to remind that the Mother said in the 1950s: “From the occult and spiritual point of view, the Earth is the concentrated symbol of the universe. ... For the convenience and necessity of the work, the whole universe has been concentrated and condensed symbolically in a grain of sand which is called the Earth. And therefore it is the symbol of all – all that is to be changed, all that is to

be transformed, all that is to be converted is here." At the time she said this, this sort of view was still squarely contradicted by the Copernican Principle⁸, stressing the fact that the Earth was but one planet among possibly billions in the universe, and man no more than an animal among animals. Now, however, when indeed many "exoplanets" are discovered, this certainty is called into question in scientifically argued books like *Rare Earth* by Peter Ward and Donald Brownlee, *The Eerie Silence* and *The Goldilocks Enigma* by Paul Davies, and *The Privileged Planet* by Guillermo Gonzalez and Jay Richards.

The direct and continuous influence of the mind on the body has time and again been highlighted by Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, especially in matters of health and the doctor-patient relationship. At the centre of this topic are the power of a doctor's suggestions and the placebo effect. In a special file about the intriguing placebo effect and titled "When the spirit cures the body" the French science magazine *Sciences et Avenir* writes: "This powerful effect has been used since the night of time in the doctor-patient relationship, but without knowing its intimate secrets. Having remained obscure for a long time, it begins to be decrypted by a new discipline called neuro-endocrino-immunology, the study of the interactions between three principal systems of our organism. ... The placebo effect does exist!"⁹

The Mother has explained several times that the brain has the capacity to continue developing during its whole lifetime. Science, on the contrary, held that the enormous mass of neurons of this most complicated of objects in the universe, was fixed once and for all, and that it could only diminish and degenerate. Recently this physiological tenet

8 See talk 6: "Being Human and the Copernican Principle".

9 *Sciences et Avenir*, November 2005, p. 62.

has been modified drastically. One reads now about the five ages of the brain and the fact that it continues evolving, even in advanced age, on condition that one does not stop stimulating it, in other words that one remains mentally active – or, as the Mother said, that one remains “young.”

In one of the first chapters of *The Life Divine*, Sri Aurobindo wrote: “For it will be evident that essential Matter is a thing non-existent to the senses and only ... a conceptual form of substance, and in fact the point is increasingly reached where only an arbitrary distinction in thought divides form of substance from form of energy.”¹⁰ Now you find popular science books with a title such as *The Matter Myth*, and physicists who say: “Speaking as a physicist, I judge matter to be an imprecise and rather old-fashioned concept. Roughly speaking, matter is the way particles behave when a large number of them are lumped together. ... Matter is weird stuff ...” (Freeman Dyson)¹¹ Or: “Quantum field theory paints a picture in which solid matter dissolves away, to be replaced by weird excitations and vibrations of invisible field energy. In this theory, little distinction remains between material substance and apparently empty space, which itself seethes with ephemeral quantum activity. ... Quantum physics undermines materialism because it reveals that matter has far less ‘substance’ than we might believe. ... Even the apparent solidity of ordinary matter melts away into a frolic of insubstantial patterns of energy.”¹²

Already during the First World War, when writing the instalments that would become *The Life Divine*, Sri Aurobindo’s interpretation of the terrestrial evolution contained elements which would only later enter the scientific discussion about the development of the life-forms. In those texts

10 *Id.*, p. 18.

11 Freeman Dyson: *Infinite in all Directions*, p. 8.

12 Paul Davies and John Gribbin: *The Matter Myth*, pp. 8 and 229.

from the *Arya* we find what Eldredge and Gould would call "punctuated equilibrium" in 1972; the discussion of life in plants and a rather developed mind in higher animals; the statement that species, including the human, cannot evolve beyond themselves by their own effort; the confirmation that there have existed civilizations of which no trace is found today, and that peoples considered primitive a century ago were actually retrograde populations from former times; the standpoint that in evolution there is a design, defined by an Intelligence and worked out by It. Etc. And all this ordered within a coherent system, valid before the positivist theories of evolution (Lamarck, Darwin, de Vries, Neo-Darwinism) were fashioned, and equally valid after those theories have been seriously questioned and will within a not too distant future become history.

Vroeger toen ik groot was! (Before, when I was big) is a remarkable little book by the Dutch author Joanna Klink (1990), with spontaneous reminiscences by small children about the time before they entered their mother's womb and during their stay in it. They remember their choice of the mother, the moment they entered her womb, and the surrounding circumstances before and during the pregnancy. What is striking here is that everything these children said agrees completely with what the Mother has told on the same subjects. For example, the soul chooses the physical mother and watches over the fetus, even when not yet definitively joining with it; the moment of the definitive union differs in each case and may even take place after birth. The being that is to be born is aware of all that goes on around the mother as it is of its own world. "An unborn apparently perceives, with his vivid awareness, much more than we think," writes Klink. And: "Children do not believe in death, they still know better." They also mention quite spontaneously the "silver thread" which connects the subtle with the gross material body, and which, when cut, results in separation (death).

Remembering the Mother

Returning to our main theme, one could ask the question: Why was this invaluable protection after death provided only recently, so late in the history of our species?

An answer on this level of things is not to be given by mental understanding. As madame Théon told the Mother, building the bridges across the afterlife was part of what the Mother had come to do on Earth, and the light mentioned in all NDE experiences is the Mother's Light. In the words of madame Théon: "All those whose psychic being is a little bit awake, and who are able to perceive your Light, will go to your Light at the moment of death, wherever they may die, and you will help them cross beyond."

These words refer directly to the status of Mirra Alfassa, the French woman whom we now call "the Mother," thereby meaning the Great Mother incarnated as the female part of the Avatar Sri Aurobindo-Mother. Before, the Avatar had always been male, and many Hindus still have difficulty in accepting a male-female Avatar. But it is quite clear that if there is an earthly evolution, in which the successive Avatars play a crucial role, and if in the present stage of humanity's history this evolution is reaching a critical point, the Avatar has to represent in himself the complete human being in order to transfigure it. Only the Great Mother, because she manifests all levels of existence and also transcends them, could perform a task like building bridges across the planes of existence, and constantly help the dying onward to their psychic resting place.

The significance of "she whom we call the Mother" can only be fully understood in her three aspects as the Great Mother of many names, but always "the one original transcendent Shakti;" as Mahashakti, the cosmic Mother of the Gods; and as the incarnated Mother in the Yoga.

The Great Mother is known in all great spiritual and occult traditions, even though variously named and described. We find her in Isis, Cybele, Sophia, and the Virgin Mary. She is the One who became Two – the active Brahman from eternity divided into Ishwara and Shakti, Purusha and Prakriti. On the *Origin of the World*, a gnostic text from around 200 CE, defines her in terms which, if properly understood, agree with those of the Vedantic scriptures:

It is I who am the offspring of what gave birth to me
[what gave birth to her being the One];
 And it is I who am the Mother
[the Great Mother, the one original transcendent Shakti];
 It is I who am the wife
[Shakti to Ishwara, in human metaphorical language];
 It is I who am the virgin
[for ever the untouchable Origin of all];
 It is I who am pregnant
[with all the power and manifestations of the universe];
 It is I who am the midwife
[the middle term chit-tapas in the Vedantic sat-chit/tapas-ananda];
 It is I who am the one that comforts pains of travail
[who justifies the pains of the evolutionary manifestation];
 It is my husband who bore me
[Ishwara is also the Brahman];
 And it is I who am his mother
[who gives shape to him in his manifestation – Isis, Mary];
 And it is he who is my father and my lord.
 It is he who is my force
[because I am his force, Shakti];
 I am in the process of becoming
[the complete Divine is growing up in the Manifestation],
 Yet I have borne a Man as lord
[the cosmic Purusha, the archetype of what humanity is to become].

The Mother herself gave us a glimpse of Mahashakti, the cosmic Mother, when she narrated one of her experiences on 3 February 1958. "The supramental world exists permanently and I am there permanently in a supramental body. I had proof of it this very day, when my earth-consciousness went there and remained there consciously between two and three o'clock in the afternoon. Now I know that what was lacking for the two worlds to join in a constant and conscious relation is an intermediate zone between the physical world as it is and the supramental world as it is ..." She saw this intermediate zone as "a huge ship, as large as a city, which was a symbolic representation of the place where this work is going on." On board of this ship were people "destined to become the future inhabitants of the supramental world. They were trained for their task and ready to go ashore."

The Mother was in charge of the whole enterprise from the beginning and throughout the proceedings. "I had prepared all the groups myself. I stood on the ship at the head of the gangway, calling the groups one by one and sending them ashore."

During this experience the Mother was suddenly interrupted and called back into her physical body by somebody in her room, and had at that instant a brief glimpse of herself. "My upper part, particularly the head, was not much more than a silhouette of which the contents were white with an orange fringe. The more down towards the feet, the more the colour looked like that of the people on the ship, that is to say orange; the more upwards, the more it was translucent and white, with less red. The head was only a contour with a brilliant sun in it. Rays of light radiated from it, which were actions of the will."

And then there is "the Mother in the Yoga" who this time had not come as a *Vibhuti* (Hatshepsut, Jeanne d'Arc,

Elisabeth I¹³) but as the Avatar. Many devotees have difficulty in understanding the three aspects of the Mother, as she said herself. Most of them expect her to be shinningly divine in all her earthly ways, twenty-four hours a day. And that she was, of course, but not like the temple Gods or the Gods in the *Puranas*. For she was here not only in a human body, she had also to take upon her or rather into her the full human condition in order to transform it, more specifically the human condition of the disciples. To be a real guru is a task of which the disciples usually have no idea, for it means taking their shortcomings, deformations and subconscious darkneses upon oneself. Being the Avatar of the age meant not only that; it meant also having to suffer and transform all that was low and animal-like below and preceding the human condition.

One reads from the pen of several authors that “the Mother was so human.” M.P. Pandit for instance wrote: “She was supremely divine but equally extremely human.” This is a misconception of the Mother which interprets her perceptible actions and her gracious relations with people according to the human ways. Indeed, she had to move among the disciples, the Ashram youth and the visitors; she had to answer all kinds of questions instantly; she had to make decisions constantly; and she had to respond immediately to requests, prayers and inner expressions of adoration and love, but also to attitudes of anger, malevolence and even hate. Yet it was she who said: “It has come to the point that even those who are here put on me feelings and reactions which are purely human.” In *Savitri* Sri Aurobindo wrote: “Even when she bent to meet earth’s intimacies / Her spirit kept the stature of the Gods.”

13 See Georges Van Vrekhem: *The Mother – The Story of Her Life*, chapter 14.

Some still consider the Mother to have been a disciple of Sri Aurobindo. It is therefore important to state that such was *not* the case. Sri Aurobindo had his amanuensis, Nirodbaran, write to Arindam Basu: "The Mother is not a disciple of Sri Aurobindo. She has had the same realization and experience as myself." And he wrote in a letter: "What is known as Sri Aurobindo's Yoga is the joint creation of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother."¹⁴ The equivalence of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother is evident when considering the following basic declarations. Sri Aurobindo: "The Mother's consciousness and mine are the same, the one Divine Consciousness in two, because that is necessary for the play." The Mother: "Without him I exist not, without me he is not manifest." These pronouncements reflect the truth of the Divine essence and its manifestation. "There is no difference between the Mother's path and mine," wrote Sri Aurobindo, "we have and have always had the same path, the path that leads to the supramental change and the divine realization; not only at the end, but from the beginning they have been the same."¹⁵

The Mother herself narrates, in *Words of Long Ago*, how in 1912 she had noted down "the whole program of what Sri Aurobindo has done and the method of doing the work on Earth. ... I met Sri Aurobindo for the first time in 1914, two years later, and I had already made the whole program." That program reads as follows: "The general aim to be attained is the advent of a progressive universal harmony. The means for attaining this aim, in regard to the Earth, is the realization of human unity through the awakening in all and the manifestation by all of the inner Divinity, which is One. In other words: to create unity by founding the Kingdom of God which is within us all.

14 Sri Aurobindo: *On Himself*, p. 459.

15 *Ibid.*, p. 459.

“The following is therefore the most useful work to be done: 1. For each individually, to be conscious in himself of the Divine Presence and to identify himself with it. 2. To individualize the states of being that till now were never conscious in man and thus to put the Earth in connection with one or more of the fountains of the universal force that are still sealed to it. 3. To speak again to the world the eternal word under a new form adapted to its present mentality. It will be the synthesis of all human knowledge. 4. Collectively, to establish an ideal society in a propitious spot for the flowering of the new race, the race of the Sons of God.”¹⁶

She has worked out this program in intimate collaboration with Sri Aurobindo – once formulating their one divine personality as “mothersriaurobindo” in writing – and she has gone on working it out when alone in her avataric body. They had come to lay the foundations of the future and to build the archetype of the supramental species. This is a rather well documented real story, more fascinating than any myth, in which one sees the constant interaction of the three personalities of the Mother. In her conversations during the last years, as well as in the transformation of the cells of her physical body, it was unfortunately the human aspect that was most visible to human eyes.

Day by day and year after year Sri Aurobindo fought his occult and spiritual battles without anybody around him being aware of it; one only gets some glimpses of his “real Work” in his poems and in *Savitri*. The Mother *has* spoken about her battles in the subconscious, her physical sufferings and some of her victories. But who was aware that that Being sitting there in a simple armchair, on the first floor of the central Ashram building in Pondicherry, was no

16 The Mother: *Words of Long Ago*, p. 47.

longer what the eyes perceived? Her back was bent and her visible body reduced to its elementary humanity; her invisible body within the visible one was glorious. On 24 March 1972 she said: "For the first time, early in the morning, I saw myself, my body. I don't know whether it is a supramental body or – how to say this? – a body in transition. But I had a body altogether new, in the sense that it was sexless, it wasn't a woman nor was it a man.¹⁷ It was very white, but this is because my skin is white, I suppose, I don't know. It was very slim ... It was pretty, truly a harmonious form. So, this was the first time. I didn't know anything at all, I had no idea of what it would be like or whatever. And I saw that I *was* like that, I had *become* like that."

The tears and the desperation at the time of the Mother's passing were the human reaction resulting from the human perception of a life which had attempted and succeeded to incorporate, for the first time in the history of the Earth, the Supermind into Matter. She and Sri Aurobindo accomplished the impossible, so much beyond the human comprehension that their accomplishment today is a living reality to not more than a handful of followers. Her body – specially chosen and composed with care in her mother's womb, and declared by Sri Aurobindo to be better than his for the initial attempt at the supramental transformation – her body lying there was not a cause for grief but the token of a triumph without precedent.

Coda

In *Champaklal Speaks* we read the following anecdote from the time the Mother still gave *darshan* on the balcony of the central Ashram building in the morning: "When Mother had her breakfast after 'Balcony', she said that she

17 The supramental body is a-sexual. Cf. talk 1: "Adam Kadmon and the Evolution".

had come to know a very interesting thing. She had seen on the forehead of Mritunjoy's sister (who had just passed away), the symbol of Sri Aurobindo. Mother said that she was very much surprised and had said to herself: 'What? On this one? ...' Then she heard Sri Aurobindo saying: 'Henceforth whoever who dies here [*i.e.* in the Ashram], I will put my seal upon him, and in any condition unconditional protection will be given.'"

We find this confirmed by the Mother herself in the *Agenda* conversation of 24 June 1961. Mritunjoy's sister was psychologically in a terrible state, said the Mother: *Elle n'avait pas la foi* – she did not have the faith. This led the Mother to ask Sri Aurobindo what happens to people who do not have the faith when they are in the Ashram and die there. Sri Aurobindo said: "Watch." The woman in question was in the act of leaving her body at that very moment, and the Mother "saw on her forehead the symbol of Sri Aurobindo in a kind of solid golden light ... And because of the presence of that symbol the psychological condition did not have any importance any more, for nothing could touch her." As we have seen, it is the psychological condition at the time of death which attracts the corresponding worlds and their beings. Then Sri Aurobindo said to the Mother: "All those who have lived in the Ashram and who die there have automatically the same protection, whatever their inner state."

At the time Auroville did not yet exist. Would it be unreasonable to surmise that a similar recognition and protection might be given to those who had the faith and surrendered their lives to the same ideal in Auroville?

8

*Sri Aurobindo's Descent into Death*¹

“The time is very serious”²

In June 1946, less than a year after the unconditional surrender of Japan, Sri Aurobindo wrote: “There was a time when Hitler was victorious everywhere and it seemed certain that a black yoke of the Asura would be imposed on the whole world; but where is Hitler now and where is his

1 This talk was given in Savitri Bhavan on 4 December 2010, in commemoration of the 60th anniversary of Sri Aurobindo's passing.

2 See also talk 2: “The Development of Sri Aurobindo's Thought”.

rule? Berlin and Nuremberg [where in those days German top Nazis stood trial] have marked the end of that dreadful chapter in human history. Other blacknesses threaten to overshadow or even engulf mankind, but they too will end as that nightmare has ended." If one has the faintest notion of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother's decisive interventions in the Second World War, the fiercest and most deadly of all wars, and of its significance in human history, one has to be moved by these words. (The phrase "where is Hitler now?" may well be the softest worded victory bulletin ever.) But then, now that the war *was* won, why the somber talk about other engulfing blacknesses which nobody else seemed to see? Yet the threat apparently increased, for in April of the following year Sri Aurobindo wrote: "Things are bad, are growing worse and may at any time grow worst or worse than worst if that is possible."³

At that point, when Sri Aurobindo was seventy-five years old and after a lifetime of revolutionary avataric Yoga, something at the root of things was blocking the Work. Sri Aurobindo stated forcefully: "I have no intention of giving my sanction to a new edition of the old fiasco – a partial and transient spiritual opening within with no true and radical change in the external nature."⁴ The old fiasco was the effort of the previous Avatars to change human nature and make spiritual progress in the material evolution possible. In his *Essays on the Gita* Sri Aurobindo had already written: "Not till the Time-Spirit in man is ready can the inner and ultimate prevail over the outer and immediate reality. Christ and Buddha have come and gone. But it is Rudra who still holds the world in the hollow of his hand. And meanwhile the fierce forward labour of mankind, tormented and oppressed by the Powers that are profiteers of

3 Sri Aurobindo: *On Himself*, pp. 168 and 169.

4 Sri Aurobindo: *Letters on Yoga*, p. 1306.

egoistic force and their servants, cries for the sword of the Hero of the struggle and the word of the prophet.”

It is said that Sri Aurobindo never explicitly stated that he was an Avatar. To expect such a statement would demand that Sri Aurobindo broke with his inborn and spiritual discretion. The quotations in the previous paragraph, however, make it abundantly clear, as do many other passages in his writings and acts in his workings, that he considered his yogic effort to be that of an Avatar, and even the most decisive of all avataric missions. On the other hand, where does one ever find a sign of the slightest awareness that in 1947 the Work of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, on which the future of humanity depended, was threatened with annulment?

