CHAPTER III

THE NATURE AND FUNCTION OF ART ACCORDING TO SHI AUROBINDO

"To embellish life with beauty is only the most outward function of art and poetry, to make life more intimately beautiful and noble and great and full of meaning is its higher office, but its highest comes when the poet becomes the seer and reveals to man his eternal self and the godheads of its manifestation."

The highest function of art is the same as that of religion in that both help us to 'lay hands on the Reality itself in its core and essence and enlighten all its infinite details from that secret centre.' In the cult of the spiritual and in the cult of the beautiful — as Sri Aurobindo defines religion and art — we abstract ourselves from the mundane, the sick hurry and divided aims of life, its harsh necessities and compelling utilities. Here the need of the hour and the compulsion of the moment do not detain us. We pass from the materialistic to the spiritual realm and fix our attention on the ideal and the universal. The limitations and restrictions of day-to-day life cease to bother us and cripple our imagination. The temporary, the transient and the

1 'The Future Poetry', Vol. 9, p. 255
2 'Social and Political Thought', Vol. 15, p. 137
practical leave hold of our fancy and we enter 'God's infinite kingdom of beauty and delight.'

Art is an externalisation of the aesthetic attitude. It is a total human activity engaging every aspect of life. Not different in its aim and source from the highest in man it forms a part of his spiritual activity. A work of art is a form of self-expression; it is a way in which the artist externalizes himself and makes his personality manifest to other men. It is the expression of the artist's uniqueness, the means by which he communicates his inspired insight into reality in the language of feeling and emotion. Any work of art is beautiful in accordance with the adequacy with which it communicates the inner life or experience of the Artist and in accordance with the quality and originality inherent in that experience. Art is the only means by which human beings can communicate to each other the quality and the uniqueness of their personal experiences, through universal symbols.

A work of art presents the opportunity, and provides the basis for new experience by itself becoming a potential object of awareness, and by being different in some way from all other objects of awareness. Thus 'a good work of art amplifies and extends human experience not merely by existing as an addition

3 Ibid., p. 137-138
to all other possible objects of awareness but because through
appreciation of a work of art the observer achieves an awareness
of the world outside himself differing in kind, content or
intensity from any experience which he would normally, or
would possibly, obtain except through the medium of that work
of art'. The artist, according to the critic, is one 'who
experiences the world more richly, more vividly, more delicately
or more profoundly than the ordinary run of men' and that
by means of his art he makes it possible for others 'to
participate in the richness, vividness, delicacy or profundity
of his own experience of the world.

The ordinary man is profoundly influenced by the work
of art: through his appreciation of it, he is enabled to
attain, by proxy and at second-hand, a richer, finer and fuller
experience of this world then is otherwise possible for him.
In some cases men obtain experiences, through the proper appre-
ciation of some works of art, 'not of novel outward aspects
of the actual world but experiences involving direct acquaint-
ance with a mysterious and transcendental universe of ultimate
reality of which the actual world is but a manifestation and

4 Harold Osborne, 'Aesthetics and Criticism',

5 Ibid., p. 177-178
consciousness, and hence the subject and the object of the Rasā experience are infinite, universal and are one and the same.

Realisation of the Infinite in and through the finite is the end and aim of all great art. The universe is the result of the līlā of God, the infinite play of the Eternal in the process of divine creation. The ancient texts of India conceive of Art as 'the soul of play and the soul of joy'. Art crystallizes for us in forms of beauty all that is charming in the perceived universe. According to Sri Aurobindo, Art is a realisation, partial though it be, of the play of the Infinite, and to that extent can be made a means of God-realisation. Spirituality can be said to be the basis of art. Art expresses, or tries to express, the soul of things. The true soul of things is the divine element, the divine essence, in them. This is in accordance with Sri Aurobindo's concept of God which is in consonance with the Upaniṣadic idea of 'Rasō vai Sah': He is the underlying essence of all that is, all that exists. This aesthetic enjoyment or ecstasy (Rasā) will lead one to the Supreme Bliss (Ānanda) is another traditional idea that Sri Aurobindo subscribes to. 'Rasam hyeyāyam

7 Dr Shrikrishna Mishra, 'Coleridge and Abhinavagupta', (Darbhanga, 1979), p. 336-339
8 Ṭaittirīya Upaniṣad, II, vii, 6
labdhvānandi bhavati'. Thus, Spirituality which is the
discipline to come into contact with the Divine, has a place,
a big place, in art; it can, in a sense, be called the highest
art, the art of life itself, because it aims at creating a
life of truth and beauty, illumined and vibrant with light
and delight.

This rasa is the soul of all art, the source of its
birth and organic growth. "It is an intuitive perception and
should not be confused with any type of worldly knowledge. It
is an esemplastic experience of the unity in multeity and
can only be imaginatively created with the help of its objective
correlatives. It does not exist anywhere as an entity ....
Total attention alone makes this experience possible, just
as total surrender makes one fit for receiving the divine
grace." 10 The experience of this rasa, the rasayāda, is the
same as the experience and the realisation of the Divine.

