

THE INDIAN AESTHETICS OF EMOTIONS (*RASA*): NON-DUALITY, AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE AND THE BODY

[A ESTÉTICA INDIANA DAS EMOÇÕES (*RASA*):
NÃO-DUALIDADE, EXPERIÊNCIA ESTÉTICA E O CORPO]

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Abstract: As a spiritual discipline leading one towards the universal, Indian performing arts involve a pedagogy of disclosure, showing things as they really are: art is not a matter of unpredictable inspiration, but an effortful exploration into the extraordinary residing in the ordinary. As such, while embracing the ever-present essence of things, art is defined by Tagore as a means of disclosure of the essentiality of life, rather than a representation of it. In other words, art is a means of bringing transparency to life, getting one rid of the dust, the fantasies and the distractions that dominate one's quotidian dealings. It is, finally, a kind of *meditative performance*, a radical exercise of paying attention to one's immediate reality.

Keywords: Aesthetics of Emotions; *rasa*; Non-duality

Resumo: Como disciplina espiritual conducente ao universal, as artes performáticas da Índia envolvem uma pedagogia do desvelamento, um modo de revelar as coisas tais como elas verdadeiramente são: a arte não constitui, assim, um evento de “inspiração” súbita, mas uma investigação árdua sobre o extraordinário que reside no ordinário. Como tal, ao abarcar a essência sempre-presente de todas as coisas, a arte é definida por Rabindranath Tagore como um meio de desvelamento da essencialidade da vida, ao invés de uma representação da mesma. Em outras palavras, a arte é um meio de dar transparência à vida, livrando-a da poeira, das fantasias e das distrações que dominam o cotidiano. É, finalmente, uma espécie de *performance meditativa*, um exercício radical de se prestar atenção à realidade imediata.

Palavras-chave: Estética das Emoções; *rasa*; Não-dualidade

Introduction

Classical Indian aesthetic philosophy is superbly embodied in the life and work of great Indian contemporary artist Rabindranath Tagore, who was granted the Nobel Prize of Literature in 1913, being at that time the first non-European writer to receive the award. Rabindranath Tagore is mostly known in western circles for his poetry and short story writing. His literature, however, and all his writings as a whole, should be framed within the wider perspective of Indian traditional performing arts which are encapsulated by word is *nāṭya*, “theatre”, as well as by the word *kāvya*, “poetics” or *poiesis*. The two words combined – *nāṭya* as theatre or stage-gathering, and *kāvya* as poetics or semio-linguistic tools of gathering – conform, purportfully, what we call Performance (*abhinaya*), the fundamental existential artistic event which involves words, gestures, imagery, dance and music. Those are precisely the fields of intervention of the multifaceted personality of Rabindranath Tagore: he is known to all Indians for his music, lyrics, dance, paintings and, obviously, his writings. While defining artistic events as *existential performances*, Rabindranath Tagore points to their supreme goal as platforms for self-transformation which, in the Indian context, necessarily reflects a fundamental spiritual quest: an immersion into and a companionship with the Other. Tough utilitarian goals may equally be embraced, the most dignified and eminent role of art is to be a means of spiritual realization understood as universal communion which, in Indian tradition, is usually designated as *mokṣa*, i.e., Liberation or Spiritual Enlightenment.

In his essay titled *The Creative Ideal*, Tagore explicitly points to theatre/poetry as “spirituality” with the following words: “To detach the individual idea from its confinement of everyday facts and to give its soaring wings the freedom of the universal.” (TAGORE, 1922) The “universal” alluded by Tagore, synonymous to “essence” or “divine”, is not to be understood as a singular and unique “thing”, distinct from and greater than all other things: instead, the universal is the ever-present, immanent and constitutive platform for the emergence and co-existence of all things. Therefore, as a spiritual discipline leading one towards the universal, performing arts

involve a pedagogy of disclosure, showing things as they really are: art is not a matter of unpredictable inspiration, but an effortful exploration into the extraordinary residing in the ordinary. As such, while embracing the ever-present essence of things, art is defined by Tagore as a means of disclosure of the essentiality of life, rather than a representation of it. In other words, art is a means of bringing transparency to life, getting one rid of the dust, the fantasies and the distractions that dominate one's quotidian dealings. It is, finally, a kind of *meditative performance*, a radical exercise of paying attention to one's immediate reality.