Nirodbaran, in those days with Champaklal the closest assistant of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, wrote in his priceless *Twelve Years with Sri Aurobindo*: “We observed a noticeable change in his mood. Our talks ... diminished. He was no longer expansive; humour, wit, sally, fun, all had shrivelled up and we were in front of a temple deity, impassive, aloof and indifferent. However much we tried to draw him out from his impregnable sanctum of silence, we were answered with a monosyllabic ‘yes’ or ‘no’, or at most a faint smile. ... One day taking courage in both hands, Dr. Satyendra asked: ‘Why are you so serious, Sir?’ Sri Aurobindo answered gravely: ‘The time is very serious.’ The answer left us mystified.”⁵

The decision

Things must have grown “worse than worst,” for a drastic act became imperative. Of Sri Aurobindo’s decision to perform this act nobody knew at the time. It is only

5 Nirodbaran: *Twelve Years with Sri Aurobindo*, pp. 263-264.

afterwards that some sayings and facts could be seen as indicative of what was to happen. So for instance the following words of the Mother spoken to Dr. Sanyal on the very morning of Sri Aurobindo's passing: "About a year ago, while I was discussing things, I remarked that I felt like leaving this body of mine. Sri Aurobindo 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.' ... After that – this took place early in 1950 – he gradually let himself fall ill. For he knew quite well that, should he say 'I must go', I would not have obeyed him and I would have gone. For according to the way I felt, he was much more indispensable than I. But he saw the matter from the other side. And he knew that I had the power to leave my body at will. So he didn't say a thing – he didn't say a thing right to the very last minute."⁶

Later the Mother would concede: "It is absolutely undeniable that my body has that capacity [of endurance] infinitely more than the body of Sri Aurobindo." This reminds us of her former saying that she had consciously chosen her parents not only for their mental but also for their physical qualities. She also said later: "I told him that, as to me, it would be absolutely without regret and without difficulty that I would leave my body to go and join him ... And he answered: 'Your body is indispensable for the Work. Without your body the Work cannot be done.' This is something that was said in 1949, which means a little more than a year before he left."⁷

Then there is the amazing avowal of the Mother that she does not seem to have known that Sri Aurobindo, step

6 Prabhat Sanyal: *A Call from Pondicherry*, in *Mother India*, December 1991.

7 Kireet Joshi: *Sri Aurobindo and the Mother*, p. 103.

by invisible step, let death approach. She has confirmed this more than once herself. For instance: "You see, he had decided to go. But he didn't want me to know that he was doing it deliberately. He knew that if for a single moment I knew he was doing it deliberately, I would have reacted with such violence that he would not have been able to leave. And he did this: he bore it all as if it was some unconsciousness, an ordinary illness, simply to keep me from knowing – and he left at the very moment he had to leave." Sri Aurobindo had created a blind spot, as it were, in the perception of her who was the Mother of the worlds and had access to all knowledge everywhere if she so desired! Once she said: "I did not believe till the last moment that Sri Aurobindo was going to leave his body." And K.D. Sethna commented: "This is correct. On December 3th [Sri Aurobindo passed away on the 5th] the Mother told me that Sri Aurobindo would soon read my articles. Later, when I asked her why she had let me go to Bombay on December 3th, she said that Sri Aurobindo's going had not been decided yet."⁸

Initially, except for some minor symptoms of kidney trouble, there were no signs of serious health problems whatever. Besides, Sri Aurobindo continued his (outwardly) daily routine as if nothing was the matter. He still wanted to write on modern poetry and a search was on to provide him with volumes of such poetry to read. (He appreciated Mallarmé, Whitman, Yeats and Eliot.) He also dictated, at the Mother's request, the important series of articles published under the title *The Supramental Manifestation upon Earth*.

In these articles he expounded the state of affairs at that time of his Work, of his Yoga of Transformation, explaining the realization of the "Mind of Light," and the necessity of

8 K.D. Sethna: *The Passing of Sri Aurobindo*, p. 5.

a range of intermediary beings between the present human and the future supramental species. These transitional species or subspecies in the making he gave no name, calling them in general "a new humanity." The Mother, however, did give them a name in French, "*surhommes*," literally meaning "overmen." She said: "This was certainly what he expected of us: what he conceived of as the overman, who must be the intermediate being between humanity as it is and the supramental being created in the supramental way ... It is quite obvious that intermediary beings are necessary, and that it is these intermediary beings who must find the means to create beings of the Supermind. And there is no doubt that, when Sri Aurobindo wrote this, he was convinced that this is what we have to do."⁹

Somewhere in October, solicited from many sides, Sri Aurobindo said to Nirodbaran: "My main work is being delayed." For, as Nirodbaran wrote: "Many interruptions came in the way. The preliminary work of reading old versions, selections, etc. [of Sri Aurobindo's own writings being prepared for publication], took up much time before we actually could start [*i.e.* continue working on *Savitri*]." Still the urgency in Sri Aurobindo's remark startled Nirodbaran, as he had never seen Sri Aurobindo hurry for anything. "When the last revision was made and the Cantos were wound up, I said: 'It is finished now.' An impersonal smile of satisfaction greeted me, and he said: 'Ah, is it finished?' How well I remember that flicker of a smile which all of us craved for so long! 'What is left now?' was his next query. 'The Book of Death and the Epilogue'. 'Oh, that? We shall see about that later on.' That 'later on' never came and was not meant to come."¹⁰ For the subject matter of *Savitri* were the experiences of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. Death had not

9 The Mother: *Questions and Answers 1957-58*, p. 57.

10 Nirodbaran: *Twelve Years with Sri Aurobindo*, p. 266.

yet been experienced. And the Epilogue, the happy ending which in this case will be a life of fulfilment on Earth, lies somewhere in the future. Thus reached *Savitri*, in the words of Nirodbaran, its “incomplete completion.”

The “worse than worst” situation did not subside. The uraemic symptoms increased, for the moment of the great master act of the Avatar had come. After all the work Sri Aurobindo and the Mother had done, after all the burdens and the suffering, the black passages and the dawns of light, something had to be done which is unknown of in the history of humankind. As the Mother would say later: “For the Will of the Supreme to be expressed as it were in contradiction with the totality of the laws of the Manifestation, that happens just at the last moment – at the ultimate limit of possibility.”¹¹

The descent into death

Sri Aurobindo’s “death” was interpreted by most as the natural result of illness and/or advanced age.

In 1924 Sri Aurobindo had said that there were three causes that [then] could still bring about his death: 1. violent surprise or accident; 2. the action of old age; 3. his own choice, when finding it not possible to accomplish his [avataric] endeavour this time, *i.e.* establishing the supramental Consciousness on Earth, or if something would prove him that it was impossible. What happened in 1950, however, was a fourth possibility not foreseeable in 1924: that he would have to descend into death voluntarily, having in the meantime acquired the powers to do so, in order to make that his endeavour would not end in failure.

Who realized in December 1950 – and even now – that at that time, in that place on Earth, a mystery without

11 *Mother's Agenda 1961*, p. 289.

precedence was enacted on which humanity's future depended?

This "tactical" move was possible because the Avatar was present on Earth in his/her physical completeness, *i.e.* in a male/female body. If the Avatar had been present in only one body, the death of this body would have cancelled out any possibility of accomplishing the present mission successfully. (This illustrates how the planning and the completion of the mission of an Avatar is decided upon and pre-exists outside the dimensions, outside "the theatre" of the material world.)

Sri Aurobindo let himself gradually become more and more ill. In the last few days before his departure the Mother said: "He is losing interest in himself." The faithful Nirodbaran, gathering his courage in both hands, ventured at last to ask him: "Are you not using your force to cure yourself?" "No!" came the stunning reply. ... Then, Nirodbaran writes, we asked: "Why not? How is the disease going to be cured otherwise?" "Can't explain. You won't understand," was the curt reply. On this Nirodbaran reflects: "The big mystery as to his strange attitude and non-intervention still remains."¹² None understood, then as now, that Sri Aurobindo descended voluntarily into death to do something in the Inconscient which only the Avatar could execute, in order to prevent that his mission on Earth, in the short or the long term, would come to nothing.

According to the testimony of Nirodbaran, a medical doctor, Sri Aurobindo was never unconscious in the course of his "illness." "It was during this period [on the very last day] that he often came out of the trance and each time leaned forward, hugged and kissed Champaklal who was sitting by the side of his bed. Champaklal also hugged him

12 Nirodbaran: *Twelve Years with Sri Aurobindo*, p. 274.

in return. A wonderful sight it was, though so strangely unlike Sri Aurobindo who had rarely called us even by our names in these twelve years.”¹³ The Avatar took leave of humanity in one of its purest representatives.

At 11 p.m. on the 4th of December the Mother helped Sri Aurobindo take a drink. At midnight she came again into his room. This time he opened his eyes and the two looked at each other in a steady gaze. “We were the silent spectators of that crucial scene,” writes Nirodbaran.

At 1 a.m. on the 5th of December the Mother came again. Her face was calm, there was no trace of emotion. Sri Aurobindo was indrawn. The Mother asked Dr. Sanyal in a quiet tone: “What do you think? May I retire for an hour? ... Call me when the time comes.” On this Nirodbaran reflects: “It may appear strange to our human mind that the Mother could leave Sri Aurobindo at this critical moment.” Yet, the Mother’s clarification is quite different: “As long as I was in the room he could not leave his body. I used all my power to prevent him from departing. So there was a terrible tension in him: the inner will to leave and then this kind of thing [*i.e.* the Mother] that was holding him there, like that, in his body – because I knew that he was alive ... He had to give a sign so that I would go into my room, supposedly to rest (which I didn’t do). And as soon as I had gone out of the room, he left.” He drew up his arms and put them on his chest, one overlapping the other. “Then they called me back immediately.”¹⁴

Soon afterwards the main personalities in the Ashram were informed and the Ashram photographers called before the endless queue would form to pay their last homage. Two of the photographers’ testimonies are worth comparing.

13 *Id.*, p. 275.

14 *Mother’s Agenda*, vol. II, p. 288.

The first one recalls: "I remember clearly that Mother was sitting in the middle room beside Sri Aurobindo's, where the tiger skins and the Mother's paintings are displayed. She looked very dejected. She was stooping with a hand on her forehead, and did not notice me as I entered."

The second photographer, on the contrary, recalls: "When I entered Sri Aurobindo's abode through the door at the top of the staircase leading from the Meditation Hall, I instantly became petrified by the sight of the Mother sitting on a chair in the central room – the room in which her paintings adorn the walls and the tiger skins decorate the divan. She was seated between the two doors on the southern side of the narrow room with her eyes shut, lost in deep meditation. I have never seen her like that again. To me she looked like the personification of Mother Kali herself, so powerful was the appearance. I stood before her for some time."

The Mind of Light

On the last day before Sri Aurobindo left his body the Mother said: "Each time I enter the room, I see him pulling down the Supramental Light." And later: "All the supramental force he had accumulated in his body, he passed on to me and I received it." ¹⁵

In his memoir *A Call from Pondicherry*, Dr. Prabhat Sanyal wrote: "She stood there, near the feet of Sri Aurobindo, her hair had been undressed and was flowing about her shoulders." ¹⁶ Once again, to know what really happened in those climactic hours, we have to turn to the Mother herself. "He had accumulated in his body much 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 –

15 *Id.*, vol. X, p. 320.

16 Prabhat Sanyal: *op. cit.*

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. It was an extraordinary experience. ... When he left, there was a whole part – the most material part of the ‘descent’ [the formation in Sri Aurobindo] of the supramental body up to the [physical] mental – which visibly came out of his body, like this [gesture], and entered into mine. And this was so concrete that I felt the friction of the forces passing through the pores of the skin. It was as concrete as if it had been material.”¹⁷

Here it should be recalled that Sri Aurobindo and the Mother had divided the tasks for the accomplishment of their mission. Sri Aurobindo, secluded in his apartment, took upon him the Yoga of bringing down the Supermind into his physical body. As his physical body, like any other human body, was a formation of the terrestrial evolution, this also meant that he was bringing down the Supermind in the very stuff of the Earth.

The Mother had taken upon her the building up of the Ashram, materially as well as spiritually, and the yoga of the *sadhaks* and *sadhikas* who, as she once said, were enclosed in her consciousness “as in an egg.” Yet every new realization in his Yoga Sri Aurobindo transmitted to her, and everything that went on in the Ashram the Mother submitted to Sri Aurobindo. This “division of the tasks” is essential to understand what happened between them at the time of Sri Aurobindo’s departure.

“As soon as Sri Aurobindo withdrew from his body, what he has called the Mind of Light got realized in me,” the Mother said afterwards to K.D. Sethna. “The Supermind

17 *Mother’s Agenda*, vol. VIII, p. 311.

had descended long ago – very long ago – into the mind and even into the vital; it was working in the physical also but indirectly through those intermediaries. The question was about the direct action of the Supermind in the physical. Sri Aurobindo said it could be possible only if the physical mind received the supramental light: the physical mind was the instrument for direct action upon the most material. The physical mind receiving the supramental light Sri Aurobindo called the Mind of Light.”¹⁸

Sri Aurobindo’s leaving the body meant a traumatic change for the Mother in ways we cannot even try to imagine. Which human can have an idea of the relationship between the embodied Ishwara and Shakti? “There are no words which can describe the collapse that has been for it,” said the Mother later, and by “it” she meant her body. It had been *un coup de massue*, a sledgehammer blow ... “When Sri Aurobindo had left, I saw that I had to cut the connection with the psychic being, otherwise I would have gone with him. And as I had promised him that I would stay on and do the work, I had to do that: I literally closed the door on the psychic.”¹⁹ It would take almost two decades before she could venture, in 1969, to open that door again.

18 K.D. Sethna: *The Vision and Work of Sri Aurobindo*, p. 105.

Here again we have a glimpse of the formation of what the Mother has called the “overman”. The supramental transformation of the physical mind, although enormously important in itself, was still far from the total transformation of the body, but it was a considerable first step in the formation of the overman, the intermediary between the human and the supramental being. This highlights the significance of the Mother’s words spoken in 1958: “When leaving his body and entering into mine he said: ‘You will continue. You will go to the end of the work.’ ... Then I have told my body: ‘You will realize that intermediary “more-than-humanity” [surhumanité] between man and the supramental being’, in other words what I call the surhomme [overman]. And this is what I have been doing for the last eight years.” (*Mother’s Agenda*, vol. I, p. 160)

19 *Id.*, p. 162.

What was threatening the accomplishment of the avataric mission?

In *The Life Divine* Sri Aurobindo wrote: "There can be no artificial escape from this problem [evil, suffering and death] which has always troubled humanity and from which it has found no satisfying issue. The tree of the knowledge of good and evil with its sweet and bitter fruits is secretly rooted in the very nature of the Inconscience from which our being has emerged and on which it still stands as a nether soil and basis of our physical existence ... There can be no final solution until we have turned our inconscience into the greater consciousness, made the truth of self and spirit our life-basis and transformed our ignorance into a higher knowledge; a complete and radical transformation of our nature is the only true solution."²⁰ Only Supermind would do. But the bringing down of the Supermind into the body of the Earth, the complete and radical transformation of our nature, was precisely what the hostile forces were trying to prevent at any cost, for it would mean the end of their dominion over the Earth and humanity.

One reads of many masters in several yogic disciplines who possessed the power to lay down their body at will. The difference with Sri Aurobindo's master act was that he went into death in full consciousness and while keeping the vital and mental sheaths which, let us not forget it, were supramentally transformed. And this he did not in search of escape or dissolution, but to intervene and effect a change somewhere at the bottom of existence, in what he called "the Inconscient," worse than hell. "He was not compelled to leave his body," said the Mother. "He chose to do so for reasons so sublime that they are beyond the reach of human mentality."

20 Sri Aurobindo: *The Life Divine*, p. 650.

But why? The Mother's "*Pourquoi?*" resounds in so many of her conversations. "He has left before telling us what he was doing. I am absolutely busy making a path in a virgin forest – more than a virgin forest."²¹ (Perhaps she was not allowed to know because she – her body – had to do the job. It may not have been permitted to have a knowledge beyond its effort.) "He told me: 'The world is not ready.'" It looks as if "the world" here means the whole of the manifestation at this point of its evolution. For that was the burden the Avatar had to take upon him, which needed to be transformed in its foundations, and which kept resisting him.

In his marvellous poem "A God's Labour" – which might also be called "The Avatar's Song" or "The Ballad of the Avatar" – Sri Aurobindo had described exactly this problem.

*A voice cried, "Go where none has gone!
Dig deeper, deeper yet
Till you reach the grim foundation stone
And knock at the keyless gate."
I saw that a falsehood was planted deep
At the very root of things
Where the grey Sphinx guards God's riddle sleep
On the Dragon's outspread wings.*

True, "the keyless gate," "the grey Sphinx," and "the Dragon's outspread wings," all concrete elements of his experience, are little more than poetic metaphors to us. But "God's riddle sleep" is clearly the dark Inconscient, and that was what Sri Aurobindo descended into for an operation which only the Avatar, the very Divine, could perform. We find something similar in his sonnet "The Inconscient Foundation:"

*My soul regards its veiled subconscious base,
All the dead obstinate symbols of the past,*

21 *Mother's Agenda*, vol. II, p. 285.

*The hereditary moulds, the stamps of race
 Are upheld to sight, the old imprints effaced.
 In a downpour of supernal light it reads
 The black Inconscient's enigmatic script –
 Recorded in a hundred shadowy screeds
 An inert world's obscure enormous drift ...
 There slept the tables of the Ignorance,
 There the dumb dragon edicts of her sway,
 The scriptures of Necessity and Chance. ...*

In *Savitri* we find Sri Aurobindo again confronting “the black inertia of our base” and seeking for ‘the secret key of Nature’s change:”

*The ordeal he suffered of evil's absolute reign ...
 Incapable of motion or of force,
 In Matter's blank denial goaled and blind,
 Pinned to the black inertia of our base
 He treasured between his hands his flickering soul ...
 Into the abysmal secrecy he came
 Where darkness peers from her mattress, grey and nude,
 And stood on the last locked subconscious's floor
 Where Being slept unconscious of its thoughts
 And built the world not knowing what it built. ...
 He saw the secret key of Nature's change.
 Then ...
 Torn were the formats of the primal Night
 And shattered the stereotypes of the Ignorance ...
 He imposed upon dark atom and dumb mass
 The diamond script of the Imperishable ...
 Matter and Spirit mingled and were one.²²*

As the Mother said: “All goes well as long as there is not the will of transformation. It is the protest against the will of transformation. ... It is the introduction of something totally new into Matter, and therefore the body protests ...