Art is born out of the aesthetic sensibility in man
which "colours every thought, qualifies every intelligence,
and modifies every product of human labour." 11 It is "prompted
by an impulse in man to express his experiences in terms of

9 Ibid., II. vii. 7

10 Dr Shrikrishna Mishra, 'Coleridge and Abhinavagupta',
(Darbanga, 1979), p. 432

11 George Santayana, 'Reason in Art', (Charles Scribner's
Sons, 1922) p. 183
values or felt-qualities through sensory media, not for a practical end but simply for the satisfaction felt in the activity itself and in the values themselves which do not find adequate realization in his everyday life." It is both creative and contemplative emotional activity, wholly imaginative. It is an end-in-itself value seeking nothing beyond the immediate end of self-expression in terms of concrete sensory objects it deals with. In this aspect art is different from the other activities in life like philosophy, ethics and religion which are means-to-an-end values.

Art is held by some to be a mere pleasant pastime, a means to personal pleasure. This is a totally wrong view of art and its function. It reduces art to be a mere selfish activity with personal pleasure as its end. Such art is morally mad as it may lead men away from the good life by diverting men's minds from the higher values of life. If art comes to be identified with mere selfish pleasure in the mind of the ordinary man, it had better be avoided. It is for this reason perhaps that Manu, the ancient Hindu law-giver, has denounced certain forms of art as human weaknesses (vyasana).


13 Dr T.P. Ramachandran, 'The Indian Philosophy of Beauty, Part I, (The University of Madras, 1979), p. 77
arts no doubt deserved to be banished from Plato's ideal republic.

But true and high art has a vital function to play in life and living. It greatly enlarges our field of experience; it broadens our knowledge and culture. It helps us improve our sense of order, develop our powers of observation and reflection, widen our outlook on life in general. It chastens and enriches our lives in many aspects. It "helps us to reconcile and adjust ourselves to the inexorable verities of life and nature with which we are confronted." According to Carritt, art liberates man from his passions; instead of attempting to gratify them, he now makes them the object of his contemplation in his artistic activity. It aims essentially at neither pleasure nor edification, says Carritt. It makes us better, more human and less brutal.

According to Sri Aurobindo, art activity is spiritual activity. Springing as it does from the highest faculties in man, viz. imagination and intuition, art must naturally serve the highest ends of life. It must help him in his attempts at self-realisation. He opines that so long as it


15 E.F. Carritt, 'The Theory of Beauty' (Methuen & Co., Ltd., 1914), p. 70-71
does not hinder the process of Yoga, art activity can go on alongside Yogic Ṣādhanā. He considers art a handmaid to spirituality. 'It is only in the service of spirituality it fulfils its promise and purpose. This view of Sri Aurobindo is akin to the view of Vedānta, Art. Man is after perfection and hence he seeks total and permanent liberation from all the imperfections that characterise life, which is called mokṣa, the final end of all human existence. According to Vedanta, it is the presence of the ideal of mokṣa in our minds which makes us turn from nature to art in our quest for perfection in the first instance and later from art to spiritual liberation, mokṣa itself. Hence art is considered a positive means to the final goal of all human existence. Art helps us as a pointer to mokṣa as well as a preparation for it.

According to the mimetic theory of art, all art is a mere imitation of life. The only true reality is the reality of abstract concepts, according to Plato, and he called those concepts Forms or Ideas. The Platonic Idea was concrete and real, not mere abstraction from sensory experience, and it existed prior to all experience and was knowable by rational

16 Dr T.P. Ramachandran, 'The Indian Philosophy of Beauty', Part I (The University of Madras, 1979), p. 80
intuition. The objects of sensory experience which form the subject-matter of art are only imperfectly, partially and derivatively real, partaking as they do only something of the nature of the Ideas. (the arche-typal Idea) and hence the reality of the Ideas could only partially inhere in them. Art-products, because they are reproductions of sensory reality, are called by Plato mere 'imitations of imitations', mere shadows of imperfect reality, and twice removed from reality proper, and rejected by him. 17

Greek art of his time was highly imitative in a literal sense. Plato's abhorrence of all imitative representation led him to make a total condemnation of art in general and deny it any value mainly on account of the imitative character of the Greek art of his times. Poetry, according to Plato, was an imitation, not of the essence of things, but of their appearances to their senses. It was irrational, arising as it did out of the poet's 'divine madness'. Regarding poetry from a moral and political point of view and examining it with regard to its ethical effect, he banished poets and poetry from his ideal Republic, because of its corrupting influence. Beauty was not recognised as an autonomous human value in

Plato's ideal Republic. This was because he laid too much stress on the ethical culture to the total exclusion of the aesthetic culture of Athens.