Tagore's fundamentals of performing arts, well-rooted in classical Indian aesthetic philosophy, show a remarkable affinity with what Antonin Artaud, perhaps one the greatest European artists and intellectuals of last century, once said while exploring the etymology of the Greek word *theatron* as an event of "contemplation of the divine". While in India performing arts are looked upon as a path distinctively marked by radical attention or mindfulness, Artaud pronounces them to be, in the words of Derrida, a *metaphysics of presence* (DERRIDA, 1978). Art, he says, "is not mimesis¹ [imitation] of an event, but the event itself, not a representation of life but a way of living." (PICKERING, 2005, p. 106).

Giving those constitutive tenets of performing arts in India, I will present in the sequence the broader narrative of Indian classical aesthetics and its eminent proposal of self-transformation and self-awareness. I will dwell on the following three topics:

- I. The Sacred/Ontological Principles and Existential Forgetfulness;
- II. Spirituality or Liberation as an Aesthetic Design: Art as Laboratory of Meditative Performance;
- III. Body as Protagonist and Emotions as its Dynamics: the *rasa* Doctrine.

The Sacred/Ontological Principles and Existential Forgetfulness

With very limited exceptions, the core of Indian philosophical thinking, that lends rational support to all major religions in India, revolves around a basic principle: behind the multiplicity of empirical entities, there is an ever-present principle of unity that binds all them together. This is what is generally spoken of as "non-duality" (*advaita*),

¹ The Greek word *mimesis* is being used here in the bare sense of "imitation". However, as discussed ahead, the original Aristotelian sense could be better translated as a critical re-visiting of quotidian reality.

the unitarian ontology that lends ultimate meaning to individual existences. Here, the principle of unity should not be understood either as a sum of parts or as a creator of them. “Oneness” means a constitutive and immanent dimension of things: it resides eternally in all of them, as their essence. The major literary sources of non-duality in India are the following: (i) sacred texts of the Vedas, and more specifically the Upaniṣads - which mainly posit an impersonal principle of unity called Brahman; (ii) the sacred texts of the Tantras, supplemented by the Purāṇas, which mainly posit a personal principle of unity, a Supreme Personality or Supreme God. These latter sources are widely prevalent in contemporary India and inform the major theistic religions: the Supreme God is either personified as Śiva (Śaiva religion), as Viṣṇu (Vaiṣṇava religion) or as Śakti or Dūrgā/Kālī (Śakta religion).

Those three major religions are a magnificent example of what I call “monotheist monism”: Śiva, Viṣṇu or Śakti are not just an Absolute God but, above all, an Absolute reality. In other words, there is no distinct divine reality. Our immediate reality, where we step on, here and now, is eminently divine. Different from western modern tendency to posit an irreconcilable antinomy between the One/Unity and the Multiple – which necessarily docks at the idea that either the One is an illusion, or the Multiple is an illusion, or still the One is an entity ontologically distinct from the Multiple -, Indian classical tradition posits a Supreme God understood as the fundamental source of both the One and the Multiple². Here, the One is not conceived as an entity, but as a platform foundation for the manifestation of the Multiple, whereas the Multiple thus manifested is conceived/understood as the only means through which the One is revealed and realised. In other words, there is no One without the Multiple and there is no Multiple without the One. Just like a coin, they constitute the inseparable sides of a single, non-dual reality. At the same time, being a foundation, the One can neither be exhausted by a particular entity of the Multiple, nor by the unimaginable sum of all particular entities. In other words, the plurality of the Multiple never affects the unitarian integrity of the One.

² The philosophical foundations are based on four of the six major schools of Vedānta (lit. “the final part of the Upaniṣads”). The exceptions are the Advaita and the Dvaita schools, the former on account of a doctrine of impersonal Absolute and the latter on account of an ontological distinction between the One and the Multiple.