22 Sri Aurobindo: *Savitri*, pp. 230-32, *passim*.

There is a whole part of Nature which is collaborating, but not in this. Distinctly, clearly, it wells up from the subconscious and the inconscient. ... It's something that wells up from below ... All the time it comes up from below."²³ This was the reason why Sri Aurobindo had to descend into death. That he was successful, that he found the key to the impossible and cured the source of darkness at the bottom of things, we know from the fact that hardly six years later the Supermind manifested in the Earth atmosphere, and a new world was born.

Triumph

There is no known person who at the time of Sri Aurobindo's passing had the slightest inkling of what was happening. "You wouldn't understand," he had said. We have seen how, during that extraordinary episode, the behaviour of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother also was time and again misinterpreted in a too human way – misinterpretations which, written down by the eye-witnesses, would become part of the standard story built around the event. If we know a little better now, if we have at least some ground for a more meaningful interpretation, it is because the Mother in later years has reminisced about those days on several occasions.

The result of the lack of understanding was, in many, doubt and desperation. What use was it to continue dedicating one's life to a supramental transformation and the conquest of death when the Guru, or Master, or Avatar and bringer of the new vision had succumbed himself to death? Therefore the Mother gave the following message on the 14th of December: "To grieve is an insult to Sri Aurobindo, who is here with us, conscious and alive."

At least there had been signs that Sri Aurobindo had not left in the ordinary way. Nirodbaran wrote in his *Twelve*

23 *Mother's Agenda*, 15 July 1961.

Years: "I also saw, to my utter wonder and delight, that the entire body was suffused with a golden crimson hue, so fresh, so magnificent. It seemed to have lifted my pall of gloom and I felt light and happy without knowing why. ... Pointing to the Light the Mother said: 'If this Supramental Light remains we shall keep the body in a glass case.' It did not remain and on the fifth day, on the 9th of December in the evening, the body was laid in a vault."²⁴

And K.D. Sethna, many years afterwards, would write in *Mother India*, the Ashram periodical of which he was the editor: "I marked that there was nothing like what people usually speak of when they stand before someone dead. They refer to the expression of peace on the face. I saw the very opposite. Certainly not any stamp of agitation but the unmoving source of a sovereign dynamism. A tremendous power seemed to emanate from the face and figure. Wave after wave of it filled the room and surrounded me. I perceived an overwhelming air of Conquest ... From the flaring nostrils to the way in which the legs were stretched out, slightly apart, there was a natural aspect of domination. Spontaneously, effortlessly an assertion of empire could be experienced. Here was a silence, transcendent of all creation – an ultimate absolute of the ineffable – from which originally had flowed forth a creative energy and which now was sending out a power of re-creating all life. Such was the mysterious death of Sri Aurobindo."²⁵ The poet that was K.D. Sethna had seen better than most of his less intuitive co-disciples.

"What we are doing will be a beginning, not a completion," Sri Aurobindo had written in a letter.²⁶ He, as no one else, knew how difficult his envisioned transformation of

24 Nirodbaran: *Twelve Years with Sri Aurobindo*, p. 280.

25 *Mother India*, December 1991, p. 5.

26 Sri Aurobindo: *Letters on Yoga*, p. 10.

Homo sapiens actually was, beginning with the bringing down of the Supermind into the body of the Earth and continuing with the transformation of the human body, as it were petrified in its evolutionary structures. The manifestation of the Supermind had been felt to be imminent in 1938-39, a possibility which may be reckoned as the main reason of the fierce counteraction by the hostile forces: the Second World War. At that point Sri Aurobindo was not even confronted by the possibility of the "fiasco" which threatened his and the Mother's mission. This may give us at least some idea of the dimensions of the whole enterprise and of the greatness of the two Protagonists who stood up, Sri Aurobindo in 1950 and the Mother in the following years, against the assembled Powers still holding the entire manifestation in the palm of their hand.

Now we are further again. Sri Aurobindo's intervention at the root of things has enabled the manifestation of the Supermind in 1956. His words about the capability of the Mother's body have proved true, and in the following years she has gradually realized the archetype of the supramental body by means of her physical body. By these two realizations the appearance of the next step in the evolution, the supramental being, has been brought nearer centuries if not millennia. Ours, humans of goodwill and aspiration, is the task of the intermediaries between the two species, of building the bridge over an enormous evolutionary gap.

In this we are not alone. If we can tune ourselves to them, we are helped by four powerful aids: the Supramental Force, active since 1956; the Consciousness of the Overman, active since 1 January 1969²⁷; Sri Aurobindo's presence; and the Mother's presence. For Sri Aurobindo's and the Mother's Work of building the New World cannot

27 See *Notes on the Way*, pp. 117 ff.

have been limited to their years of incarnation in a physical body. Helpers of the progress of the Earth and humanity during the whole of the past²⁸, they are undoubtedly there to help them now, after their initiation of the new evolution in its critical present phase.

28 The footnote corresponding to this call is missing.

9

Sri Aurobindo and the Big Bang

*Whatever India has to offer should be stated to the
West in language that the West can understand.*

Sri Aurobindo¹

Rationality is a specific function of the human being, so often called “the mental being” by Sri Aurobindo. There is no doubt that his view was the most encompassing ever, which is the reason why words like “integral” and “synthetic” are keywords in it. His affirmation was “a

1 Sri Aurobindo: *Essays Divine and Human*, p. 65.

catholic affirmation," his faith "a faith which the highest Reason, the widest and most patient reflection do not deny, but rather affirm." ² It may therefore be said that Sri Aurobindo's teaching is the most rational, for it expounds an integration or synthesis of all material and spiritual knowledge from the past and the present, and an open attitude to embrace and find a place for everything. Because all is That. In the practice of the Yoga one has to be one-pointed in one's heart, but in one's mind, as a human incarnation in the present time, one has to be open and wide-ranging, therein following the example of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother.

"We have to find a truth that can entirely reconcile Spirit and Matter and can give to both their due portion in Life and their due justification in Thought, amercing neither of its rights, denying in neither the sovereign truth from which even its errors, even the exclusiveness of its exaggerations draw so constant a strength. For wherever there is an extreme statement [like the tenets of materialistic science] that makes such a powerful appeal to the human mind, we may be sure that we are standing in the presence of no mere error, superstition or hallucination, but of some sovereign fact disguised which demands our fealty and will avenge itself if denied or excluded. ... It is therefore through the utmost unification of Spirit and Matter that we shall best arrive at their reconciling truth and so at some strongest foundation for a reconciling practice in the inner life of the individual and his outer existence." ³

True to this attitude, Sri Aurobindo followed with constant interest the goings-on in the world, including the main discoveries in science, where the revolutionary new

2 Sri Aurobindo: *The Life Divine*, p. 37.

3 *Id.*, p. 29.

theories of relativity and quantum mechanics were the order of the day. Many statements in his writings show how much he appreciated the efforts of the scientists to understand Nature and to advance a step further towards the Truth. Yet he was also in possession of a spiritual insight and knowledge which made the limitations of positivist science – a science of process, not of essentials or Reality – crystal clear.

About the theory of evolution, for instance, he wrote: "A theory of spiritual evolution is not identical with a scientific theory of form-evolution and physical life-evolution; it must stand on its own inherent justification: it may accept the scientific account of physical evolution as a support or element, but the support is not indispensable. The scientific theory is concerned only with the outward and visible machinery and process, with the detail of Nature's execution, with the physical development of things in Matter and the law of development of Life and Mind in Matter; its account of the process may have to be considerably changed or may be dropped altogether in the light of new discovery, but that will not affect the self-evident fact of a spiritual evolution, an evolution of Consciousness, a progression of the soul's manifestation in material existence."⁴

What was to Sri Aurobindo self-evident fact of spiritual knowledge, here brought to bear on the biological theory of evolution, may be equally well applied to other branches of science. Indeed, Sri Aurobindo's writings are strewn with direct or indirect reflections on science and spirituality, and with comparisons between them. As these remarks are often made in passing, they may escape the attention of the reader. In this talk we will consider one such passage in *Savitri*, a few lines which contain a wealth of meaning.

4 *Id.*, p. 868.

The Big Bang

Two months before he descended into death, Sri Aurobindo seemed in a hurry to finish “his real work,” this to the astonishment of Nirodbaran, his amanuensis, who writes in his memoirs that he had never seen Sri Aurobindo hurry for anything. By his “real work” Sri Aurobindo meant *Savitri*, the epic which he had been rewriting and expanding for decades. If anything, Sri Aurobindo’s concern shows the importance attached by him to this major opus of his later years. In it he laid down the essence not only of his own knowledge and experience but also of the experience of the Mother, as she has said herself. We can find her supreme praise for *Savitri* in a conversation which Mona Sarkar, then a young *sadhak*, has published under the title *Sweet Mother – Harmonies of Light*. There is no doubt that Sri Aurobindo, who had written *The Poetry of the Future*, conceived *Savitri* as his poetry of the future, a poetry of Truth in the age-old tradition of the truth-seers, the *rishis*, who formulated the mantric lines of the *Veda* and the *Upanishads*. Putting it all together, one might call *Savitri* Sri Aurobindo’s testament.

As the Mother said in the aforementioned conversation, Sri Aurobindo shows us in *Savitri* the main structure and the sense of the divine manifestation which we call the universe, mantrically formulated from the largest spiritual knowledge and perception ever possessed by an incarnated being. We find in the epic a description of the universe and its origin, the gradations or worlds of involution and evolution, the beings of those worlds, the evolution of life on Earth, the past, present and future of the human being in its changing environments, life and death, the aspects and relation of Spirit and Matter, the meaning of it all and the ways of the Divine with it. And much more. Many statements refer directly to science in a positive or negative

way. As Sri Aurobindo wrote for the future, this cannot but have been intentionally. It is the aim of this talk to examine one such statement:

*A Mystery's process is the universe.
At first was laid a strange and anomalous base,
A void, a cipher of some secret Whole,
Where zero held infinity in its sum
And All and Nothing were a single term,
An eternal negative, a matrix Nought:
Into its forms the Child is ever born
Who lives for ever in the vasts of God.
A slow reversal's movement then took place:
A gas belched out from some invisible Fire,
Of its dense rings were formed these million stars ...*⁵

In these lines Sri Aurobindo describes the origin of the universe, with in the last two his evocation of what is now commonly called the "Big Bang." It should be kept in mind that this was written before 1950.

All peoples known in history – and most probably all others also – have wondered about how the world in which they lived originated. There were the seasons which regulated their lives, the unknown beyond the horizon which encircled their lives, the immense cupola of the sky along which the sun and moon travelled and where the stars shone bright at night, and the miracles of birth, life and death. Each people has its own story about the beginnings, told from generation to generation, with gods, giants and primeval beings doing amazing deeds. However, there are no known stories in which the cosmos began at one time, at one point – humanity, yes, successive humanities, yes, but never the existence of the world. The inexplicable was mostly explained by imagining cycles of immense duration,

5 Sri Aurobindo: *Savitri*, pp. 100-01.

improving or worsening the lot of the creatures of the gods, and sometimes of the gods themselves. With one exception: the Hebrews. Their holy book told about an absolute beginning, when Yahweh created heaven and earth, and everything in it. According to *Genesis*, the book in which this is narrated, the world had a beginning.

Physics and cosmology, successful in working out several theories of cosmological mechanics, preferred at first not to trouble itself with an explanation of how the cosmic clockwork had been wound up. They supposed, for simplicity's sake, that the universe had existed from infinity and would continue existing in infinity, eternal and unchanging. Yet this opportunistic viewpoint began to be questioned in the 1920s. Because of the advances in nuclear physics, the composition and the life histories of the various types of stars began to be known. Edwin Hubble's astonishing discoveries seemed to show that the universe was expanding. All this led to a model of the universe which is still presented in the text books and by the media as the standard model (but which is in fact severely questioned).

"We can say that the Big Bang theory is currently regarded as a well-established theory, the standard-model acceptable to most physicists, and that the questions that remain do not cast serious suspicions on it." Thus wrote Kitty Ferguson in *The Fire in the Equations*, published in 1994.⁶ Lee Smolin, however, opines: "We, who are used to the idea now, can only speculate about how hard it was to accept the notion that the universe might have had a beginning."⁷ Indeed, in 1933 the universe was still assumed to be eternal and unchanging, and when Albert Einstein, then already a celebrity, endorsed the first propositions of

6 Kitty Ferguson: *The Fire in the Equations*, p. 126.

7 Lee Smolin: *The Trouble with Physics*, p. 151.

something like a Big Bang model, he was vehemently attacked and even ridiculed. (In the history of science, there has never been a new proposition which was not attacked and covered with ridicule.)

Around 1950, in the years Sri Aurobindo wrote the lines quoted from *Savitri*, the controversy raged between Hoyle, Bondi and Gold's "Steady State" model of the universe and the theory of the explosion, the Big Bang at the beginning of time. In 1953 the majority of astronomers had not yet accepted the Big Bang model of the universe, and clung to their conservative view of an eternal universe. Throughout the 1950s the scientific community remained divided. In 1959 the *Science News-Letter* conducted a survey and asked thirty-three prominent astronomers to declare their position on the controversy. "The results showed that eleven experts backed the Big Bang, eight stood by the Steady State model, and the remaining fourteen were either undecided or thought that both models were wrong." It was only in the 1960s that the Big Bang model became preponderant.⁸ The 1964 discovery of the cosmic background radiation by Arno Penzias and Robert Wilson, and later the mapping of the entire sky by the COBE satellite, were supposed to confirm the theory. Still, in a 1980 poll, 69% of the astronomers supported the Big Bang, only 2% stuck with the Steady State theory, and 29% were unsure.⁹

This means that Sri Aurobindo wrote what he had seen as the truth at a time that science was still far from having converted to the Big Bang, namely that "a gas exploded from an invisible fire," and that "of its dense rings were formed these million stars" – in other words, that the material universe had begun with an explosion.

8 Simon Singh: *Big Bang*, pp. 365 ff.

9 *Id.*, p. 438 (emphasis added).

According to the current Big Bang theory, the universe originated from something smaller than an atom, even smaller than the nucleus of an atom, labelled a “singularity.” Reducing, in accordance with the laws of physics and cosmology known at present, the expanding universe backwards to its ever smaller past, the theorists have ended with something that was an unknowable, something of which only one instance existed. The astronomically big had, oh wonder, originated from the indefinably small. All had originated from nothing.

This is an example of how science, epitome of the rational and opponent of the mystical, accepts the undefinable, even as a basis of its theoretical constructs. (Another example was Newton’s gravity, exerting a magical action at a distance.) All the same, it must be said that serious science has never been comfortable with the explanation. Extrapolating backwards, from the known to the unknown (from the perceived universe to an inexplicable event 13.7 billion years ago), is a risky and scientifically unjustifiable way of proceeding. This is why string theory and M-theory, much flaunted but as yet little proven, propose several solutions to the problem, accept a universe or universes before and after the Big Bang, and even fantasize about a “multiverse” with an infinite number of dimensions which would explain all things imaginable.

Sri Aurobindo gives the solution of the mysterious and momentous happening at the origin of the universe: a gas belched out *from some invisible fire*. This places the “singularity” squarely in dimensions which must remain forever foreign to materialistic science, but without which Reality, including material reality, will never be explainable. For the “invisible fire” in question is not what is commonly understood as “fire,” it is Agni, the mystic fire of the *Vedas* “which is hymned as the upbuilder of the worlds, the secret

Immortal in men and things." It is the central Fire of Heraclitus, Pythagoras and the Stoics, "the heart of Zeus." "In the Pythagorean cosmology the centre of the world is occupied by a fire (different from the Sun) around which orbit all the heavenly bodies (including the Sun), and that fire is connected with the godhead, Hestia, responsible for the movement of the world and for its organization. Here the fire occupies a central position and an organizing function ..." (André Pichot)¹⁰ Sri Aurobindo, rediscoverer of the secret of the *Veda*, wrote: "It is a fact that Agni is the basis of forms, as the Sankhya pointed out long ago, *i.e.* the fiery principle in the three powers radiant, electric and gaseous (the Vedic trinity of Agni) is the agent in producing liquid and solid forms of what is called Matter."¹¹

The quantum vacuum

Yet all this is a comment on the last two lines of our quotation. The previous lines are as revealing:

*A Mystery's process is the universe.
At first was laid a strange and anomalous base,
A void, a cipher of some secret Whole,
Where zero held infinity in its sum
And All and Nothing were a single term,
An eternal negative, a matrix Nought ...*

What Sri Aurobindo mentions here is "a strange and anomalous base" for the event that is to take place: the sudden appearance of a material universe. At the time he wrote this it was thought that nothing could precede the primal explosion. Russell Stannard, for instance, tries to explain: "The Big Bang did not take place at some well-defined point within an already existing space – like a terrorist bomb

10 André Pichot: *Histoire de la notion de vie*, p. 119.

11 Sri Aurobindo: *Letters on Yoga*, p. 215.

going off under a car in a particular street in a particular town. Before the Big Bang there was no space. It was the expansion of space itself, from 'nothing,' that was responsible for the phenomenon of the expansion of the universe."¹² Here Sri Aurobindo names the indescribable making the appearance of matter possible, and in which we can discern two matters of special interest.

The first one is that "a void" had to be created. Metaphysically, the Divine has always been seen as a plenum, an absolute fullness in which there can be no gaps or holes. The Divine is the Infinite that is a Point of absolute density, and a Point that is the Infinite of absolute density. In his non-material manifestation there are no gaps, for a gap or vacuity would mean a flaw in the divine fullness and perfection. Contrary to modern science, which has found that matter is for the most part empty space, in the wisdom traditions the Divine has always been conceived as a total density. Consequently, Arthur Lovejoy writes in his classic work on *The Great Chain of Being*: "The perfection of the Absolute Being must be an intrinsic attribute, a property inherent in the Idea of it; and since the being and attribute of all other things are derivative from this perfection because they are logically implicit in it, there is no room for any contingency anywhere in the universe."¹³

According to Sri Aurobindo "a void" had to be created in the fullness to make place for a material universe. However, this void is not an emptiness or nothing, it is "a cipher of some secret Whole, / Where zero held infinity in its sum / And All and Nothing were a single term." It may here be recalled that, in another, complementary approach to the creation of matter, Sri Aurobindo and the Mother said that

12 Russell Stannard: *Science and Wonders*, p. 144.

13 Arthur Lovejoy: *The Great Chain of Being*, p. 54.

matter is the first produce of the Inconscient, the dark Zero that is the contrary into which the Divine has plunged. At the very beginning of *Savitri* we read:

*A fathomless zero occupied the world.
A power of fallen boundless self awake
Between the first and the last Nothingness ...*

Here is that “zero” again that held infinity in its sum, and which Sri Aurobindo would confirm by asserting that “The Inconscient too is infinite.”¹⁴

The other matter of special interest is the resemblance of the lines of our quotation with elements of the quantum theory known as “the quantum vacuum.” (It should be stated here explicitly that this comparison is not meant as a scientific explanation intending to show that science proves spirituality. All is That, science too. But spirituality is holistic, based on experience. Science is an activity of the mind, restricting itself to matter as perceived by the senses. Spirituality can know now; to really know, science will have to break through the boundaries of materialism it has imposed on itself, and take up the exploration of the realms of life and mind before it can found a durable knowledge.)