Sri Aurobindo rejects the mimetic theory of art emphatically. He considers Plato's approach to art an outcome of his imperfect view of human possibility and perfection, arising from a total distrust of free and flexible thought as well as the aesthetic impulse. Art is not a mere imitation of life or Nature, says Sri Aurobindo. Plato seems not to take into consideration the role that imagination plays in the process of artistic creation. The transmutation undergone by the material the artists work on and the transformation effected on their nature and quality by the alchemy of their imagination are totally disregarded or at least relegated to the background by this theory of mimesis. The artists do take something from life and nature, no doubt, but what they borrow from the world of reality is transferred to the world of their imagination where they become a totally new thing altogether, new-created according to the artists' vision of the truth of existence and the law of life. The characters who people the artists' world are not copies of their counterparts in actual life but live by the law of their own life and being, emanating as they do from the inner mind of their creator.
As a matter of fact, says Sri Aurobindo, the artist is under no compulsion to write about only those things he has actually seen or experienced. A man of imagination that he is, he makes a mere hint of suggestion from life a starting point of the process of artistic creation. The artist is under no obligation at all to make his creations faithful to the life around him. But it is invariably the case that the world of the artist is more strikingly real than the actual world in which we live. This only reveals the fidelity with which the artist has grasped the essence of life with the aid of his imagination, and this is what confers on art-products a universality and immortality of their own. It is sometimes life which imitates art, not the other way around, asserts Sri Aurobindo.

Inspiration from within and dependence on Nature together go into the creation of art; they are not incompatible as such. Inspiration always comes from within; and Nature provides us with the forms of expression which from the basis of art. It is the selective or interpretative vision of the artist which develops and modifies these forms so as to render them artistic. It is here the imagination plays its role, in selecting, arranging and combining simple elemental images into an image which has never existed before. Hence Sri Aurobindo's epigrammatic statement: "Art cannot give what
Nature gives, it gives something more.  

This opinion of Sri Aurobindo is in accordance with the Revelatory theory of art which holds that the work of art is doing something more than nature or is doing the same thing better. Art brings us into closer and more direct contact with the world of real essences which the natural world of sense perception imperfectly mirrors and even hides. "Art is not a copy of nature but a truer copy than nature of that which nature copies." According to Plotinus, the arts give no bare reproduction of the things seen but go beyond to the Ideas from which Nature itself derives. They make good where Nature is defective, having the vision of beauty in themselves. In the words of Harold Osbourne, "the work of art reveals something of which the natural world is a very imperfect image or symbol and reveals it more truly and more luminously than inartistic nature." The artist is able to have direct apprehension of ultimate reality by an act of mystic absorption or pure perception. His awareness of reality is non-conceptual; it is a non-rational insight into transcendental reality. Plato

18 'The Future Poetry', Vol. 9, p. 497
19 Harold Osbourne, p. 191
20 Harold Osbourne, p. 191
calls it 'a divine frenzy' which gives rise to 'inspired art', which 'copies not sensory experiences but the ultimate reality of the Ideas themselves and which derives from a celestial, pre-natal vision of the Ideas by the soul of the artist.'

According to those who hold art as a revelation of the Transcendent, the emotion of the artist is a form of non-conceptual knowledge, a knowledge by acquaintance, involving direct intuitional awareness of the essence. It cannot be understood by logical reason, or expressed in terms of concepts. According to Croce, this intuition is a spiritual activity; it is prior to reason and logic and is basic to it. Positing two forms of human knowledge, intuitive and logical, Croce distinguishes them by stating that intuitive knowledge produces images and hence is prior logically to logical knowledge which produces concepts. Without images we can have no concepts; hence intuitive knowledge is the ground of logical knowledge. The origin of art, according to Croce, lies in the power of forming images. Art is ruled uniquely by imagination and images are its only wealth. Man is an artist as

21 Ibid., p. 190
soon as he imagines, and long before he reasons. The essence of the aesthetic activity... lies, according to Croce, in a form of intuition that involves no mystic insight, but perfect sight, complete perception, and adequate imagination. The miracle of art lies not in the externalisation but the conception of the idea; externalisation is a matter of mechanical techniques and manual skills.

According to Croce, that which we intuit is before we intuit it. It is this content, this sensation which is referred to as the rough material of the mind. He does not satisfactorily account for its existence, rigidly abstaining from any speculations about supposed realities that transcend experience. "Primal origins and ultimate ends do not interest him. That which we intuit before we intuit it is that which we do not know."  

Croce's philosophy is the philosophy of mind and he views mind alone as reality. Every form that reality assumes for us has its ground within mind. Intuition is a mental activity that is the ground of all other forms of mental


activity. Intuition is identical with expression in aesthetic activity and he goes on to assert that beauty, the aesthetic fact, is expression; and thus to Croce, there is no distinction amongst any of the terms, art, beauty, intuition, expression. When one is there, all are there. When one is absent, all are absent.