Notwithstanding the ontological configuration of the One wherein the Multiple abides, individual existence is marked by a mysterious and intriguing condition of forgetfulness, whereby the former (i.e., the One) is largely omitted in one's consciousness, and a presumption of self-sufficiency and self-reliability prevails. This condition of forgetfulness, generally called "ego-centrality" or "individualism", poisons one's inter-subjective and inter-objective dealings: the world becomes, as Michel Foucault (2000) rightly states, a battleground for self-centred projects wherein one's relationships with the other become merely instrumental in ensuring and enabling one's private appropriation, control and manipulation of that very other. In other words, the world becomes a battleground for a war between two irreconcilable parties: the party of the "mine" as against the party of "yours". The first ("mine") generates a compulsive attitude of self-defence and the second ("yours") generates a compulsive attitude of other-attacking. Inter-subjectivity turns out to be reduced, even in its manifold disguises as modes of "charity" or "generosity", to strategies of self-defence and other-attacking. Successes and failures are, accordingly, to be measured by the technical efficacy or otherwise of those very strategic means.

Such state of affairs entails a sheer impossibility of one's attaining, in the long run, any meaningful and sustainable success. In fact, the external factors involved in each and every egocentric project are countless and unpredictable, being therefore beyond one's individual capacity to control. As a consequence, failure is, in the long run, the recurrent point of destination of all previous successes, bringing about recurrent suffering, distress, desperation and, above all, an unbearable feeling of solitude. The diagnosis of Indian philosophy, by and large, is that there is no escape from that situation as long as one keeps acting "technically", i.e., acting in order to amend, reform or substitute the tools and strategies of producing the "mine" and eliminating the "yours". In fact, the real causes of one's recurrent and unavoidable failure are deemed not to be one's technical abilities, or perhaps the lack of them, but above all one's presumptive idea of autonomous individuality and self-sufficiency or, in other words, one's self-conceited idea of being himself/herself the Supreme God. Therefore, the forgetfulness of the meta-unity that enables one's existence and one's agency in the world – i.e., the real Supreme God, in the terms above stated – makes us blind to the fact that the same others we attempt to control and manipulate are, in fact, our own

ancestors, our own present enablers, those without which we can't simply exist. In short, the forgetfulness of Supreme God makes one desire what (if I may say so) one already has/is. One's desire is not, ultimately, a desire of the other, but a desire for a reconciliation with the other. And, again, this fundamental desire for the underlying unity is much more than a mere "desire" as a matter of subjective deliberation and much more than an imperative rational ethics: it is a fundamental *will* (in the Nietzschean sense of the term), an instinctive mode of regaining one's destiny, one's own nature.

In short, the forgetfulness of one's unitarian platform of life and existence does not ever amount to a real absence of the forgotten contents. The world (*jagat*) is what it is, irrespective of my fantasies, my misperceptions, and my sheer ignorance. Presumptive possession, manipulation and control of the other does not affect the latter's ever-present status of being one's destiny companion and partner, in the unity of God. Just like in a mirage the road is never affected by the subjective perception of the water, similarly in a consciousness veiled by ignorance the truth of reality remains and resists, right in front of one's eyes, ready to be re-cognised and re-collected. In the end, the real harmful consequences of forgetfulness are one's individual suffering and recurrent failure. Even the sense of self-resignation, that comes often veiled by the seemingly humble recognition of one's being "finite" and therefore bound to "unavoidable suffering", is perhaps an ultimate attempt of egocentrism to resist change and self-sacrifice: it is, in fact, an hypocritical lament for one's failure and impotence to actually be and act like god. Accordingly, Indian religious traditions state that individual things are neither finite nor infinite: they are "interdependent" (*parasparopakāra*)³ within a platform of unity. Interactive life is, therefore, not only affirmed but posited as the real nature and destiny of beings.