Decades before Sri Aurobindo wrote the quoted passage in *Savitri*, he had already noted, interpreting the old scriptures: “As in the immobile ether arises, first sign of the creative impulse of Nature, vibration, *Shabda*, and this vibration is a line of etheric movement, is ether contacting ether in its own field of mobile self-force and that primal stir is sufficient to initiate all forms and forces, even such is the original movement of the Infinite. But the vibration is not the stir of any material force or substance and this contact is not material contact. This is a vibration of consciousness in spiritual essence; this is the contact of consciousness with

14 Sri Aurobindo: *Savitri*, p. 318.

itself in spiritual substance.”¹⁵ The language is quite different from the modern scientific terminology. (To Sri Aurobindo ‘ether’ was ‘space’ and may become so again in physics.) But the point is that what at the time was a novel theory in physics is stated as fact in a *magnum opus* by Sri Aurobindo, intended to contain his spiritual legacy. Moreover, terms like “anomalous base” and “the etheric movement of vibration” bring to mind the quantum theory according to which virtual particles arise continuously out of “the void” and may be at the origin of the universe.

For “one of the more bizarre consequences of quantum uncertainty is that matter can appear out of nowhere ... Quantum mechanics permits energy to appear spontaneously from nothing as long as it disappears again rapidly ... In fact, the fluctuating quantum energy of the vacuum causes the temporary creation of all manner of ‘virtual’ particles ... The apparently inert vacuum is actually a sea of restless activity, full of ghostly particles which appear, interact and vanish.”¹⁶ (Paul Davies) What we normally regard as empty space is actually an ocean of seething activity. “In this remarkable scenario, the entire cosmos simply comes out of nowhere, completely in accordance with the laws of quantum physics, and creates along the way all the matter and energy needed to build the universe we now see.”¹⁷ But then the question arises: what produced the quantum forces that made the virtual particles, and consequently the universe, possible? Davies’ “out of nowhere” looks much like “out of nothing.” And as Sri Aurobindo wrote: “A Nothing which is full of all potentialities is the most complete opposition of terms and things possible.”¹⁸

15 Sri Aurobindo: *Essays Divine and Human*, p. 198.

16 Paul Davies and John Gribbin: *The Matter Myth*, p. 138.

17 Paul Davies: *God and the New Physics*, p. 216.

18 Sri Aurobindo: *The Life Divine*, p. 105.

Is the Big Bang generally accepted?

From the popular literature and the media one would gather that the Big Bang, the explosive event at the origin of the universe, is now the consensus in science. In the general mind the mysterious explosion of a nothing that became everything has lost most of its shocking mystery, as scientists assert that they know all about it up to a fraction of time so small that it requires a long chain of zeros to write it out. Yet the scientist Hubert Reeves warned recently: "That the observations support the idea of the Big Bang only means that it is a highly credible theory, not that it is an absolute and definitive truth." And in a serious popular science magazine like the French *Sciences et Avenir* one finds headlines like "Did the Big Bang really happen?" or "The mystery of the origins of the universe is far from solved."

What is more, there are still several models of the universe. As we have seen, there is the dominant Big Bang model and the Steady State model, even at present adhered to by a few cosmologists. But now, based on the "string" and M(membrane) theories, there are also models which bypass the initial explosion and say that the universe started off as a dense sea of black holes; or that it was sparked by a collision between two "membranes" floating in higher-dimensional space; or that our universe was originally ripped from a larger entity, and that countless baby universes will be born from the wreckage of ours. It would seem that there is hardly a cosmological theory in science fiction that is not backed up by theoretical physics, or made acceptable by the addition of a number of dimensions or universes.

Moreover, the "Cambridge Group" consisting of Hoyle, Bondi and Gold, presented as late as 1993 a revamped steady-state model which posited that there has been a succession of "little big bangs" like the one that created our

universe. And Halton Arp, former assistant of the great Edwin Hubble himself, remains a stubborn opponent of the standard Big Bang theory. But one of the most impressive stances against the Big Bang was that by John Maddox, for years the physics editor of the prestigious science journal *Nature*. In 1989 he wrote in an editorial, with the argumentative title "Down with the Big Bang": "Apart from being philosophically unacceptable, the Big Bang is an over-simple view of how the Universe began, and it is unlikely to survive the decade ahead." It has survived even two decades ahead, but it is now, as mentioned above, one among several rival theories which are not yet sufficiently simplified to become the standard fare of the media.

This means that if one reads statements of the following sort: "We can be very confident about tracing the history [of the universe] back to within about one-billionth of a second after the universe began," one should question the confidence. Statements like this, by the arch-scientific-materialist and fertile popular author Peter Atkins, belong to the gospel of the Church of Scientism. Steven Weinberg, Nobel Prize winner in physics and the author of *The First Three Minutes*, is less forward, and writes in that very book: "I cannot deny a feeling of unreality in writing about the first three minutes [let alone the first one-billionth of a second], as if we really know what we are talking about."¹⁹

The main problem is that present-day cosmology uses the mathematical instruments of present-day physics to calculate fantastically complex events in a past many billions of years ago and totally different from the present circumstances. New technological instruments, like the Hubble and Kepler telescopes, do allow to see billions of light years into the past of the cosmos, but the interpretation of the obtained

19 Steven Weinberg: *The First Three Minutes*, p. 7.

data rests on theories which are quite novel and changing all the time. Serious doubt has arisen about the fact that the laws and constants of physics are absolute. This means that the problem lies in the extrapolations back in time, in applying what is deemed valid now to what happened then. David Shramm acknowledges that, as cosmologists venture further back toward the beginning of time, their theories become more speculative. And Howard Georgi confided to the science journalist John Horgan: "You're trying to look at the present-day universe and extrapolate back, which is an interesting but dangerous thing to do, because there may have been accidents that had big effects."²⁰ By "accidents" Georgi meant events the nature of which is unknown and cannot be known or foreseen in the context of the present scientific paradigm.

Pralaya: the Big Bang and the Big Crunch

All things we know of originate in one way or another, exist for a shorter or longer time, disintegrate and die. This is how we perceive their life cycle in time. Until recently this life cycle has been projected, at least in the West, on the whole of existence, considering our present universe as the one and only. But the Brahman is eternal, and if it has manifested at one moment of its existence, it must have manifested and will be manifesting continuously in all its eternity. "The universe persists or always comes back into manifestation, because the will to become is eternal and must be so since it is the inherent will of an eternal Existence," wrote Sri Aurobindo.²¹

In *The Life Divine* we read also: "The emergence of the movement from the Immutable is an eternal phenomenon

20 John Horgan: *The End of Science*, p. 104.

21 Sri Aurobindo: *The Life Divine*, pp. 695-696.

and it is only because we cannot conceive it in that beginningless, endless, ever-new moment which is the eternity of the Timeless that our notions and conceptions are compelled to place it in a temporal eternity of successive duration to which are attached the ideas of an always recurrent beginning, middle and end.”²² Which means that we do not have “any surety that there ever was or ever will be a period in time when no form of universe, no play of being is represented to itself in the eternal Conscious-Being.”²³ “[The ancient Hindu] believes that Nature has repeated itself over and over again, as indeed it is probable she has done, resuming briefly and in sum at each start what she had previously accomplished in detail, slowly and with labour. It is this great secular movement in cycles, perpetually self-repeating, yet perpetually progressing, which is imaged and set forth in the symbols of the *Puranas*.”²⁴

In this view the ancient Hindu concept of *pralaya*, or dissolution of a universe, is part of the eternal process of manifestation. This concept was even less than a century ago thought of as part of the old mythical Hindu lore, just like the cycles of time were part of the mythology of ancient Greece. Now, amazingly, not only is the universe supposed to have burst forth from a magic primordial particle, the question “what came before the Big Bang?” has become scientifically legitimate, as has the question what to expect after the Big Crunch, when our universe will have died. Paul Steinhardt and Neil Turok, for instance, have published a book with the title *Endless Universe: Beyond the Big Bang*, and consequently beyond the collapse that will be the Big Crunch. “They say they were motivated to form a new theory as the Big Bang came to require more and more

22 *Id.*, p. 83.

23 *Id.*, p. 110.

24 *Sri Aurobindo Archives and Research*, 1979, vol. I, p. 9.

exotic elements – inflation, dark matter, dark energy – to make it fit observations.” And string theory has spawned not only the possibility of a multitude of universes, a “multiverse,” but an infinity of them.

Paul Steinhardt is not a science fiction writer, he is Albert Einstein Professor of Science at Princeton. His opinion: “Recently some cosmologists have been exploring the possibility that the universe is exponentially older [than thought until now]. In this picture, *the evolution of the universe is cyclic*. The Big Bang is not the beginning of space and time but a sudden creation of hot matter and radiation that marks the transition from one period of expansion and cooling to the next cycle of evolution. Each cycle might last a trillion years, say. Fourteen billion years marks the time since the last infusion of matter and radiation, but this is brief compared to the total age of the universe. Each cycle lasts about a trillion years and the number of cycles in the past may have been ten to the googol power or more!”²⁵ “Googol” is a fancy word that means an unimaginably big number. All at once science too discovers the enormous time spans of “a day of Brahman” and “a year of Brahman” in the Hindu scriptures, time spans which seem to have some meaning after all in the mental construct of an “oscillating universe,” in other words “the cyclic world revisited,” to borrow a phrase from Paul Davies.

In Sri Aurobindo’s interpretation, however, this is not the senseless recurrence of a Nietzschean eternal and eternally exact replication. “[The ancient Hindu] believes that Nature has repeated [her cycles] over and over again, as indeed it is probable she has done, resuming briefly and in sum at each start what she had previously accomplished in

25 In John Brockman (ed.): *What is Your Dangerous Idea?* p. 126 (emphasis added).

detail, slowly and with labour. It is this great secular movement in cycles, *perpetually self-repeating, yet perpetually progressing*, which is imaged and set forth in the symbols of the Puranas." ²⁶

Multiple universes and tupal worlds

In "The Book of the Traveller of the Worlds" in *Savitri*, Sri Aurobindo has given an unprecedented description of "the world-stair," the tremendous hierarchic scale of worlds that form the divine manifestation. All consist of their specific substance – vital, mental, spiritual; all are peopled with countless beings; all are perpetual and exist in complete contentment according to their nature. Sri Aurobindo has called them "tupal" worlds, because they are not subject to change. In these countless gradations of existence, however, there is one world where change is the law: our material, evolutionary world. Matter is an evolutionary product of the Inconscient into which the Absolute has plunged to experience the *Lila* of rediscovering himself. Matter may be considered the lowest form of substance, although it too is the Divine.

"The material universe is only the façade of an immense building which has other structures behind it, and it is only if one knows the whole that one can have some knowledge of the truth of the material universe. There are vital, mental and spiritual ranges behind which give the material its significance." (*Letters on Yoga*) ²⁷ "The immense material world in which we live is not the sole reality but only one of innumerable potential and existent universes; all of them need not have either Matter as we know it or the Inconscient for their base. Indeed this world of matter

26 *Sri Aurobindo Archives and Research*, 1979, vol. I, p. 9 (emphasis added).

27 Sri Aurobindo: *Letters on Yoga*, p. 212.

is itself dependent on many planes of consciousness and existence which are not material; for these have not this gross substance as their foundation or as the medium of their instrumentation of energy and consciousness or their primary condition of existence."²⁸

As we have seen, according to Sri Aurobindo the creation of a new universe or universes is a phenomenon of the Eternal that must be continuously repeated. "For what was that portentous date in the history of eternal Nothing on which Being was born out of it or when will come that other date equally formidable on which an unreal all will relapse into the perpetual void?" he asks ironically.²⁹ And he answers: "Creation has no beginning and no end. It is only a particular creation that can be said to have a beginning and an end."³⁰

"For when was the beginning? At no moment in Time, for the beginning is at every moment; the beginning always was, always is and always shall be. The divine beginning is before Time and in Time and beyond Time for ever. The Eternal Infinite and One is an endless beginning.

"And where is the middle? There is no middle; for the middle is only the junction of the perpetual end and the eternal beginning; it is the sign of a creation which is new at every moment. The creation was for ever, is for ever, shall be for ever. The eternal Infinite and One is the magical middle term of his own existence; it is he that is this beginningless and endless creation.

"And when is the end? There is no end. At no conceivable moment can there be a cessation. For all end of things is

28 Sri Aurobindo: *Essays Divine and Human*, p. 241.

29 Sri Aurobindo: *The Life Divine*, p. 32.

30 Sri Aurobindo: *Letters on Yoga*, p. 252.

the beginning of new things which are still the same One in an ever developing and ever recurring figure. Nothing can be destroyed for all is He who is for ever. The Eternal Infinite and One is the unimaginable end that is the never closing gate upon new interminable vistas of his glory.”³¹

The central problem of science, as practiced since “the scientific revolution” in the 17th century, is that it recognizes only matter as the substance of reality and the object of its study. The wisdom of ages in East and West has held that the layers of reality are those of matter, the life forces, mind, and the spirit, in the traditions called the “Chain of Being.” Since Lorentz and Einstein materialistic science has to accept from its formulas that matter equals energy, and that each term can be transformed into the other.³² Two of the basic tools of the scientific method are measurement and mathematics, the third one being systematic experimentation. However, measurement and mathematics are only applicable to material objects, and materialistic science has itself already shot far past the boundaries of matter into an occultism where the intellect feels lost. Of this the paradoxes of quantum mechanics are a telling example.

“Neither the laws or the possibilities of physical Nature can be entirely known unless we know also the laws and possibilities of supraphysical Nature,” wrote Sri Aurobindo in *The Human Cycle*.³³ And elsewhere: “Having examined and explained Matter by physical methods and in the language of the material Brahman, – it is not really explained, but let that pass, – having failed to carry that way of knowledge into other fields beyond a narrow limit,

31 Sri Aurobindo: *Essays Divine and Human*, p. 220.

32 The complete formula will prove to be, as taught by the great traditions: matter = energy = consciousness.

33 Sri Aurobindo: *The Human Cycle*, p. 78.

we must then at least consent to scrutinize life and mind by methods appropriate to them and explain their facts in the language and tokens of the vital and mental Brahman.”³⁴

Western scientific materialism, after initially accepting the Book of God (the *Bible*) and the Book of Nature, as Galileo and Kepler did, has rejected the former and accepts exclusively the latter, not realizing that it is trying to decipher an amputated version. To solve its own fundamental problems, to approach closer to reality, and to see ultimately the face of Truth, it will have to recognize the other levels and dimensions of the world. “If science is to turn her face towards the Divine, it must be a new science not yet developed which deals directly with the forces of the life-world and of Mind and so arrives at what is beyond Mind; but present-day science cannot do that.”³⁵

The way science sees itself has changed since the publication in 1972 by Thomas Kuhn of *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Scientists are now aware of how dependent their theories and even their formulas are on paradigms which are sure to change one day. Such changes are painful and bitterly fought by the old against the new; they are said to become definitive only after the death of those who refuse to accept that they were wrong. A science which will one day venture into the realms of life and mind Sri Aurobindo called the “future science.” And he warned that it will be “a big step to take.”

Only then will be recognized that the universe, universes or multiverse – whatever they may really be – are there as the body of *hiranyagarbha*, the Golden Child, of which the *Upanishad* says: “In the beginning the Golden

34 Sri Aurobindo: *Essays in Philosophy and Yoga*, p. 194.

35 Sri Aurobindo: *Letters on Yoga*, p. 205.

Child arose. Once he was born, he was the one lord of creation. He held in place the earth and the sky." For this is what is also said in the two lines of our chosen passage on which we have not commented:

*Into its forms the Child is ever born
Who lives for ever in the vasts of God.*

10

Theodicy: “Nature does not Make Mistakes”

The term “theodicy” comes from the Greek “theos,” which means god, and “dikè,” which means justice. “Theodicy” could therefore be defined as “the justification of divine providence in view of the existence of evil and suffering in the world.” According to the *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary* the meaning is “defense of God’s goodness and omnipotence in view of the existence of evil.” The definition in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* is “explanation of why a perfectly good, almighty and all-knowing God permits evil.” Both definitions omit suffering.

The Problem

The intractable problem of evil and suffering is glaringly present in the written testimonies of all cultures past and present. It is the cause of consternation when confronted with the Holocaust, a tsunami or other catastrophes, as well as when confronted with the torture and the vicious or random killing of a few or even a single human being. To this problem every religion has to find an answer in order to justify the actions of its God, whoever he is supposed to be. Sri Aurobindo considered the problem as follows in *The Life Divine*: “God being All-Good, who created pain and evil? If we say that pain is a trial and an ordeal, we do not solve the moral problem, we arrive at an immoral or non-moral God – an excellent world-mechanist perhaps, a cunning psychologist, but not a God of Good and Love whom we can worship, only a God of might to whose law we must submit or whose caprice we may hope to propitiate. For one who invents torture as a means of test and ordeal, stands convicted either of deliberate cruelty or of moral insensibility and, if a moral being at all, is inferior to the highest instinct of his own creatures.”¹

In modern day philosophy and science we find the problem voiced for instance in this way: “When you consider all the physical suffering that there is in the world; when you consider the stupidity of a good number of people; when you consider the cataclysms of nature; when you consider that all of human life is only a transitory phase of the universe, I think it is difficult to suppose that [the] omnipotence [of God] could not possibly have done better.” (Bertrand Russell) “The universe we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil and no good, nothing but blind

1 Sri Aurobindo: *The Life Divine*, p. 101.

pitiless indifference." (Richard Dawkins) "Omnipotence raises some awkward theological questions. Is God free to prevent evil? If he is omnipotent, yes. Why then does he fail to do so? This devastating argument was deployed by [the philosopher] David Hume: if the evil in the world is from the intention of the Deity, then he is not benevolent. If the evil is contrary to his intention, he is not omnipotent. He cannot be both omnipotent and benevolent (as most religions claim)." (Paul Davies)

The God here put into question is the Abrahamic God who stands outside the creation brought by him into being and for which he is therefore responsible. Theologians of the Abrahamic religions may say that he is an abstract God, rare mystics in these religions may say that he can be met in the heart, yet the general idea is that of an anthropomorphic autocrat floating somewhere above the clouds or sitting on a throne in heaven.