Art is the expression of impressions. These impressions, according to him, are not any external impressing causes or physical objects but something in the mind of man. This is what he calls the content of art. According to him, there is no passage between content and form, i.e., between impressions and expressions; the aesthetic facts, beauty, consists in form alone. Regarding the nature of the content, Croce says that we know nothing of its nature. Thus Croce, an idealist, reveals his agnosticism, denying the existence of matter apart from the mind. Sri Aurobindo, whose theory of evolution considers mind as the highest point of evolution achieved by man till now and matter as the lowest point of involution from which man has evolved, does not agree with Croce in his analysis of the forms of knowledge or in his theory of aesthetics which is of a piece with his general philosophy.

A mystic and a seer that he is, Sri Aurobindo believes in the Upanishadic dictum that the essential reality or the Brahman, is above and beyond the mind and words.
"yato vāco māvartante; aprāpya manasā saha." Mind has to be annihilated in the process of self-realisation. He does not agree with the proposition that there are only two forms of knowledge, imaginative and intellectual. That the imaginative knowledge is that of the individual while intellectual knowledge is that of the universal is also quite unacceptable. Art, according to Sri Aurobindo, can be both conceptual and imaginative. It produces images as well as embodies ideas. It has a spiritual function to perform. Art has not only aesthetic values, but life-values, mind-values, and soul-values as well. It is quite unnatural to cut up the mind and its activities and to oppose the concept-forming faculty to the image-making faculty of the mind and to rigidly compartmentalise them. According to him, the synthetic action of the idea is more prominent in Art than the analytic idea which stands out in logic, science, and philosophical reasoning. It would be proper to say that the integrating conception as well as the image-making faculty are two leading powers of Art with intuition as the driving force behind it.

Nor does Sri Aurobindo agree with Croce's view that the aesthetic activity is completed internally and externalisation is outside the miracle of art and is not needed. The
power of a rich inner imaging of things which Croce calls
g expression must go hand in hand with the power of translating
the images into visible form which Sri Aurobindo calls "at
least an indispensable part of the art of expression, creation
or image-making." What use is an inarticulate Shakespere
or an ineffective Angelo if we cannot participate in the
contemplation and enjoyment of their works of art?

Sri Aurobindo divides the activity of human thought
into two broad groups of functions: the faculties of contempla-
tion, creation, imagination which enable a man to see the
truth and those of criticism, reasoning, discrimination, inquiry
which help him judge the truth when it is seen. It is the
proper development and functioning of both these groups of
faculties, the interpretative and the analytical, which go to
make a complete man.

Art is the produce of the higher faculties of man
namely those of contemplation, creation and imagination. It
is through these faculties that man realises the Ultimate
Truth. Analysing and arranging the uses of Art according to
the order of their importance, Sri Aurobindo considers the
purely aesthetic as the first and lowest, the intellectual

25 'The Future Poetry', Vol. 9, p. 485-487
and educative as the second and the spiritual as the third and highest. The aesthetic use though graded as the lowest, is of immense value to humanity because it is basic to the other uses of Art. The aesthetic sense helps to raise man from the beast, to refine and purge his passions, to ennoble his emotions and to lead him up through the heart and the imagination to the state of the intellectual man∗, and enables man to evolve further. It purifies by beauty; it leads to \textit{cittasuddhi}, the purification of \textit{citta}, the mind and its mass of established ideas, feelings and actional habits, which is similar to the Katharsis of the Greek tragedies. It disciplines the mind and heart, raises and purifies conduct by instilling a desire for the coarse desires and vulgar passions of the savage, for the uncouth and excessive in action and manner. It gives man a sense of restraint and makes him strive after the decent, the beautiful, the fit and seemly. Through Joy, Love and Beauty, it leads man to \textit{ananda}, the unbounded delight which is identified with the Brahman. "To see divine beauty in the whole world, man, life, nature, love that which we have seen and to have pure unalloyed bliss in that love and that beauty is the appointed road by which mankind as a race must climb to God."

26 Sri Aurobindo, \textit{The Hour of God} (SABCL, Vol. 17) p. 238
The second use of Art is its impact on life, its place in the evolution of the race and its value in the education and actual life of a nation. The sense of the beautiful is the very basis of the culture of a nation. The manners, the social culture and the restraint in action and expression are expressive of national prestige and dignity and these are the very things that the aesthetic sense fosters in man. "Art stills the emotions and teaches them the delight of a restrained and limited satisfaction." Perfection and harmony are the cherished ideals of all art. Plato has emphasized the importance of music in education; according to him, the music to which a people is accustomed was reflective of the character of that people. "The mind is profoundly influenced by what it sees and if the eye is trained from the days of childhood to the contemplation and understanding of beauty, harmony and just arrangement in line and colour, the tastes, habits and character will be insensibly trained to follow a similar law of beauty, harmony and just arrangement in the life of the adult man." Through the exercise of both the creative and contemplative activity, we can develop our powers of reflection and discrimination, says Aram Torossian. To