The "integral Vedantic affirmation" agrees with the mystics, because its perception of God is a matter of spiritual experience confirmed by many great experiencers: rishis, seers, yogis, mystics. According to this affirmation all is God, all is the Brahman, all is That, all is the Self, and there cannot be anything outside or apart from That. "If it be true that the Self alone exists, it must also be true that all is the Self," asserts Sri Aurobindo. "And if this Self, God or Brahman is no helpless state, no bounded power, no limited personality, but the self-conscious All, there must be some good and inherent reason in it for the manifestation, to discover which we must proceed on the hypothesis of some potency, some wisdom, some truth of being in all that is manifested.

"The discord and apparent evil of the world must in their sphere be admitted, but not accepted as our conquerors. ...

For we cannot suppose that the sole Entity is compelled by something outside or other than itself, since no such thing exists. Nor can we suppose that it submits unwillingly to something partial within itself which is hostile to its whole Being, denied by It and yet too strong for It; for this would be only to erect in other language the same contradiction of an All and something other than the All.

“Even if we say that the universe exists merely because the Self in its absolute impartiality tolerates all things alike, viewing with indifference all actualities and all possibilities, yet is there something that wills the manifestation and supports it, and this cannot be something other than the All. Brahman is indivisible in all things and whatever is willed in the world has been ultimately willed by the Brahman. It is only our relative consciousness, alarmed or baffled by the phenomenon of evil, ignorance and pain in the cosmos, that seeks to deliver the Brahman from responsibility for Itself and its workings by erecting some opposite principle, Maya or Mara, conscious Devil or self-existent principle of evil. There is one Lord and Self and the many are only His representations and becomings.”²

Delight of existence

One of the main tenets of *Vedanta* is that the ultimate attributes of the Divine are *sat-chit/tapas-ananda*, Existence-Consciousness/Force-Bliss. This is what in the last or highest instance can be said of the Divine. These attributes are one, they are not and cannot be separate. The singing word *ananda* is the most difficult to translate, it means the most intense joy, delight, felicity, ecstasy or bliss. This is a divine attribute, different from any of the human feelings suggested by the enumeration. “The truth is *ananda*,”

2 *Id.*, pp. 31-32.

writes Sri Aurobindo. "But this is a knowledge for which mankind is not ready."³ "Delight is existence, Delight is the secret of creation; Delight is the root of birth, Delight is the cause of remaining in existence, Delight is the end of birth and that into which creation ceases. 'From Ananda,' says the *Upanishad*, 'all existences are born, by Ananda they remain in being and increase, to Ananda they depart.'"⁴ And the Mother said: "It is Joy that has created, it is Joy that will accomplish."⁵

"Absoluteness of conscious existence is illimitable bliss of conscious existence; the two are only different phrases for the same thing. All illimitableness, all infinity, all absoluteness is pure delight."⁶ But then: "This ancient Vedantic theory of cosmic origin is immediately confronted in the human mind by two powerful contradictions, the emotional and sensational consciousness of pain and the ethical problem of evil. For if the world be an expression of Sachchidananda, not only of existence that is conscious force – for that can easily be admitted – but of existence that is also infinite self-delight, how are we to account for the universal presence of grief, of suffering, of pain?" asks Sri Aurobindo in *The Life Divine*. "All being Sacchidananda, how can pain and suffering at all exist?"⁷

He approaches the problem from four angles. The first one, quite revelatory, is that we are not consciously aware of "the pleasure of existence" by which we are carried through all our life experiences, negative as well as positive. In fact "we shall find that the sum of the pleasure of

3 Sri Aurobindo: *Essays in Philosophy and Yoga*, p. 63.

4 Sri Aurobindo: *The Life Divine*, p. 101.

5 The Mother: *Entretiens 1955*, p. 454.

6 Sri Aurobindo: *The Life Divine*, p. 91.

7 *Id.*, pp. 92-93.

existence far exceeds the sum of the pain of existence ... Precisely because the latter is normal, we do not treasure it ... The normal satisfaction of existence which is always there regardless of event and particular cause or object, affects us as something neutral which is neither pleasure nor pain." It is actually this mostly subconscious pleasure of existence which keeps us going through thick and thin. "There too hidden, profound, subconscious, it is that which enables and compels things to remain in existence. It is the reason of that clinging to existence, that overmastering will-to-be, translated vitally in the instinct of self-preservation, physically as the imperishability of matter, mentally as the sense of immortality which attends the formed existence through all its phases of self-development."⁸

"We must first make it clear to ourselves that just as when we speak of universal consciousness we mean something different from, more essential and wider than the waking mental consciousness of the human being; so also when we speak of universal delight of existence we mean something different from, more essential and wider than the ordinary emotional and sensational pleasure of the individual human creature. ...

"Sensation and emotion are, in their essential being, the pains no less than the pleasures, that delight of existence which they seek but fail to reveal – fail because of division, ignorance of self and egoism."⁹

Sri Aurobindo's second point is the one we have already mentioned above: that the Judeo-Christian God stands outside his creation, and that therefore the flaws in this creation must be his handiwork. "The difficulty [*i.e.* the problem of suffering and evil] arises only if we assume the existence

8 *Id.*, pp. 94 and 100.

9 *Id.*, p. 99.

of an extracosmic personal God, not Himself the universe, one who has created good and evil, pain and suffering for His creatures, but Himself stands above and unaffected by them, watching, ruling, doing His will with a suffering and struggling world or, if not doing His will, if allowing the world to be driven by an inexorable law ... then not God, not omnipotent, not all-good and all-loving." The *Vedanta*, on the contrary, establishes that "all that is, is He. If then evil and suffering exist, it is He that bears the evil and suffering in the creature in whom He has embodied Himself. The problem then changes entirely. The question is no longer how came God to create for His creatures a suffering and evil of which He is Himself incapable and therefore immune, but how came the sole and infinite Existence-Consciousness-Bliss to admit into itself that which is not bliss, that which seems to be its positive negation."¹⁰

Suffering and evil are ethical problems which we measure according to moral norms. Sri Aurobindo, thirdly, draws our attention to this and makes us realize that "we do not live in an ethical world. ... Material nature is not ethical ... Animal or vital Nature is also non-ethical, although as it progresses it manifests the crude material out of which the highest animal evolves the ethical impulse." (Evolutionary psychology will agree with this.) Ethics is a matter of the mind and therefore a stage in evolution. It is "man the mental being" who evaluates God as obligatorily "good" – an attribute which is not there in the Vedantic trinity.¹¹

It is only from the human standpoint that the world has three layers: infra-ethical, ethical, supra-ethical. "The ethical

10 *Id.*, pp. 94 and 95.

11 To Plato "the Good" was synonymous with the Supreme Being. This adjective, with its ethical associations, applied to "God" has caused enormous confusion in all subsequent philosophy and theology referring to the great Greek.

standpoint applies only to a temporary though all-important passage from one universality to another." Sri Aurobindo calls this passage all-important because it relates to the crucial human role in the evolution of life on Earth. The human is the great X, the ensouled intermediary between the animal and the "supra-man." It is in this passage from the lower to the higher life-forms that "there intervenes the phenomenon of pain and suffering which seems to contradict the fundamental nature of its being. This and this alone is the root-problem. ... There is an *anandamaya* behind the *manomaya* [the central sense perception], a vast Bliss-Self behind the limited mental self, and the latter is only a shadowy image and disturbed reflection of the former. The truth of ourselves lies within and not on the surface."¹²

Fourthly, suffering, like everything else in nature, has its function and meaning. "Pain of mind and body is a device of Nature, that is to say, of Force in her works, meant to subserve a definite transitional end in her upward evolution. ... It does not come into being in the purely physical world so long as Life does not enter into it; for till then mechanical methods are sufficient. Its office begins when life with its frailty and imperfect possession of Matter enters on the scene; it grows with the growth of Mind in life. ... Its eventual elimination must be an essential point in the destined conquest of the soul over subjection to Matter and egoistic limitation in Mind. This elimination is possible because pain and pleasure themselves are currents, one imperfect, the other perverse, but still currents of the delight of existence. ... The nature of suffering is a [provisional] failure of the conscious-force in us to meet the shocks of existence and a consequent shrinking and contraction, and its root is an inequality of that receptive and possessing force due to

12 *Id.*, pp. 97, 98 and 105.

our self-limitation by egoism consequent on the ignorance of our true Self, of Sachchidananda."¹³

If one does not accept the reality of the spirit, considerations like the above are impossible to accept from a materialistic viewpoint, but then an understanding of the problem of suffering and evil remains out of the question. If one accepts the reality of the spirit but has not realized the cosmic consciousness, these considerations are not concretely comprehensible. But if the fundamental Vedantic premises and the Vedantic conception of the universe are accepted or experienced as valid, the logical conclusion is inevitable.

In *Savitri*, Sri Aurobindo has expressed the same point of view as follows:

*Bliss is the secret stuff of all that lives,
Even pain and grief are garbs of world-delight,
It hides behind thy sorrow and thy cry.*

And he has the divine sage Narad say to Savitri's royal parents:

*Where Ignorance is, there suffering too must come ...
Pain was the first-born of the Inconscience
Which was thy body's dumb original base ...
Pain is the hammer of the gods to break
A dead resistance in the mortal's heart ...
Pain is the hand of Nature sculpturing men
To greatness ...¹⁴*

"In Nature there are no errors"

The first premise of Vedanta, its "integral affirmation," is that all is That. "Brahman is the Alpha and the

13 *Id.*, pp. 107 ff.

14 Sri Aurobindo: *Savitri*, pp. 454 and 443.

Omega. Brahman is the One besides whom there is nothing else existent.”¹⁵ “All action, all mental, vital, physical activities in the world are the operation of a universal Energy, a Consciousness-Force which is the power of the Cosmic Spirit working out the cosmic and individual truth in things.” Therefore “in reality all that we call undivine can only be an action of the four divine principles themselves.” Each principle is also the other principles and the Divine as a whole. “Each single act and movement falls by the fiat of the omnipotent omniscience which works as the Supermind inherent in things.”¹⁶ “Chance is not in this universe,” writes Sri Aurobindo in his *Thoughts and Aphorisms*.¹⁷ If there were chance in this universe, it would not be an inherent manifestation of the divine Unity and Truth. The Divine would be a flawed Entity.

If all is the One, then nature in her entirety is also the One. “What Nature does, is really done by the Spirit.”¹⁸ “All her works are instinct with an absolute intelligence.”¹⁹ Nature is part of the divine manifestation; the divine manifestation is the work of the divine Power, the Consciousness/Force, also called the Great Mother, or known as Maya, Prakriti, Lila.²⁰ “World is the play of the Mother of things moved to cast Herself for ever into infinite forms and avid of eternally outpouring experiences.”²¹ This leads to the conclusion that there cannot be any mistakes in Nature. “When we speak indeed of the errors of Nature, we use a figure illegitimately borrowed from our human psychology and experience, for

15 Sri Aurobindo: *The Life Divine*, p. 33.

16 *Id.*, pp. 923, 160 and 196.

17 Sri Aurobindo: *Thoughts and Aphorisms*, p. 5.

18 Sri Aurobindo: *The Life Divine*, p. 370.

19 Sri Aurobindo: *The Synthesis of Yoga*, p. 98.

20 See talk 7: “Bridges across the Afterlife”.

21 Sri Aurobindo: *The Life Divine*, p. 102.

in Nature there are no errors but only the deliberate measure of her paces traced and retraced in a prefigured rhythm, of which each step has a meaning and its place in the action and reaction of her gradual advance."²² And Sri Aurobindo affirms: "We may be sure that if [in Nature] destruction is done, it is that for that end the destruction was indispensable."²³

If there are no errors in Nature, and if there is no chance, and if all is the Divine, suffering and evil must also be That. But this does not answer the burning question "Why?" arising from the bleeding heart of humanity, as it arose from the lips of the Mother herself – *Pourquoi ?* – in the last years of her avataric yoga. Sri Aurobindo puts the question bluntly and gives the following answer: "But still what is the purpose and origin of the disharmony – why came this division and ego, this world of painful evolution? Why must evil and sorrow enter into the divine Good, Bliss and Peace? It is hard to answer to the human intelligence on its own level, for *the consciousness to which the origin of this phenomenon belongs and to which it stands as it were automatically justified is a supra-intellectual knowledge, is a cosmic and not an individualized human intelligence ...*"²⁴

The mind of the human being, halfway up the ladder of evolution, is an instrument that only can grasp part of a whole, not the whole itself. The divine manifestation is a constant cosmic act of Consciousness/Force which far exceeds the ordinary capacity of the human mind, but which can be and has been acceded to by humans in a spiritual widening called "cosmic consciousness." We do indeed find in some mystics who have been capable of acquiring

22 Sri Aurobindo: *The Ideal of Human Unity*, p. 99 (emphasis added).

23 *Id.*, p. 347.

24 Sri Aurobindo: *The Life Divine*, p. 28 (emphasis added).

the cosmic consciousness the supreme affirmation that all is good or right as it is. It is however in the vision and work of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother that we find the supreme justification of the divine manifestation in its origin, its evolution, and its glorious, endless future end.

The gnostic explanation

The following story told by the Mother to the Ashram youth contains in essence the theodicy of Gnosticism throughout the centuries, while also completing it. The Mother stressed that it was “a story,” and that one could know its inner meaning only by experience on the spiritual path.

“When the Supreme decided to exteriorize Himself in order to be able to see Himself, the first thing in Himself which He exteriorized was the Knowledge of the world and the Power to create it [*i.e.* the Great Mother]. This Knowledge-Consciousness and Force began its work; and in the supreme Will there was a plan, and the first principle of this plan was the expression of both the essential Joy and the essential Freedom, which seemed to be the most interesting feature of this creation.” (It may be noted here that the crucial principles of Joy and Freedom at the origin of creation are hardly ever mentioned elsewhere in the gnostic literature.)

“So intermediaries were needed to express this Joy and Freedom in forms. And at first four Beings [or Forces] were emanated to start this universal development which was to be the progressive objectivation of all that is potentially contained in the Supreme. These Beings [the four essential attributes of the Divine] were, in the principle of their existence: Consciousness and Light, Life, Bliss and Love, and Truth. You can easily imagine that they had a sense of great power, great strength, of something tremendous, for they

were essentially the very [divine] principles of these things. Besides, they had full freedom of choice, for the creation was to be Freedom itself ... As soon as they set to work – they had their own idea of how it had to be done – being totally free, they chose to do it independently. Instead of taking the attitude of servant and instrument ... they took the attitude of the master [of the Ego], and this mistake – as I may call it – was the first cause, the essential cause of all the disorder in the universe. As soon as there was separation – for this is the essential cause, separation – as soon as there was separation between the Supreme and what had been emanated, Consciousness turned into inconscience, Light into darkness, Love into hatred, Bliss into suffering, Life into death and Truth into falsehood. And they proceeded with their creations independently, in separation and disorder. ...

“The creative Force [*i.e.* the Great Mother] which had emanated these four Beings, essentially for the creation of the world, saw what was happening, and turning to the Supreme she prayed for a remedy and a cure of the evil that had been done. Then she was given the command to precipitate her Consciousness into this inconscience, her Love into this suffering, and her Truth into this falsehood. And a greater consciousness, a more total love, a more perfect truth than what had been emanated at first, plunged, so to say, into the horror of Matter in order to awaken in it Consciousness, Love and Truth, and to begin the movement of redemption, which was to bring the material universe back to its supreme origin. And this is my story.”²⁵

This is the wording of one version of the Mother’s story, which she has told or referred to on other occasions also. It is noteworthy that it was the Great Mother’s second intervention which created the possibility of the manifestation

25 The Mother: *Entretiens* 1957-58, pp. 235-236.

to return to its Origin instead of having to remain forever separated from it. The divine Love which she poured into it would be incarnated in the progressive succession of the Avatars enabling and supporting the evolution. This Love would also create the presence of the soul, the divine Self, in the manifestation. Hidden in the lower evolution, it would become consciously active in the human being, and, once fully developed, it will give shape to the species of the future, the spiritual superman.

When the plunge happened into the Darkness and Inconscience of the separation, which the Mother said was “an accident,” “immediately something else sprang forth from the Source which probably would not have manifested if this accident had not taken place. If Delight had remained Delight, conceived as Delight, and everything [of the manifestation] had come about in Delight and Union instead of in division, there would never have been any need for the divine Consciousness to plunge into the inconscience as Love.”²⁶ This is the justification of our evolutionary universe.

The four great beings, cause and basis of the manifestation, were the Lords of Falsehood, Ignorance (or Inconscience), Suffering, and Death. Through them the Divine plunged into its opposite, for reasons called his *Lila* in the Hindu tradition, which also means that they were fundamentally known to himself alone. (As we have seen in the previous section, they are still unknowable to humanity on its evolutionary pilgrimage.)

Sri Aurobindo mentions them in his sonnet “The Iron Dictators:”

*I looked for Thee alone, but met my glance
The iron dreadful Four who rule our breath,*

26 The Mother: *Entretiens* 1955, p. 478.

*Masters of falsehood, Kings of ignorance,
 High sovereign Lords of suffering and death.
 Whence came those formidable autarchies,
 From what inconscient blind infinity ... ?*²⁷

Numerous instances could be cited from the gnostic tradition in which this kind of knowledge was very much alive. The *Bible* too has a similar knowledge, but there the four "fallen" Powers are reduced to only one, Lucifer, the Light-Bearer. "How are you fallen from heaven, day star, son of the dawn! How are you fallen to earth, conqueror of the nations! You said in your heart: 'I will ascend to heaven, above the stars of God, I will set my throne on high ... I will ascend upon the high clouds. ...' But you are brought down to darkness, to the depths of the pit." (Isaiah 14:12-15)

It is of prime importance to realize that the evolution, the road back to the glory of the Origin, started from the absolute negation, from the extreme contraries of that Origin. In some traditions and religions (Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism, and even Christianity) the separation between Positive and Negative, Light and Darkness has been seen as permanent. In the Vedantic view, which is the basis of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother's vision, all is one and all is the One, so that a permanent separation or duality is impossible. Behind the Mother's story one sees the Love which is the Ananda of the Divine in everything. It is the power of this Love, incarnated in the soul and in the Avatars, which in the course of the ages has brought movement and Life into the stagnant "bottomless Zero" at the beginning of the slow climb upwards.

If one talks of evil and the Asuras who are its personalized powers, one should remember that in the beginning

27 Sri Aurobindo: *Collected Poems*, p. 136.

all was Darkness and Ignorance in the most absolute sense. From that Inconscient the Subconscient and Matter have emerged. The Inconscient we cannot imagine; what "Matter" means, science has given us a more complete idea in its discoveries of the billions of galaxies, the fantastic fireworks of the material universe, and the wonders in the subatomic world; the Subconscient is the murky waters in which our life and our mental consciousness have taken shape and on which they are still floating. Life and Mind are the level accelerating evolution has reached in the human being. We are the children of the evolution as concentrated in the workings of Mother Earth, which means that we are carrying the cosmic past, from its very beginnings, in us, even in our cells.