27 Ibid., p. 245
28 Ibid., p. 245
emphasize the fact that Art enables us to introduce order into our diverse and conflicting activities and experiences, he quotes Denman Ross from his book 'On Drawing and Painting': "The question is, constantly, am I doing it right or not? The effort is to do it right, right every time, exactly right, and there lies the value of it.... The repetitions must be exact, the sequences faultless, the balances perfect. The student trying constantly to do the right thing gets into the habit of doing it, as a matter of course. When his practice of Design is ended and it comes to the applications of Design in the conduct of life, he will be constantly thinking about his activities as if he were designing, as if he were making Music, or Dancing or Painting." The third and the noblest utility of Art, according to Sri Aurobindo, lies in its service to the growth of spirituality in the race, wherein Art reaches its highest and purest self-expression. European Art merely satisfies the physical requirements of the aesthetic sense, the laws of formal beauty, the emotional demand of humanity, the portrayal of life and outward reality, while Indian Art alone reaches beyond these and expresses inner spiritual truth, "the joy of God in the world and its beauty and desirableness and the manifestation of divine force and energy in phenomenal

29 Denman Ross: Aram Torossian quotes in 'Guide to Aesthetics' (Stanford University Press, 1937) p. 303
Sri Aurobindo firmly states that "What Nature is, what God is, what man is can be triumphantly revealed in stone or on canvas."

To the traditional Indian Artist, who lived close to Nature, art was a means of relating human life to the creative cosmic life. By actual and intense participation in it, he attempted to create the cosmic dynamism which consisted in the discovery and expression of the rhythmic vitality of Nature and her inner laws which the Vedas refer to as chandas. Art thus helped to enrich human life by enabling it to establish communion with the life of the universe to the fullest possible measure. According to Hegel, art presents to the imagination features of the ultimate ideal of the harmonising universe.

One of the main functions of art, according to Snjet Pandit, is the presentation of the aesthetic surface of life and Nature to man. One of the primary motivating forces of art is kāma, 'the pleasure-giving and life-enhancing feeling which helps us identify ourselves with the art object in the first place. "Art is neither the pure sensuous, nor the mere

30 'The Hour of God and Other Essays', Vol. 17, p.248
31 Ibid., p. 249
intellectual; it is not philosophy, nor science or theology made attractive for the people through sensuous embodiment."

The object of the artist must be art only. Even if he treats ethical, social or political questions, he can turn them into art only by expressing what is aesthetically beautiful in them. 'Art has nothing to do with Life in itself, things in themselves, Good, Truth or the Divine for their own sake, but only in so far as they appeal to some aesthetic sense of beauty.' The aim of art is not to popularise religion or science; nor does its utility lie in arousing passions and sentiments, as Plato contended. 'The value of art lies in its ability to express the fundamental and inner nature of the actual.' Art must reveal Nature's inner law and not her outward appearance, her ideal form, not her superficial aspect. It is this creative office of art which Sri Aurobindo emphasizes when he refers to the function of the poet as artist and creator: 'The poet is then something more than a maker of beautiful word and phrase, a favoured child of the fancy and imagination, a careful fashioner of idea and utterance or an effective poetic thinker, moralist, dramatist or story-teller;


33 'The Future Poetry', Vol. 9, p. 241

he becomes a spokesman of the eternal spirit of beauty and
delight and shares that highest creative and self-expressive
rapture which is close to the original ecstasy that made
existence, the divine Ānanda'. 35

Art is suprarational; it treads the realm of a power
and a light higher than that of the intellect. At the same
time, the intellect or the reason cannot be totally excluded
from the sphere of artistic creation and appreciation. Sri
Aurobindo calls the intellect the enlightener and corrector
of life-impulses and first mental seekings which lay the
foundation for the superstructure of the spiritual advancement
and self-realisation. It is 'only one minister of the veiled
spirit and a preparer of the paths for the coming of its rule.' 36

The perfect individual in the perfect society must
necessarily aim at making his whole life and being entirely
beautiful; a complete and universal appreciation of beauty
is an indispensable attainment of his. This he does through
the great creative arts, poetry, painting, sculpture, archi-
tecture in which his seeking after beauty reaches its most
intense and satisfying expression.

36  'Social and Political Thought'; Vol. 15, p. 127
This seeking for beauty, the aesthetic activity is not rational in its origin; "it springs from the roots of our life, it is an instinct and an impulse, an instinct of aesthetic satisfaction and an impulse of aesthetic creation and enjoyment." It is impossible for man to kill or suppress this instinct as well as the impulse. The necessity of self-expression as well as the inevitability of the pursuit of Truth, Goodness and Beauty, the Ultimate values of life, urges man to take recourse to artistic creation whereby soul grows in stature.

More often than not, this aesthetic impulse springs from the infrarational parts of our being and hence much imperfection and impurity characterise aesthetic creation by and large. The deficiencies and crudities of aesthetic creation are corrected and purified by the faculty of reason which results in the advancement of taste and perception. Thus reason comes in to shape our aesthetic conscience and to guide it along the proper lines.