*Inflicting still its habits on the cells
The phantom of a dark and evil start
Ghostlike pursues all that we dream and do.*²⁸

It is the weight of this past in us that causes what Sri Aurobindo has called "the downward gravitation," so easy to give in to. Yet the whole sense of the involutory plunge, also called "the Fall," and the effort towards the recovery of the original divinity lies in the Love and Ananda which are redeeming all.

"It was you ..."

History is for the most part a horror story, with only here and there an oasis of rationality, beauty, kindness or love. It was not for nothing that Sri Aurobindo and the Mother so often called *Homo sapiens* "the human animal," for this is what we still are. True spirituality is not only a matter of ethereal experiences, hearing bells or hovering a foot above the ground. Especially Sri Aurobindo's Integral

28 Sri Aurobindo: *Savitri*, p. 140.

Yoga has turned the arrow of the yogic aspiration around, from exclusively upwards to also downwards, aimed at the nether regions of our humanity, at the realms of the lower chakras. For if the transformation of this part of Nature in us is not possible, there is no hope that humanity and the world would ever change.

If one is aware of this, one must also realize the priceless value of the treasure India has discovered, kept and guarded for humanity. Of humanity's ordeal her tradition gives the only coherent explanation based on a vast experience, together with a certainty of the meaning of the ordeal and its inevitable outcome in the Light. For the human condition is not the doubtful result of the intentional actions of a good God, it is God himself in action. We, humans, are God in action, for he is everything we are, can be and will be – and have been. The plunge, the separation in the Mother's story, was the *Lila* of the Divine, and therefore *our* Lila, for "we are that." If the Vedantic premises are correct, then this is the logical conclusion. It is the conclusion we find in Sri Aurobindo.

In a letter, afterwards published in *The Riddle of This World*, he, the seer and knower, wrote: "But still what is the purpose and origin of the disharmony – why came this division and ego, this world of painful evolution? Why must evil and sorrow enter into the divine Good, Bliss and Peace? It is hard to answer to the human intelligence on its own level, for the consciousness to which the origin of this phenomenon belongs and to which it stands as it were automatically justified in a supra-intellectual knowledge, is a cosmic and not an individualized human intelligence: it sees in larger spaces, it has another vision and cognition, other terms of consciousness than human reason and feeling.

"To the human mind one might answer that while in itself the Infinite might be free from those perturbations,

yet once manifestation began infinite possibility also began and among the infinite possibilities which it is the function of the universal manifestation to work out, the apparent effective negation – with all its consequences – of the Power, Light, Peace, Bliss was very evidently one. If it is asked why even if possible it should have been accepted, the answer nearest to the Cosmic Truth which the human intelligence can make is that in the relations or in the transition of the Divine in the Oneness to the Divine in the Many, this ominous possible became at a certain point an inevitable.

“For once it appears it acquires for the soul descending into evolutionary manifestation an irresistible attraction which creates the inevitability – an attraction which in human terms on the terrestrial level might be interpreted as the call of the unknown, the joy of danger and difficulty and adventure, the will to attempt the impossible, to work out the incalculable, the will to create the new and the uncreated with one’s own self and life as the material, the fascination of contradictories and their difficult harmonization – these things translated into another supraphysical, superhuman consciousness, higher and wider than the mental, were the temptation that led to the fall.

“For in the original being of light on the verge of the descent the one thing unknown was the depth of the abyss, the possibilities of the Divine in the Ignorance and Inconscience. On the other side from the Divine Oneness a vast acquiescence, compassionate, consenting, helpful, a supreme knowledge that this thing must be, that having appeared it must be worked out, that its appearance is in a certain sense part of the incalculable infinite wisdom, that if the plunge into Night was inevitable the emergence into a new unprecedented Day was also a certitude, and that only so could a certain manifestation of the Supreme Truth be effected – by a working out with its phenomenal opposites

as the starting-point of the evolution, as the condition laid down for a transforming emergence.

"In this acquiescence was embraced too the will of the great Sacrifice, the descent of the Divine itself into the Inconscience to take up the burden of the Ignorance and its consequences, to intervene as the Avatar and the Vibhuti walking between the double sign of the Cross and the Victory towards the fulfilment and deliverance. A too imagined rendering of the inexpressible Truth? But without images how to present to the intellect a mystery far beyond it? It is only when one has crossed the barrier of the limited intelligence and shared in the cosmic experience and the knowledge which sees things from identity that the supreme realities which lie behind these images – images corresponding to the terrestrial fact – assume their divine forms and are felt as simple, natural, implied in the essence of things. It is by entering into that greater consciousness alone that one can grasp the inevitability of its self-creation and purpose."²⁹

Nirodbaran, then the Ashram doctor, wrote a daily report to the Mother and Sri Aurobindo about the condition of the *sadhaks* under his care. It was Sri Aurobindo who wrote the answers about what Nirodbaran had to do in his dispensary or at the local hospital, and who also answered the doctor's more personal queries concerning his sadhana. These answers developed into a treasure of wisdom and simplicity – and humor. For because of a reason Sri Aurobindo did not disclose – "Let it have no name," he wrote – he suddenly gave expression to the humorous side in him which otherwise had to be kept hidden for fear of misunderstanding.

In this *Correspondence with Sri Aurobindo*, unique in the spiritual literature, there is a page where Nirodbaran vented

29 Sri Aurobindo: *Letters on Yoga*, pp. 28-29.

one of his bouts of yogic depression and doubt about the meaning of it all. Sri Aurobindo answered him: "In the beginning it was you (not the human you which is now complaining but the central being) who accepted or even invited the adventure of the Ignorance. Sorrow and struggle are a necessary consequence of the plunge into the Inconscience and the evolutionary emergence out of it. The explanation is that it had an object, the eventual play of the Divine Consciousness and Ananda not in its initial transcendence but under conditions for which the plunge into the Inconscience was necessary. It is fundamentally a cosmic problem and can be understood only from the cosmic consciousness. If you want a solution which will be agreeable to the human mind and feelings, I am afraid there is none. No doubt, if human beings had made the universe, they would have done much better, but they were not there to be consulted when they were made. Only your central being was there."³⁰

This answer contains in a nutshell, and in the most limpid language, much of what has been considered in this talk. Sri Aurobindo wrote the same in the mantric lines of *Savitri*:

*O mortal who complainst of death and fate,
Accuse none of the harms thyself hast called;
This troubled world thou hast chosen for thy home,
Thou art thyself the author of thy pain.
Once in the immortal boundlessness of Self,
In a vast of Truth and Consciousness and Light
The soul looked out from its felicity.
It felt the Spirit's interminable bliss,
It knew itself deathless, timeless, spaceless, one,
It saw the Eternal, lived in the Infinite.
Then, curious of a shadow thrown by Truth,*

30 Nirodbaran: *Correspondence with Sri Aurobindo*, p. 277.

*It strained towards some otherness of self,
It was drawn to an unknown Face peering through night ...*³¹

And it took the plunge into the abyss, thrilled by "the adventure of consciousness" that would be the effort of the return to the Origin, of the Self-rediscovery. This plunge it could take because it was That possessing the powers of That. And the effort of the return it could envisage because one of those powers was *Ananda*, which assured that it would be equal to the epic repetition of suffering, death and rebirth, many times and in many ways. This quest for the true Graal is the quest of the Divine for himself, which

*... None could bear but for his strength within,
Yet none would leave because of his delight.*³²

31 Sri Aurobindo: *Savitri*, p. 453.

32 *Id.*, p. 63.

11

The Kalki Avatar

*God must be born on earth and be as man
That man being human may grow even as God.*

*Sri Aurobindo*¹

According to the Hindu tradition, the evolution of life and consciousness on Earth has been supported by a succession of Avatars: the Fish, the Tortoise, the Boar, the Man-Lion, the Dwarf, Rama-with-the-Ax, Rama, Krishna, the Buddha, and the last one, Kalki, who according to the tradition is still to come.

1 Sri Aurobindo: *Savitri*, p. 537.

Question: If Sri Aurobindo and the Mother were Avatars, or an Avatar, what or which Avatars or Avatar were they?

1. Avatar

Sri Aurobindo has given clear definitions of the Avatar and Vibhuti on many occasions. For instance: "There are two sides of the phenomenon of Avatarhood, the Divine Consciousness and the instrumental personality. The Divine Consciousness is omnipotent but it has put forth the instrumental personality in Nature under the conditions of Nature and it uses it according to the rules of the game – though also sometimes to change the rules of the game."²

"An Avatar, roughly speaking, is one who is conscious of the presence and power of the Divine born in him or descended into him and governing from within his will and life and action; he feels identified inwardly with this divine power and presence. A Vibhuti is supposed to embody some power of the Divine and is enabled by it to act with great force in the world, but that is all that is necessary to make him a Vibhuti: the power may be very great, but the consciousness is not that of an inborn or indwelling Divinity."³

"In the phenomenon of Avatarhood there is a Consciousness behind, at first veiled or sometimes perhaps half-veiled, which is that of the Godhead and a frontal consciousness, human or apparently human or at any rate with all the appearance of terrestriality, which is the instrumental personality."⁴

2 Sri Aurobindo: *Letters on Yoga*, p. 408.

3 *Id.*, pp. 406-407.

4 *Id.*, p. 420.

In the effort to understand and explain the phenomenon of the Avatar the accent has been laid by some on his divinity, by others on his humanity, and by many more on something in between, covering the whole range from divine to human. Although the Avatar is often thought to be a specifically Hindu concept, the most extensive documentation about the various interpretations of the Avatar-phenomenon is to be found in Christianity. (In *Essays on the Gita*, Sri Aurobindo repeatedly names as Avatars Krishna, Buddha and Christ.) In Christianity its founder is seen – mostly unawares – as an Avatar, for Christ is at the same time the Son of God and the Son of Man. The fundamental difference with Hinduism is that in Christianity Christ is held to be the *only* Avatar, the one and only Redeemer of a fallen humanity. From a human teacher and miracle worker the theologians gradually exalted him into a divine being, one in essence with God the Father, therefore omniscient and omnipotent, capable of doing anything also while in the human body. A similar belief exists in some forms of Hinduism about its divine incarnations.

Sri Aurobindo countered such notions quite forcefully. “The Avatar does not come as a thaumaturgic magician, but as the divine leader of humanity and the exemplar of a divine humanity.”⁵ “Certain conditions have been established for the game and so long as those conditions remain unchanged things are not done ...”⁶ As the Mother said: “The true divine power has organized the world according to a certain plan, and in that plan was not included that things would happen in an illogical [*i.e.* random] way; otherwise from the very beginning the world would have been illogical and it is not.”⁷

5 Sri Aurobindo: *Essays on the Gita*, p. 165.

6 Sri Aurobindo: *Letters on Yoga*, p. 411.

7 The Mother: *Questions and Answers 1950*, p. 80.

“An Avatar or Vibhuti have the knowledge that is necessary for their work, they need not have more,” wrote Sri Aurobindo. “There was absolutely no reason why Buddha should know what was going on in Rome. An Avatar even does not manifest all the Divine omniscience and omnipotence; he has not come for any such unnecessary display; all that is behind him but not in the front of the consciousness.”⁸ “My own idea of the matter is that the Avatar’s life and actions are not miracles. If they were, his existence would be perfectly useless, a mere superfluous freak of Nature. He accepts the terrestrial conditions, he uses means, he shows the way to humanity as well as helps it.”⁹

“We know whatever we have to know for our work,” said Sri Aurobindo to the disciples gathered around him after the accident with his leg.¹⁰ And to a disciple who wrote: “We consider you omniscient,” he answered with a touch of irony: “You do not expect me, surely, to know how many fishes the fishermen of Pondicherry have caught, or how much money they have made of it? [On another occasion he chose as an example of his ignorance what Lloyd George, a famous British politician at the time, had had for breakfast.] Because [the Divine] chooses to limit or determine his action by conditions, it does not make him less omnipotent. His self-limitation is itself an act of omnipotence.”¹¹

Another topic in the 3rd and 4th century theological controversies was the constitution of Christ, the God-Man. The standpoint, for instance, of the “heretic” sect of the Sabellians, was that Christ was fully and effectively God, also when in his human body, and that consequently, being God, he could not suffer.

8 Sri Aurobindo: *op. cit.*, p. 410.

9 Sri Aurobindo: *On Himself*, p. 149.

10 Nirodbaran: *Talks with Sri Aurobindo*, vol. I, p. 41.

11 Sri Aurobindo: *Letters on Yoga*, p. 411.

The same point was made in the 1930s to Sri Aurobindo, who had to state: "The Divine when he takes on the burden of terrestrial nature, takes it fully, sincerely, and without any conjuring tricks or pretence."¹² "X seems to say that there is no way and no possibility of following [the example of the Avatar], that the struggles and sufferings of the Avatar are unreal and all humbug – there is no possibility of struggle for one who represents the Divine. Such a conception makes nonsense of the whole idea of Avatarhood; there is then no reason in it, no necessity in it, no meaning in it. The Divine being all-powerful can lift people up without bothering to come down to earth. It is only if it is part of the world-arrangement that he should take upon himself the burden of humanity and open the Way that Avatarhood has any meaning."¹³

"If the Avatars are shams, they have no value for others nor any true effect, Avatarhood becomes perfectly irrational and unreal and meaningless. The Divine does not need to suffer or struggle for himself; if he takes on these things it is in order to bear the world-burden and help the world and men; and if the sufferings and struggles are to be of any help, they must be real. A sham or falsehood cannot help. They must be as real as the struggles and sufferings of men themselves – the Divine bears them and at the same time shows the way out of them. Otherwise his assumption of human nature has no meaning and no utility and no value. What is the use of admitting Avatarhood if you take all the meaning out of it?"¹⁴ If an Avatar did only *seem* to take upon himself the struggles and sufferings of mankind "all I have done or the Mother has done is a mere sham – sufferings, struggles, conquests, defeats, the Way formed,

12 Sri Aurobindo: *On Himself*, p. 154.

13 Sri Aurobindo: *Letters on Yoga*, pp. 408-409.

14 *Id.*, pp. 411-412.

the Way followed, the call to others to follow, everything – it was all make-believe since I was the Divine and nothing could touch me and none follow me.”¹⁵

An Avatar, according to Sri Aurobindo, “is never in fact merely a prophet, he is a realizer, and establisher ... of something essential and radical needed for the terrestrial evolution which is the evolution of the embodied spirit through successive stages towards the Divine.”¹⁶ “For my yoga is done not for myself who need nothing and do not need salvation or anything else, but precisely for the earth consciousness, to open a way for the earth consciousness to change.”¹⁷

“The crisis in which the Avatar appears, though apparent to the outward eye only as a crisis of events and great material changes, is always in its source and real meaning a crisis in the consciousness of humanity when it has to undergo some grand modification and effect some new development. For this action of change a divine force is needed ...” It should be kept in mind that the real stuff of things is the Spirit, and that therefore everything exists and changes within the Spirit, also what we, human beings, perceive as material. “When the crisis has a spiritual seed or intention, then a complete or partial manifestation of the God-consciousness in a human mind and soul comes as its originator or leader. That is the Avatar.”¹⁸

“The Avatar is not bound to do extraordinary actions, but he is bound to give his acts or his work or what he is –

15 Nirodbaran: *Correspondence with Sri Aurobindo*, p. 165.

This is a decisive argument against the thesis that Christ did not die on the cross, as it is against the opinion that Christ, being God, did not suffer on the cross. If his suffering was not real, his avataric mission made no sense.

16 Sri Aurobindo: *op. cit.*, p. 415.

17 Nirodbaran: *op. cit.*, p. 143.

18 Sri Aurobindo: *Essays on the Gita*, p. 169.

any of these or all – a significance and an effective power that are part of something essential to be done in the history of the earth and its races.”¹⁹

2. The world-arrangement

We have seen that Sri Aurobindo said: “Certain conditions have been established for the game.” He also spoke about “the rules of the game,” “the world-arrangement” and “the arrangement of the omnipotent Divine in Nature.” And he said: “All is possible, but all is not licit – except by a recognizable process.”²⁰ To realize what is the (cosmic) game, the process or world-arrangement, is of immense importance; it is essential to understand Sri Aurobindo’s worldview and his avataric mission.

The ancient understandings of the cosmos all saw its development in time, and therefore the history of humanity, as cyclic. There is a continuous, eternal succession of the four ages or *yugas*: Gold, Silver, Bronze and Iron, gradually degenerating towards the critical point where all is taken back into its origin (*pralaya*) and then started again in the same order. “Lord Vishnu mounted on a white horse, with a drawn scimitar, blazing like a comet will come to end the present Kali Yuga and inaugurate a reign of universal goodness, peace and prosperity, he will renovate the creation with an era of purity or Krita Yuga. The four yugas will then proceed in the same order once again, with similar characteristics, and this process will repeat itself till the final dissolution or Mahapralaya.” (V. Ashok)²¹

Sri Aurobindo accepts the essence of the meaning of the cycles and the cycles as such, but in a progressive way,

19 Sri Aurobindo: *Letters on Yoga*, p. 414.

20 Nirodbaran: *op. cit.*, p. 133.

21 V. Ashok: *Dasavatar – The Ten Incarnations of Vishnu*, p. 292.

for “the cycles of our evolution move towards a divine result.”²² We thank to his erudition and spiritual knowledge the coherent, majestic picture of the cosmic manifestation in which fit the partially valid schemes of the religions and mythologies of the past.

The Brahman is twofold: silent, completely absorbed in himself, and active, manifesting himself in a splendour of worlds and beings, for reasons that transcend our understanding and in Hinduism are called his *Lila*. This effusion of worlds, from the highest formations of *Sat-Chit-Ananda* down to the lowest of the lower vital, has been explored by Sri Aurobindo and described by him in “The Book of the Traveller of the Worlds,” in his epic *Savitri*. As this endless scale of worlds is, each of them, the expression of Existence and Consciousness, it is also the expression of *Ananda*, and all their beings enjoy therefore perfect satisfaction and happiness as they are, even those of the lower vital which to us become demonic. Sri Aurobindo has called those worlds “typal” because, not possessed of the urge to change, they are non-evolutionary.

However, the characteristics and possibilities of Brahman are infinite, which means that there also eternally existed the possibility of the Divine seeing himself as his own opposite in his negative aspects. As in the Divine seeing means being, immediately Consciousness turned into inconscience, Truth into falsehood, Light into darkness, Bliss into suffering, Life into death. The Great Mother, who is the executive or manifesting Power of the one Divine, and who therefore was responsible for this tragic reversal, “saw what was happening, and turning to the Supreme she prayed for the remedy and the cure of the evil that had been done. Then she was given the command to precipitate her Consciousness into this

22 Sri Aurobindo: *The Life Divine*, p. 65.

inconscience, her Love into this suffering, and her Truth into this falsehood. And a greater consciousness, a more total love, a more perfect truth than what had been emanated at first, plunged, so to say, into the horror of Matter in order to awaken in it Consciousness, Love and Truth, and to begin the movement of redemption, which was to bring the material universe back to its supreme origin.”²³

The “movement of redemption” is none other than what we call “evolution,” the slow upward climb on the ladder established as the manifestation of the Divine, and which Sri Aurobindo called “involution.” What in present-day science and common thought is seen as an exclusively material process, is by Sri Aurobindo and the Mother put in its complete, spiritual context. Thanks to them humanity is becoming aware of what is really at stake in the universe: the regaining of the divinity which was at the beginning and which will be at the end – the divine “adventure of consciousness and joy.”

During one of her occult explorations with Théon at Tlemcen, the Mother saw in a cave deep under water a reclining divine figure. “In fact, this is the origin of all Avatars. He is, so to say, the first universal Avatar who, gradually, has assumed more and more conscious bodies and finally manifested in a kind of recognized line of Beings who have descended directly from the Supreme to perfect this work of preparing the universe so that, through a conscious progression, it may become ready to receive and manifest the supramental Light in its entirety.”²⁴ In other words, the divine figure which the Mother saw at the base of the material universe was a personification of the divine Love making the upward climb possible, and to this end incarnating in

23 The Mother: *Questions and Answers 1957-1958*, p. 208.

24 *The Mother's Agenda*, 1961, p. 417.

“Avatars” when the realization of a new level of consciousness became necessary.

We find this confirmed in Sri Aurobindo. “Are we then to suppose an eternal or continual Avatar himself evolving, we might say, his own mental and physical body according to the needs and the pace of the human evolution and so appearing from age to age, *yuge yuge*? In some such spirit some would interpret the ten incarnations of Vishnu, first in animal forms, then in the animal man, then in the dwarf man-soul, Vamana, the violent Asuric man, Rama of the axe, the divinely-natured man, a greater Rama, the awakened spiritual man, Buddha, and, preceding him in time, but final in place, the complete divine manhood, Krishna, – for the last Avatar, Kalki, only accomplishes the work Krishna began, – he fulfils in power the great struggle which the previous Avatars prepared in all its potentialities.”²⁵

And again: “The Hindu procession of the ten Avatars is itself, as it were, a parable of evolution. First the Fish Avatar, then the amphibian animal between land and water, then the land animal, then the Man-Lion Avatar, bridging man and animal, then man as dwarf, small and undeveloped and physical but containing in himself the godhead and taking possession of existence, then the *rajasic*, *sattwic*, *nirguna* Avatars, leading the human development from the vital *rajasic* to the *sattwic* mental man and again the overmental superman. Krishna, Buddha and Kalki depict the last three stages, the stages of the spiritual development – Krishna opens the possibility of overmind, Buddha tries to shoot beyond to the supreme liberation but that liberation is still negative, not returning upon earth to complete positively the evolution; Kalki is to correct this by bringing the Kingdom of the Divine upon earth, destroying the opposite

25 Sri Aurobindo: *Essays on the Gita*, p. 166.

Asura forces. The progression is striking and unmistakable."²⁶

Considering the origin of the Avatars, as above narrated by the Mother and confirmed by Sri Aurobindo, one could argue that the whole of the manifestation is the Avatar of the Divine, who is present in the atom, the cell, the animal. This is still more valid for the human being, who has in him a soul that is a spark of the Divine growing into a completely developed psychic being, and of whom the *Upanishad* says: *tat tvam asi*. When a child asked the Mother: "Mother, are you God?" she answered instantly: "Yes, my child, and so are you." Sri Aurobindo wrote in *Essays on the Gita*: "The divine manifestation of a Christ, Krishna, Buddha in external humanity has for its inner truth the same manifestation of the eternal Avatar within in our own inner humanity."²⁷ And he wrote in a letter: "If [the Avatar] has something behind him which emerges always out of the coverings, it is the same thing in essence, even if greater in degree, that is behind others – and it is to awaken that that he is there."²⁸

But, obviously, there is also an enormous difference between the human and the divine, which Sri Aurobindo explains as follows. "Now it is notable that with a slight but important variation of language the *Gita* describes in the same way both the action of the Divine in bringing about the ordinary birth of creatures and his action in his birth as the Avatar. ... In both cases Maya is the means of the creation or manifestation," but in the divine birth the Avatar is conscious, and in the ordinary, multiple birth the "Avatar" is not conscious ... "[The Avatar] is the manifestation from above of that which we have to develop from below; it is

26 Sri Aurobindo: *Letters on Yoga*, p. 402.

27 Sri Aurobindo: *Essays on the Gita*, p. 160.

28 Sri Aurobindo: *Letters on Yoga*, p. 412.

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.”²⁹

The “something essential in the history of the earth and its races” can only be done by the Avatar if he takes upon him the burden of humanity. Hence the superhuman *tapasya* and suffering for which some Avatars are exemplary, and which is so often misinterpreted (as we have seen before). For if the Avatar is God, how can he suffer? The double nature of the Avatar, at the same time consciously divine and fully human, is indeed a great mystery, as great as the mystery of the manifestation. It is, as Sri Aurobindo wrote in *The Riddle of this World*, a suprarational fact our mind cannot grasp and which therefore has led to endless speculation and controversy in East and West. Sri Aurobindo’s testimony to this point is quite clear and deeply moving.

“When the Divine descends, he takes upon himself the burden of humanity in order to exceed it – he becomes human in order to show humanity how to become Divine. Anyone who wants to change earth-nature must first accept it in order to change it.”³⁰ “I have borne any attack which human beings have borne, otherwise I would be unable to assure anybody ‘This too can be conquered.’ At least I would have no right to say so. ... The Divine when he takes on the burden of terrestrial nature, takes it fully, sincerely and without any conjuring tricks or pretence.”³¹ “No, it is not with the Empyrean that I am busy: I wish it were. It is rather with the opposite of things; it is in the Abyss that I

29 Sri Aurobindo: *Essays on the Gita*, pp. 157, *passim*.

30 Sri Aurobindo: *On Himself*, p. 153.

31 *Id.*, p. 154.

have to plunge to build a bridge between the two. But that too is necessary for my work and one has to face it.”³²

“It is only divine Love which can bear the burden I have to bear, that all have to bear who have sacrificed everything else to the one aim of uplifting the earth out of its darkness towards the Divine.”³³ “Anyone who wants to change earth-nature must first accept it in order to change it. To quote from an unpublished poem of my own:

*He who would bring the heavens here
Must descend himself into clay
And the burden of earthly nature bear
And tread the dolorous way.*³⁴

(Sri Aurobindo is quoting here for the first time a quatrain from that marvellous poem of his “A God’s Labour”, which could also be called “The Avatar’s Song”.)

Some of the Mother’s suffering during her last years is abundantly illustrated in *The Mother’s Agenda*, and partly still alive in the memory of the persons who were physically near to her or to whom it was given to approach her at the time.

In *Savitri*, the Avatar’s epic, there are many lines evoking the burden he has to bear. For instance:

*Mortality bears ill the eternal’s touch ...
It sullies with its mire heaven’s messengers ...
It meets the sons of God with death and pain. ...
The cross their payment for the crown they gave ...
He who would save the race must share its pain ...
Heaven’s riches they bring, their sufferings count the price ...*

32 *Id.*, p. 153.

33 *Id.*, p. 152.

34 *Id.*, p. 153.

*The Eternal suffers in a human form ...
The Creator bears the law of pain and death ...*³⁵

3. Sri Aurobindo: Avatar

The avatarhood of Sri Aurobindo has been put in doubt on several occasions. There seem to be two reasons for this, the first being that the claim to avatarhood by pseudo-spiritual persons has indeed become very cheap. As the discernment between spirituality, guruship and occult powers is generally vague among those who search for solace or spiritual theatrics, the word "avatar" has, and justly so, become suspect among the sceptically-minded. The second reason, especially among Westerners, is that the word "Avatar" is put on a par with the word "God", and that this "God" is still commonly seen as the bearded autocrat in nightdress above the clouds or seated on a throne in heaven.

Did Sri Aurobindo never say himself that he was an Avatar? An outright affirmation would, in the first place, have been contradictory with his delicate, tactful character. In the second place, Avatars in general do not seem to proclaim their avatarhood. "Why should the Avatar proclaim himself except on rare occasions to an Arjuna or to a few *bhaktas* or disciples? It is for others to find out what he is; though he does not deny when others speak of him as That, he is not always saying and perhaps never may say or only in moments like that of the *Gita*, 'I am He'."³⁶ Besides, the persons who have any specific idea about the mission of the Avatar and the world-crisis in which he incarnates, are rare exceptions. This may be is the reason why Sri Aurobindo wrote that the Avatars were generally recognized as such only by a few, while to the others they were quite human, even though perhaps extraordinary, persons.

35 Sri Aurobindo: *Savitri*, pp. 7 and 445, *passim*.

36 Sri Aurobindo: *Letters on Yoga*, p. 418.

“It is a question between the Divine and myself – whether it is the Divine Will or not, whether I am sent to bring that down or open the way for its descent or at least make it more possible or not,” wrote Sri Aurobindo. “Let all men jeer at me if they will or all Hell fall upon me if it will for my presumption – I go on till I conquer or perish. This is the spirit in which I seek the Supermind, not hunting for greatness for myself or others.”³⁷ When a disciple wrote to him: “I have a strong faith that you are the Divine incarnation. Am I right?” Sri Aurobindo answered: “Follow your faith – it is not likely to mislead you.”³⁸

Surely, Sri Aurobindo has declared many times that he was an Avatar, not in plain words but in ways which can leave no doubt about the meaning of his statements. A few examples will have to do. “I have said ‘Follow my path, the way I have discovered for you through my own efforts and example. ... I have opened the way, now you with the Divine help can follow it.’” What kind of way or path did he mean? It was “... the path I opened, as Christ, Krishna, Buddha, Chaitanya, etc., opened theirs.”³⁹

“My experience is the centre and condition of all the rest,” by which he meant the supramental realization on Earth. “If I am seeking after supramentalization, it is because it is a thing that has to be done for the earth-consciousness and if it is not done in myself, it cannot be done in others. My supramentalization is only the key for opening the gates of the supramental to the earth-consciousness; done for its own sake, it would be perfectly futile.”⁴⁰

37 Sri Aurobindo: *On Himself*, p. 144.

38 *Id.*, p. 151.

39 Nirodbaran: *Correspondence with Sri Aurobindo*, pp. 166 and 172.

40 Sri Aurobindo: *op. cit.*, pp. 147 and 145.

Nagin Doshi, at the time a young disciple, wrote to Sri Aurobindo: "We believe that you and the Mother are Avatars. But is it only in this life that both of you have shown your divinity? It is said that both you and she have been on the earth constantly since its creation. What were you doing during the previous lives?" Sri Aurobindo's answer, laconic but so full of meaning: "Carrying on the evolution."⁴¹ These words bring to mind what he wrote about Sri Krishna: "As for the lives in between the Avatar lives, it must be remembered that Krishna speaks of many lives in the past, not only a few supreme ones, and secondly that while he speaks of himself as the Divine, in one passage he describes himself as a Vibhuti, *vrishnīnam vasudevāh*. We may therefore fairly assume that in many lives he manifested as the Vibhuti veiling the fuller Divine Consciousness. If we admit that the object of Avatarhood is to lead the evolution, this is quite reasonable, the Divine appearing as Avatar in the great transitional stages and as Vibhutis to aid the lesser transitions."⁴²

"The Mother's consciousness and mine are the same," wrote Sri Aurobindo, "the one Divine Consciousness in two, because that is necessary for the play."⁴³ He wrote "Divine Consciousness" with capital letters. And there is for example the following statement of which we cannot even sound the depth: "It is only divine Love which can bear the burden I have to bear, that all have to bear who have sacrificed everything else to the one aim of uplifting earth out of its darkness towards the Divine."⁴⁴

In the last years of the *Entretiens (Questions and Answers)*, the Mother explained the significance of Sri Aurobindo's

41 *Id.*, p. 447.

42 Sri Aurobindo: *Letters on Yoga*, p. 402.

43 Sri Aurobindo: *On Himself*, p. 456.

44 *Id.*, p. 152.

birth on the various levels of existence. Physically, she said, the consequences of his birth will last as long as the Earth; mentally, it is a birth the memory of which will last eternally; psychically, it is a birth which will recur eternally, from age to age, in the history of the universe; spiritually, it is the birth of the Eternal on Earth.⁴⁵

Sri Aurobindo warrior

Usually the Avatars seem to be contemporaneous with great, world-changing wars in which they play a crucial role. This is easily understandable if one remembers that the intervention of the Avatar is needed at a time of world crisis – “a crisis in the consciousness of humanity when it has to undergo some grand modification and effect some new development” – and that, under the conditions of the evolution up to now, such a kind of crisis generally expresses itself physically in conflicts which we call war.

In *Essays on the Gita*, Sri Aurobindo wrote: “Vishnu, incarnated as Krishna, delivered the oppressed Pandavas and destroyed the unjust Kauravas. A similar account is given of the descent of the previous Vishnu Avatars, of Rama to destroy the unrighteous oppression of Ravana, of Parashurama to destroy the unrighteous license of the military and princely caste, the Kshatriyas, of the dwarf Vamana to destroy the rule of the Titan Bali. But obviously the purely practical, ethical or social and political mission of the Avatar which is thus thrown in popular and mythical form, does not give a right account of the phenomenon of Avatarhood. It does not cover the spiritual sense, and if this outward utility were all, we should have to exclude Buddha and Christ whose mission was not at all to destroy evil-doers and deliver the good, but to bring to all men a new spiritual message

45 The Mother: *Questions and Answers 1957-1958*, pp. 274.

and a new law of divine growth and spiritual realisation. ... Always we see in the history of the divine incarnations the double work, and inevitably, because the Avatar takes up the workings of God in human life, the way of the divine Will and Wisdom in the world, and that always fulfils itself externally as well as internally, by inner progress in the soul and by an outer change in the life ... The Avatar may descend as a great spiritual teacher and saviour, the Christ, the Buddha, but always his work leads, after he has finished his earthly manifestation, to a profound and powerful change not only in the ethical, but in the social and outward life and ideals of the race.”⁴⁶

(Even the mission of Christ, the “Prince of Peace”, has led to a superabundance of internal and quite physical struggles in Christianity, and to the Crusades and the Wars of Religion. Christ’s own words as quoted in the gospel of Matthew should not be forgotten: “Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to turn a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. A man’s enemies will be the members of his own household.” Matth. 10: 34-36)

Sri Aurobindo is generally seen as in the photos of Henri Cartier-Bresson: the old wise man seated unmoved and unmovably in his big chair, Nirodbaran’s “Golden Purusha”. But if this is the sole aspect of Sri Aurobindo, or the sole one taken into consideration by so many of his perhaps “too ethereally-minded” disciples, when or where did he do the avataric work about which he wrote, for instance, in his correspondence with Nirodbaran, in his letters, poems and *Savitri*? When and where did he wage his battles against the assailing Titan kings? It is obviously a distortion to see

46 Sri Aurobindo: *Essays on the Gita*, p. 161.

Sri Aurobindo only as the inexhaustible source of Love and Peace, which he was and is for anyone turning towards him, and not as the great warrior who had to fight, together with the Mother, the decisive battles for the new world. Of these battles the three 20th century wars – the First and Second World War and the so-called Cold War (actually one war in three parts) – were partial externalizations.

“My life has been a battle from its early years and is still a battle; the fact that I wage it now from a room upstairs and by spiritual means as well as others that are external makes no difference,” wrote Sri Aurobindo in the middle of the 1930s,⁴⁷ when dark clouds gathered over the world and he himself was soon to be attacked in his physical person.

*... Each enemy slain revives,
Each battle for ever is fought and refought
Through vistas of fruitless lives.
My gaping wounds are a thousand and one
And the Titan kings assail,
But I cannot rest till my task is done
And wrought the eternal will.*⁴⁸

In *Savitri*, his spiritual autobiography and testament, we find reports of his avataric battles on many pages, such as:

*But though to the outward eye no sign appears
And peace is given to our torn human hearts,
The struggle is there and paid the unseen price;
The fire, the strife, the wrestle are within. ...
A million wounds gape in his secret heart. ...
Antagonist forces crowd across his path;
A siege, a combat is his inner life. ...*

47 Sri Aurobindo: *On Himself*, p. 153.

48 Sri Aurobindo: *Collected Poems*, p. 100.

*His large identity and all-harbouring love
Shall bring the cosmic anguish into his depths ...*⁴⁹

4. The Mother Avatar

Outspoken or not, the avatarhood of the Mother has been much more controversial than that of Sri Aurobindo. From the beginning there were comments on the fact that Sri Aurobindo had taken her (and Dorothy Hodgson) into his house, and the presence as well as the person of that French lady were often put into question. After all, she had been married twice, wore perfume and make-up, and moved in mysterious ways. Besides, who had ever heard of a female Avatar, and a foreign, French female to boot?

In the letters of which his booklet *The Mother* is composed, Sri Aurobindo describes the Mother's three essential aspects: the transcendent Mother, the universal cosmic Mother, and the human Mother in the yoga. A disciple asked him: "Do you not refer to the Mother (our Mother) in your book *The Mother*?" Sri Aurobindo answered with one word: "Yes." Then the disciple asked: "Is she not the 'individual' Divine Mother who has embodied 'the power of these two vast ways of her existence'?" Sri Aurobindo answered again with one word: "Yes." And he explained: "The Divine puts on an appearance of humanity, assumes the outward human nature in order to tread the path and show it to human beings, but does not cease to be the Divine. It is a manifestation that takes place, a manifestation of a growing divine consciousness, not human turning into divine. The Mother was inwardly above the human even in childhood"⁵⁰ – when she was living in Paris.

49 Sri Aurobindo: *Savitri*, p. 446, *passim*.

50 Sri Aurobindo: *The Mother*, pp. 47 and 48.

Let us choose two snap-shots, two aspects of the Mother from the rich literature. During her experience of "the supramental ship," in 1958, she was suddenly interrupted and called back into her physical body by somebody in her room, and at that instant she had a brief glimpse of herself. "My upper part, particularly the head, was only a silhouette of which the contents were white with an orange fringe. Going down towards the feet, the colour became more like that of the people on the ship, that is to say orange; going upwards, it was more translucent and white, with less red. The head was only a contour with a brilliant sun in it. Rays of light radiated from it, which were actions of the will."⁵¹ This was the cosmic Mother during a phase of the ongoing supramentalization of the manifestation.