The intervention of the intellect in the process of artistic creation in order to enlighten and chasten the aesthetic taste is true only of lower planes of aesthetic

37 Ibid., p. 128
activity. Aesthetic activity of the greatest and most powerful kind however, surpasses reason and leaves it behind. "The creation of beauty in poetry and art does not fall within the sovereignty or even within the sphere of the reason". It is a divine enthusiasm which creates beauty of the highest kind: "Creation comes by a suprarational influx of light and power which must work always, if it is to do its best, by vision and inspiration." The true Creator, according to Sri Aurobindo, is the Genius. It is suprarational in its nature and in its instrumentation. If the intellect dominates the impulse of artistic creation, takes hold of the divine influx and forces it to accept and obey the canons of reason, severe limitations are imposed on the freedom of artistic achievement and creative enthusiasm repressed. Thus even the most beautiful and powerful art-creations guided and shaped by the intellect turn out to be mere mechanical constructions, not creations of beauty. Art is reduced to mere workmanship, mechanical though good and faultless. It is mere form without a soul; a body without the Spirit. True art, instead, is "the embodiment of the imperishable truth of beauty seized in its inner reality, its divine delight, its appeal to a supreme source of ecstasy,

38 Ibid., p. 128
39 Ibid., p. 128
Mere perfection of technique and an intellectual greatness do not make great art. To discover the deeper truth of beauty, not merely the truth of idea, or of reason, is the true aim of great art; it is a truly creative aim, not a critical one. This truth of beauty it seizes and expresses by form and idea, the form being a significant form, a form which reveals the secret significances which God, the divine Creator, who dwells in them as their very soul and spirit, has invested them with, not the faithful and harmonious reproduction of the natural form, and, the idea being the revelatory idea, the idea that lays bare the revelatory idea, the idea that lays bare the eternal splendour and truth of Spirit inherent in the thing which inspires the artist, not the elegant or merely satisfying or correct idea of the intellect.

In the concluding paragraph of his essay on 'Supra-rational Beauty', Sri Aurobindo describes the progress of the search for beauty from a mere joy in the beauty of form, a vital satisfaction, to spiritual ecstasy and divine consummation. At this height, aesthetic activity and religion appear to have common aims. '... that which we are seeking

through beauty is in the end that which we are seeking through religion, the Absolute, the Divine." Aesthetic delight is a mere vital enjoyment, "a satisfaction in the beauty of form, the beauty which appeals to the physical senses and the vital impressions, impulses, desires" in the beginning. It turns out to be, in the middle, an intellectual satisfaction, "a satisfaction in the beauty of the ideas seized, the emotions aroused, the perfection of perfect process and harmonious combination." This intellectual satisfaction reaches its ultimate fruition in a state of supreme spiritual satisfaction in which one is enabled to come face to face with the soul of beauty in everything one sees, a mystic apprehension of the divine element in and through all His Creations. Says Sri Aurobindo: "Behind them the soul of beauty in us desires the contact, the revelation, the uplifting delight of an absolute beauty in all things which it feels to be present, but which neither the senses and instincts by themselves can give, though they may be its channels - for it is suprasensuous, — nor the reason and intelligence, though they too are a channel, — for it is suprarational, supra-intellectual, — but to which

41 Ibid., p. 135
42 Ibid., p. 135
43 Ibid., p. 135
through all these veils the soul itself seeks to arrive."  
The sense of beauty in us arrives at its highest satisfaction 
and fulfilment only when we are able to discern and apprehend 
the soul of beauty, the touch of divinity "in any slightest 
or greatest thing, the beauty of a flower, a form, the 
beauty and power of a character, an action, an event, a 
human life, an idea, a stroke of the brush or the chisel or 
a scintillation of the mind, the colours of a sunset or the 
grandeur of the tempest."  It is here that the highest aims 
of religion and aesthetic activity coincide. "It is in 
truth seeking, as in religion, for the Divine, the All-Beautiful 
man, in nature, in life, in thought, in art; for God 
is Beauty and Delight hidden in the variation of his masks 
and forms; when, fulfilled in our growing sense and knowledge 
of beauty and delight in beauty and our power for beauty, we 
are able to identify ourselves in soul with this Absolute 
and Divine in all the forms and activities of the world and 
shape an image of our inner and our outer life in the highest 
image we can perceive and embody of the All-Beautiful, then 
the aesthetic being in us who was born for this end, has 
fulfilled himself and risen to his divine consummation."

44 Ibid., p. 135
45 Ibid., p. 135
46 Ibid., p. 135
To find highest beauty, according to Sri Aurobindo, is to find God.

To find highest beauty, not to create it, is the function of all great art, according to Sri Aurobindo. Creation, in the sense of artistic creation, is a misnomer, says he. "Nothing in this world is created, all is manifested. All exists previously in the mind of the Knower." All art is, hence, mere interpretation. "It may interpret that which is already manifest or was manifest at one time, or it may interpret what will be manifest hereafter. It may even be used as one of the agencies in the manifestation." According to Plato, the only reality is the reality of abstract concepts, which he called Forms or Ideas. This archetypal Idea of Plato was concrete and real, "not constructed in the mind by abstraction from sensory experience but existing prior to experience and known in immediate acquaintance by rational intuition." The objects of sensory experience as well as man's art products are only imperfectly and derivatively real, their reality being a reflection of the reality of the Ideas partially inhering in them. The same idea is echoed by Sri Aurobindo when he

47 The Harmony of Virtue, Vol.3, p. 413
48 Ibid., p. 413 (Vol.3.)
49 Harold Osborne, 'Aesthetics and Criticism', p.190
says that "man creates his world because he is the psychic instrument through whom God manifests that which He had previously arranged in Himself. In this sense Art can create the past, the present and the future."