She also described herself on that all-important moment of the supramental manifestation, 29 February 1956. Late on that day she noted down: "This evening the Divine Presence, concrete and material, was there present amongst you [her audience at the Playground and perhaps the Ashram in general]. I had a form of living gold, bigger than the universe, and I was facing a huge and massive golden door which separated the world from the Divine. As I looked at the door, I knew and willed, in a single movement of consciousness, that 'the time has come,' and lifting with both hands a mighty golden hammer I struck one blow, one single blow on the door and the door was shattered to pieces. Then the supramental Light and Force and Consciousness rushed down upon earth in an uninterrupted flow."⁵²

About the Divine Mother, *i.e.* about herself, the Mother said: "She has descended onto Earth to participate in their

51 The Mother: *Entretiens 1957-58*, p. 272.

52 *Words of the Mother*, vol. I, pp. 50-51.

nature [*i.e.* the nature of the humans]. For if she did not participate in their nature, she could not lead them farther ... But she does not forget: she has adopted their consciousness but she remains in relation with her own, her supreme consciousness ... If she did not adopt their consciousness, if she did not suffer their pain, she would not be able to help them. Hers is not a suffering because of ignorance, it is a suffering because of identity. It is because she has accepted to have the same vibrations as they have, in order to be able to enter into contact with them and to pull them out of the state they are in. If she did not enter into contact with them, they would not even perceive her, or no one would be able to bear her radiance ..."⁵³

It is also interesting to compare the following passage from a conversation in the *Agenda* (27 June 1962) with Sri Aurobindo's statement "Carrying on the evolution." "One day I have said that in the history of the Earth, wherever the Consciousness could manifest, I was there – that was a fact. It was like in the story of *Savitri*: always there, always there, always there, in this man, in that woman. At certain times there were four emanations simultaneously ... at the time of the Italian and of the French Renaissance. At another moment also, the time of Christ ... This time, as soon as I started practising yoga, all have come together. This is how I remembered them."

The Mother warrior

In the Ashram the Mother was usually addressed as "Sweet Mother," but everybody knew that some of her emanations or individualized personalities, among them Kali or Durga, were great warriors. She carried above her eye the scar of an occult battle. And did Sri Aurobindo not call

53 The Mother: *Questions and Answers* 1953, pp. 387-388.

the Second World War “the Mother’s War”? Of Mahakali, Sri Aurobindo wrote: “There is in her an overwhelming intensity, a mighty passion of force to achieve, a divine violence rushing to shatter every limit and obstacle. All her divinity leaps out in a splendour of tempestuous action; she is there for swiftness, for the immediately effective process, the rapid and direct stroke, the frontal assault that carries everything before it. Terrible is her face to the Asura, dangerous and ruthless her mood against the haters of the Divine; for she is the Warrior of the Worlds who never shrinks from the battle.”⁵⁴

In the *Agenda* of 1962 there is a telling part of a conversation where the Mother describes one of her vital beings, *l’être blanc avec la hallebarde*, the white being with the halberd. (A halberd is a weapon consisting of a long shaft with an axe blade and a pick, topped by a spearhead. In this case the weapon evidently represents a power or powers.) On 23 June the Mother narrated one of her experiences. “All at once I had become, or I saw, a tall being completely white, with a kind of halberd in his hand and the expression of an iron will ... It was something like a great transforming power in the vital.”

Four days later she returned to this experience: “It was one of my aspects of being who was present there, like that – who manifested itself like that. It’s a part of my vital being, or rather of my innumerable vital beings (for there are quite a lot). And it is the one who is particularly interested in things concerning the Earth. ... But this one [the tall white being] is not a being of human origin, he has not been formed in a human life. It is a being that has incarnated – he has already incarnated – and he was one of those who have presided over the present formation of [the Mother’s]

54 Sri Aurobindo: *On the Mother*, p. 28.

being. But, as I said, I saw him: he was a-sexual, by which I mean that he was neither female nor male. And he represents all what is intrepid in the vital, with a calm but absolute power.”

Not only do these words give us a glimpse, like so much else of what the Mother has communicated, of the complexity, the astonishing variety and the mind-boggling creativity of the worlds behind the façade of our material existence, they also provide us with some notion of the multiple and glorious personalities of the Mother – who was at one time sitting there in that simple chair on the second storey of the Ashram building, bent in the back and subject to the symptoms of old age.

*The great World-Mother now in her arose ...
A flaming warrior from the eternal peaks
Empowered to force the door denied and closed
Smote from Death's visage its dumb absolute
And burst the bounds of consciousness and Time.*⁵⁵

5. The complete Avatar

“There are the Two who are One and play in many worlds ... This whole wide world is only he and she ...” wrote Sri Aurobindo in *Savitri*.⁵⁶ The Two-in-One at the origin of the Manifestation were not only known in the Indian tradition, they were also part of the wisdom traditions elsewhere in the world. There was the Absolute, self-existent and self-sufficient in its eternal existence, sometimes called the Silent Brahman; but there was also the duality in the Active Brahman, the self-manifesting Divine, of Ishwara and Shakti, Purusha and Prakriti. A Gnostic text from the second

55 Sri Aurobindo: *Savitri*, p. 21.

56 *Id.*, pp. 61 and 63.

century CE has the Great Mother say in words which echo the Vedic scriptures:

It is I who am the offspring of what gave birth to me
[what gave birth to her being the One];
 And it is I who am the Mother
[the Great Mother, the one original transcendent Shakti];
 It is I who am the wife
[Shakti to Ishwara, in human metaphorical language];
 It is I who am the virgin
[for ever the untouchable Origin of all] ... etc.

Until now, and throughout the course of the evolution of life on Earth, the Avatars have always been of the male gender, and a female Avatar may seem rather unorthodox, especially to people familiar of old with the line of male Avatars. It is however obvious that one gender does not represent the full human constitution and condition, nor does it take into account the divine sexless Archetype which supports the evolution and directs it towards its goal.⁵⁷ The time has come to draw the full conclusions from certain well-known formulations by Sri Aurobindo and the Mother.

Sri Aurobindo wrote: "The Mother and I are one but in two bodies." "The Mother's consciousness and mine are the same, the one Divine Consciousness in two, because that is necessary for the play. ... If anybody really feels her consciousness, he should know that I am there behind it and if he feels me it is the same with hers." "Whatever one gets from the Mother, comes from myself also – there is no difference." "The Mother and myself stand for the same Power in two forms."⁵⁸

57 See talk 1: "Adam Kadmon and the Evolution".

58 Sri Aurobindo: *On Himself*, pp. 456-457, *passim*.

The Mother wrote: "Without him, I exist not; without me, he is not manifest."⁵⁹ (Cf. Sri Aurobindo: "There is one force only, the Mother's force – or, if you like to put it like that, the Mother is Sri Aurobindo's Force.") "Sri Aurobindo and I are always one and the same consciousness, one and the same person."⁶⁰ "When in your heart and thought you will make no difference between Sri Aurobindo and me, when to think of Sri Aurobindo will be to think of me and to think of me will mean to think of Sri Aurobindo inevitably, when to see one will mean inevitably to see the other, like one and the same Person – then you will know that you begin to open to the supramental force and consciousness."⁶¹ And at one time she unified in writing both their names in the mantric formula "mothersriaurobindo is my refuge".⁶²

All this is of crucial importance because the mission of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother was to effect the transition of our human world to a new, supramental world, to "the life divine." The supramental being will be a-sexual, sexuality having been a means of Nature to render the evolution of life possible. This is the reason why the Avatar of the Supermind, transcending the evolutionary sexuality, had to be male/female in one, while still, because of the evolutionary necessity, incarnated in two bodies. The Mother's remark about the white warrior with the halberd, a figure of her own vital, also refers to this: "He was a-sexual, by which I mean that he was neither female nor male." And those familiar with her work in the Ashram will no doubt remember how, in the youth of the Ashram School, she worked to create a mentality surpassing the common sexual attitudes in order to prepare them for the transition to an asexual species.

59 *Words of the Mother*, vol. I, p. 32.

60 *The Mother's Agenda*, vol. I, p. 121.

61 *Words of the Mother*, vol. I, p. 32.

62 *Ibidem*.

Sri Aurobindo and the Mother were *one* being, one Avatar. They were:

... the deathless *Two-in-One*,
 A single being in two bodies clasped,
 A diarchy of two united souls.
 In a new act of the drama of the world
 The united Two began a greater age.
 An hour began, the matrix of new Time.⁶³

6. The Kalki Avatar

In Hinduism, the Kalki Avatar is thought of as the last of the succession of Avatars, who will come at the end of the present Kali Yuga. The victor of the last, decisive battle with the hostile forces, he will ride on a white (winged) horse and brandish a sword or scimitar. He will vanquish Yama, or Death, and resolve all opposites as well as overcome darkness. He will be the divine man, at one with infinite divinity.

Sri Aurobindo wrote, however: "Too much importance need not be attached to the details about Kalki – they are rather symbolic than an attempt to prophesy details of future history. What is expressed is something that has to come, but it is symbolically indicated, no more."⁶⁴ The description of the Avatars dates from the *Puranas*, in other words from a traditional view that saw the evolution of the cosmos as cyclic. As mentioned before, the Aurobindonian conception of the cosmic evolution is cyclic *but progressive*. Although the evolutionary development can be traced back to the ancient Hindu scriptures, as did Sri Aurobindo, the general thinking and imagining did not take evolution into account, and one

63 Sri Aurobindo: *Savitri*, pp. 293, 411, 399.

64 Sri Aurobindo: *Letters on Yoga*, p. 403.

may say that the supramental transformation of the human species into divine beings was not a part of the traditional vision.

In his book *Dasavatara – The Ten Incarnations of Vishnu*, V. Ashok, for instance, writes: “Lord Vishnu mounted on a white horse, with a drawn scimitar, blazing like a comet will come to end the present Kali Yuga and inaugurate a reign of universal goodness, peace and prosperity, renovate the creation with an era of purity, a Krita Yuga. The four Yugas will then proceed in the same order once again, with similar characteristics, and this process will repeat itself till the final dissolution or Mahapralaya. ... At this nadir in human existence a divine Being, who comprehends all things and is the beginning and the end, shall descend upon the earth. He will be born in the family of Vishnu-yasas, an eminent brahmin of Sambal village, as Kalki. He will be endowed with eight superhuman faculties. He will destroy the *mlechchas*, thieves and all those whose minds are set on wickedness. He will then re-establish righteousness on earth, and the minds of the good people who survive at the end of Kali Yuga will be awakened and be made as clear as crystal. These men, who are changed in virtue of that particular time, shall be those who will give birth to a race which shall follow: the Krita Aya or Age of Purity.”⁶⁵

Sri Aurobindo has closely related the Kalki Avatar with the Krishna Avatar. “Krishna is the Anandamaya; he supports the evolution through the overmind leading it towards Ananda.”⁶⁶ “... The last Avatar, Kalki, only accomplishes the work Krishna began – he fulfils in power the great struggle which the previous Avatars prepared in all its potentialities ...”⁶⁷

65 V. Ashok: *op. cit.*, pp. 292 and 294.

66 *Id.*, p. 405.

67 Sri Aurobindo: *Essays on the Gita*, p. 166.

“Krishna opened the possibility of overmind with its two sides of realization, static and dynamic. Buddha tried to shoot from mind to Nirvana in the Supreme, just as Shankara did in another way after him. Both agree in overleaping the other stages and trying to get at a nameless and featureless Absolute. Krishna on the other hand was leading by the normal course of evolution. The next normal step is not a featureless Absolute, but the supermind. I consider that in trying to overshoot, Buddha like Shankara made a mistake, calling away the dynamic side of the liberation. Therefore there has to be a correction by Kalki.”⁶⁸

“No system indeed by its own force can bring about the change that humanity really needs; for that can only come by its growth into the firmly realized possibilities of its own higher nature, and this growth depends on an inner and not an outer change. But outer changes may at least prepare favourable conditions for that most real amelioration – or on the contrary they may lead to such conditions that the sword of Kalki can alone purify the earth from the burden of an obstinately Asuric humanity. The choice lies with the race itself; for as it sows, so shall it reap the fruit of its Karma.”⁶⁹

Mothersriaurobindo: the Kalki Avatar

Here the time has come to repeat our question at the beginning: According to the Hindu tradition, the evolution of life and consciousness on Earth has been supported by a succession of Avatars. If Sri Aurobindo and the Mother were Avatars, or an Avatar, what or which Avatars or Avatar were they?

The reason that this question has to be put now, sixty years after Sri Aurobindo left his body and thirty-seven years after the Mother left hers, may have been the misleading

68 Sri Aurobindo: *Letters on Yoga*, pp. 402-403.

69 Sri Aurobindo: *The Human Cycle*, pp. 661-662.

picture of the Kalki Avatar as upheld by tradition: a male warrior on a white horse with a sword.⁷⁰ The reality seems to be quite different, although it agrees in every detail with the world as it has evolved since ancient times. Divinization, *i.e.* supramentalization of humanity in a material Earth, requires a more complete representation of the human being, it requires the complete male/female Avatar. Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, two great warriors in one, waged the last battles against the hostile forces, some of which we know about (e.g. the twentieth century wars), most of which we are ignorant of, as we are ignorant of the totality of their being and action. Their all-important mission as the last Avatar was to lay the foundations of a new, supramental world, in which “evolution itself will evolve.” (In 1956, after the supramental manifestation, the Mother cried out, almost chanted: “A new world is born, born, born!”)

Most important, and rarely referred to, was the role Shri Krishna played in Sri Aurobindo’s avataric realization,⁷¹ thereby demonstrating Sri Aurobindo’s statement: “The last Avatar, Kalki, only accomplishes the work Krishna began.” Shri Krishna was the guide of Sri Aurobindo’s yoga, as well in Alipore Jail, when studying the *Gita* and putting it into practice, as in Pondicherry, where it was from Shri Krishna that he received the detailed programme of his yoga. The *Thoughts and Aphorisms* and *The Record of Yoga* bear witness to this. In 1926 Shri Krishna descended into Sri Aurobindo’s body.⁷² This means that from 1926 till

70 In persons knowledgeable about Christianity, this image will bring to mind the figure of the Messiah in the biblical book of Revelation, written by John of Patmos. The Mother herself pointed out the similarity: “Saint John has said that there would be a new earth – that, moreover, there would be a new Christ who corresponds with the one of the Hindus. Yes, Kalki. The description is quite similar.”

71 See talk 2: “The Development of Sri Aurobindo’s Thought.”

72 See again talk 2: “The Development of Sri Aurobindo’s Thought”.

1950 Shri Krishna was incarnated on Earth, without anybody being aware of it. (This may, moreover, be the reason that the light or aura of Shri Krishna and Sri Aurobindo is the same light blue light.)

About the historical Krishna, king of the Vrishnis, Sri Aurobindo wrote: "I suppose very few recognized him as an Avatar – certainly it was not at all a general recognition. Among the few those nearest to him do not seem to have counted – it was less prominent people like Vidura etc. ... Those who were with Krishna were in all appearance men like other men. They spoke and acted with each other as men with men and were not thought of by those around them as gods. Krishna himself was known by most as a man – only a few worshipped him as the Divine."⁷³ The same could now be said about Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, who are hardly known outside the circles of their followers, and, if known, not recognized for what they were and did – for what they are and are doing.

Krishna, like Christ and the other Avatars, has only gradually grown into a recognized incarnation of the Divine. It would actually be better to say "a generally recognized incarnation of the Divine," given the ease with which *chelas* see their guru, sometimes rightly, as a realized being which they declare, unrightly, to be an Avatar. The task of the Avatar is always out of the ordinary, relevant for the whole of humanity, and revolutionary, initiating a radical new element in the spiritual evolution of life on Earth.

In 1957 the Mother said: "The spaces which separate these various incarnations [of the Avatars] seem to have become shorter and shorter, as if, for as much as Matter became more and more ready, the action could accelerate and

73 Sri Aurobindo: *Letters on Yoga*, p. 406.

become more and more rapid in its movement, more and more conscious too, more and more efficacious and decisive." ⁷⁴

The dazzling pace at which Mother Earth and her human offspring are changing, in ways unprecedented in history, is a sure sign that something huge is happening, equivalent to the coming about of a new world, which could only be effected by the spiritual and material action of the ultimate Avatar, Shri Kalki.

74 The Mother: *Questions and Answers 1957-1958*, pp. 333-334.

Biographical Note

Georges Van Vrekhem (°1935) is a Flemish speaking Belgian who writes in English. He became known in his country as a journalist, poet and playwright. For some time he was the artistic manager of a professional theatre company. He gave numerous talks and presentations in America, Europe and India.

He became first acquainted with the works of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother in 1964. In 1970 he joined the Sri Aurobindo Ashram in Pondicherry, and in 1978 he became a member of Auroville, where he is still living and writing.

He wrote:

Beyond Man, the Life and Work of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother (1997),

The Mother, the Story of Her Life (2000),

Overman, the Intermediary between the Human and the Supramental Being (2000),

Patterns of the Present, in the Light of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother (2001),

The Mother: the Divine Shakti (2003) and
Hitler and His God – The Background to the Nazi Phenomenon (2006).

Evolution, Religion, and the Unknown God is in the press.

Books by him are translated into Dutch, French, German, Italian, Russian, and Spanish. He was awarded the Sri Aurobindo Puraskar for 2006 by the Government of Bengal.

Georges Van Vrekhem, a Belgian Fleming, has been living in Auroville since 1978. His seminal book *Beyond Man – The Life and Works of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother* has meanwhile been published in six languages. He also wrote *The Mother – The Story of her life*, and *Hitler and His God*, a historical study of background of the Hitler phenomenon and its relevance for the work of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother. *Overman* deals with the intermediate being between the human and the supramental being, while *Patterns of the Present* explains present-day developments from the Aurobindonian perspective.

In the last months of 2010, Georges Van Vrekhem gave a series of ten talks in Auroville covering a wide range of subjects, examined from the Aurobindonian viewpoint. He added the talk on “The Kalki Avatar” in February 2011. The themes of these talks are the following:

- Adam Kadmon and the Evolution;
- The Development of Sri Aurobindo’s Thought;
- Preparing for the Miraculous;
- What Arjuna Saw: the Dark Side of the Force;
- 2012 and 1956: Doomsday?
- Being Human and the Copernican Evolution;
- Bridges across the Afterlife;
- Sri Aurobindo’s Descent into Death;
- Sri Aurobindo and the Big Bang;
- Theodicy: “Nature Makes no Mistakes;”
- The Kalki Avatar.

This book contains the edited versions of these talks.