The nature of art depends upon whether it reproduces what the eye sees or what the soul sees. Art is truly reflective of the culture of the people who create it. In the context of a discussion of the nature of art, Sri Aurobindo is naturally led to a comparison between the two main categories of Art, viz. oriental and occidental, more particularly European and Indian Art. The materialistic culture of the European is contrasted with the spiritual culture of the Indian in such a discussion.

The lower type of European Art, according to Sri Aurobindo, is a mere reproduction of what the eye sees as far as possible within the limitations imposed by the medium. The hallmark of this type of art is realism and factual fidelity. A higher European Art is basically imitative, not of form but of the emotion of the subject. A great deal of our psychic selves expresses itself through our eyes, the face and the pose when we are in the grip of a powerful emotion or in a psychological moment. This is what is sought

50 'The Harmony of Virtue', Vol.3, p.413
to be expressed here, where baffled realism turns to interpre-
tation, interpretation of the inner truth revealing itself
through the outward form. Products of this type of art
manifest the profundities and intensities of human character
with vividness and accuracy and this is sometimes referred to
as 'psychological Realism'. A still higher kind of European
Art is basically imagination. The imaginative artist "trans-
fers something that belongs to himself into the object of his
study, some fancy that has flashed across or some idea that
has mastered his mind." Such imaginative art is a form of
self-expression, a way in which the artist externalised himself
and makes his personality manifest to other men.... The art-
product was valued as the expression of the artist's uniqueness,
as the means by which he communicated his inspired insight into
reality, or conveyed his wonderfully delicate or passionately
intense emotional responses to the less favoured and gifted
of mankind." In this egoistic type of Art, the artist is
interpreting himself, not his subject. The European artist
is, on the whole, a bondsman to form and very seldom that he
attain to "that spiritual freedom which is the first condition

51 Aesthetics and Criticism (Harold Osborne), p. 84
52 The Harmony of Virtue, Vol.3, p. 415
53 Harold Osbornes, p. 140
of the sight spiritual", and which alone can lead to the true vision.

The Indian artist, beginning at the other end, sees the soul, or the heart or mind of the object under study and expresses it in his work of art. He possesses sukṣmā-dṛṣṭi or the soul-sight and he seeks a spiritual union with the object by dhyāna. The essential truth of things dawns on his mind by the process of revelation. He takes the outward forms as a starting-point for his formal expression of the vision within him. The faculty of imagination is not paramount with him in the creation of art as it is with his European counterpart; it is only "a channel and an instrument of some source of knowledge and inspiration that is greater and higher." To him, reality is not mere outward appearance; the true reality is that which is hidden. Indian art does not consciously strive after beauty as a thing worthy to be sought for its own sake. 'To embellish life with beauty is only the most outward function of art and poetry, to make life more intimately beautiful and noble and great and full of meaning is its higher office, but its highest comes when the poet becomes the seer and reveals to man his eternal self and the godheads of its manifestation.'

54 'The Harmony of Virtue', Vol.3, p. 415
55 Ibid., p. 417
Commenting on the import of Indian Art, Sri Aurobindo stresses the fact that the whole basis of Indian artistic creation is directly spiritual and intuitive. The method of direct perception over intellect, though it is offensive to the rationalistic mind, is infinitely superior to mere intellectual cerebration. That the Indian art had no basis in any intellectual process of any kind or any verifiably experience does not detract from its greatness. The intuitions of the scientist which are made much of by the western minds are mere fantasies which contradict one another and seem to have no real value except their vain metaphysical subtlety, says Sri Aurobindo. As the reason rises above mere sensuous perception and admits us to higher ranges of truth and knowledge, so does the intuition overtop reason and help us realise the direct and luminous power of truth.

All great artistic work proceeds from an act of intuition, not really an intellectual idea or a splendid imagination, but a direct intuition of some truth of life or being, some significant form of that truth, some development of it in the mind of man. There are different kinds of intuition in art itself, asserts Sri Aurobindo, but the essential part of the process, that which makes the artistic perception intuitive, is the same. So far as the intuition of an European artist is concerned, it starts from an appearance in life or nature, and if it happens to start from something in his own soul, it
relates the intuition at once to an external support. The intuition gets intellectualised, coated over with the mental stuff and thus is made agreeable to the reason. It is now at best a colourable imitation of life and Nature. The appeal of such art is not direct to the eye of the deepest self or spirit within; its appeal is mainly sensuous, vital, emotional or intellectual. The object and field of this kind of creative intuition are life, action, passion, emotion, idea and nature seen for their own sake and for a mere aesthetic delight in them. This is what Sri Aurobindo calls the most outward function of art and poetry. That art has a greater function to perform a greater perfection to achieve through that extra spiritual quality of it is unacceptable to the ordinary European mind.

Ancient Indian art at its greatest is of another kind. Its highest business is to disclose something of the self, the Infinite, the Divine to the regard of the Soul. Life is seen not in its externals, but in the self in some suggestion of the Infinite or of something beyond. It suggests the infinite multiplicity in the Infinite oneness, which is the quintessence of all Upanisadic wisdom "Pūrnamadah Pūrnamidam Pūrnāt Pūrnamudacyate. Pūmasya Pūrnamadaya Purnamevavasisyate." Indian Art, in fact

56 Isavasya Upanisad, verse, 1.
is identical in its spiritual aim and principle with the
rest of Indian culture.

The Indian artist sees in his spiritual being the truth
of the thing he must express and his intuitive mind creates
its form. He reaches through the finite to the infinite and
tries to express the divine origin of earthly beauty. He
no doubt uses a material form, colour, line and design as
every artist does as the physical means of his expression
but he does not confine himself to mere imitation of Nature;
he renders them all significant of and true to his vision
which involves in the process a lot of modification or
symbolic variation of the outward object of perception.
The line, colour and the rest are not his first but his
last pre-occupation because they are the vehicles of the
spiritual truth that has taken shape in his intuitive mind.
Even in the matter of portraying some human passion or
incident, he always goes to the root of the emotion and brings
out in the spirit of his design what power behind the action
or the soul from which it springs and that is the main theme
of the artistic creation. Thus the appeal is not merely to
the outward soul but to the inner self, the antarātmān. Thus,
says Sri Aurobindo, one needs to cultivate a spiritual insight
or culture if one is to enter into the whole meaning of Indian
artistic creation; an essentially intuitive and spiritual art
must be seen with the intuitive and spiritual eye alone; and
in it being confined to the mere arrangement of ideas and the technique of expression.

Coleridge in his "On Poesy or Art", in dealing with the unconscious, goes on to say: "...there is in genius itself an unconscious activity; nay, that is the genius in the man of genius. And this is the true exposition of the rule that the artist must first elcign himself from nature in order to return to her with full effect... He merely absents himself for a season from her, that his own spirit, which has the same ground with nature, may learn her unspoken language in its main radicals..."

Art and Nature can, thus, be said to have equal claims to representing reality, deriving as they do from the same activity. Poetry, according to Coleridge, is a special kind of knowing where there is a reconciliation of the internal with the external. All art is a form of real knowledge and not an expression of something less essential, and embodies 'universals' and 'particularly' as much as Nature does. Commenting on Coleridge's views of poetry and art, Professor Eate writes: 'Art presents an 'abridgement' of reality itself. For 'universal' and 'particular' of reality itself. For

59 Coleridge, Norman Fruman quotes in 'Coleridge, the damaged archangel', p. 202
'universal' and 'particular' are mutually dependent in nature. Reality, that is, consists in the manner in which value or form becomes definite and emergent in the particular: reality is the bridge between concreteness and value. Value becomes real at the same point where the concrete exemplifies the ideal. In this sense, therefore, the ideal and the real are one and the same, and 'Idealism' is at the same time 'the truest and most binding realism'.

This idea of Art is embodied in Sri Aurobindo's statement that Art cannot give what Nature gives; it gives something more. At the same time he is also of the opinion that the question of Art or Nature being more beautiful does not arise because both are representations of reality under different conditions of creation. But the pioneers of the school of Art for Art's sake assert art's priority to Nature. According to Oscar Wilde, "...the more we study Art, the less we care for Nature. What Art really reveals to us is Nature's lack of design, her curious rudities, her extraordinary monotony, her absolutely unfinished condition. Nature has good intentions of course, but as Aristotle once said, she cannot carry them out."

60 Walter Jackson Bate, 'Coleridge' (New York, 1968), p. 149-50

Asserting in an idealistic strain, that Nature is our creation and that she quickens to life in our brain, writes:
Asserting in an idealistic strain, that Nature is our creation and that she quickens to life in our brain, he writes:

"Things are because we see them, and what we see, and how we see it, depends on the Arts that have influenced us. To look at a thing is very different from seeing a thing. One does not see anything until one sees its beauty. Then, and then only does it come into existence." Citing London fogs as an example in this connection, he says, "They did not exist till Art had invented them". According to these champions of Art the unfortunate aphorism that Art holds a mirror up to Nature is far from the truth.

Sri Aurobindo stresses the superiority of the aesthetic mode of apprehending Reality over the intellectual again and again. The harmony of the subjective and objective is possible only in art, not in philosophy. Emphasizing the superiority of Art over philosophy, Schelling observes in 'System of Transcendental Idealism':

"Absolute objectivity is given to art alone. If art is deprived of objectivity, one may say, it ceases to be what it is and becomes philosophy; give objectivity to