Spirituality or Liberation as an Aesthetic Design: Art as Laboratory of Meditative Performance

Interdependence understood as the sharing of a principle of unity - the Supreme God (Śiva, Viṣṇu ou Śakti) of theistic traditions - is at the core of the overall methodologies of self-transformation in Indian religions: from an egocentric existence

³ The term, used by philosopher Śāṅkarācārya, is descriptive of the so-called "Honey Doctrine" (*madhuvidyā*), presented in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* (1983, 2.5.1-19, p. 323-346).

that fantasizes himself/herself as being an autarchic God, to an interdependent existence merged into the real and trans-subjective Supreme God. The word *bhakti*, usually translated as “devotion” points, more precisely, to the means of realising the primeval sense of *participation* in God, i.e., the primeval sense of co-operation and co-existence of all things in God and, more specifically, in God’s manifestation as cosmos. A text like the *Bhagavad Gītā*, which is perhaps one of the most pan-Indian textualities, synthesises appropriately this proposal: what is at stake is not shift from this to another world; it’s a shift from a way of being-in-this-world marked by ignorance, selfishness and suffering, to another way of being-in-this-world marked by wisdom or knowledge (*prajñā/jñāna*), compassion (*karuṇā*), love (*preman*) and well-being (*ānanda*). In other words, instead of advocating an evasion from the world, or the performance of extraordinary actions, the religious paths lay emphasis on a re-signification of every day interaction, which involves, necessarily and concomitantly, the renunciation of all ineffectual and painful designs of the ego, and the final (re-)discovering of the other as an integral dimension of oneself, as a partner of an ontological brotherhood that dwells in the unitarian platform of God. In short, all we have here is a process of re-visiting, recognising, and re-framing one’s quotidian life within the actual and real unitarian frame. It’s important to note here, that transmigration or re-birth (*saṃsāra*), so exhaustingly associated with Indian religions in general, is not conceived as a final solution, but as a sort of “extra time” to be granted to all those who have not yet been willing or been able to undertake successfully the transformative path towards the realisation of God as one’s immediate reality, here and now.

This process of re-framing one’s quotidian life within the unitarian principle of an immanent Supreme God is the defining mark of what we call “tantrism” or tantric philosophy and practise⁴. It dominates to a large extent Indian contemporary religious scene with a prevailing sense of the cosmos as divine and a soteriological path that favours active aesthetic contemplation as an expression par excellence of the harmonious interaction between the constitutive elements of the Multiple. This re-

⁴ The radical emphasis of Tantric traditions on the ontological immanence of a personal Absolute (the Supreme God) and the consequent divinization of the world favors the development of procedural soteriologies that resort to methodological instrumentalizations of the quotidian. Therefore, it is not only in the ultimate event of Liberation (*mokṣa*) that the world of everyday life is re-embraced as an celebratory communion of all things: the very methods that make it possible also embrace it. This bears testimony to the intrinsic aesthetic nature of Tantric soteriologies in general.

framing process as active aesthetic contemplation could be designated as *meditative or contemplative performance*: it comprehends a multifaceted discipline that leads one to aesthetic experience as participative contemplation of the Multiple (cosmos) as the perennial unfolding of the One (God). It's precisely here where performing arts (*nāṭya*) and religion (*dharma*) coincide, being the designative terms of both interchangeable: performing arts (*nāṭya*) are, as philosophers state, the *dharma* par excellence, particularly its most profound and ultimate dimension, *mokṣa* or spiritual Liberation⁵.

Assuming, by analogy, the cosmos as a meta-narrative, as the great theatrical drama of the Multiple, meant to promote an experience of sustainable delight, the protagonists' ability to undertake a correct and effective performance demands the fulfilment of pre-requisites. The most important of them is the need to relinquish any delusional idea of one's being the omnipotent director of the play. In fact, this false assumption prompts one to counterproductive attempts to make the play prey to his/her subjective whims, resulting in total failure and frustration. One should instead acknowledge the pre-existence of a trans-subjective director – the immanent Supreme God everywhere – which sets the world as a suitable stage-dispensation and stage-arrangement for each and every one to celebrate and share with the other the ontological brotherhood that uniquely enables existential delight. It is by accepting one's role as an interdependent one, in a concerted interaction with other players, that one is able to experience the platform of unity in God and, as such, to accomplish or, perhaps, realise, not just a single desire, but the totality of them: partaking in the One God is to partake God's attributes - first and foremost its uncountable modes of being, its manifestation as Multiple. Aware of this meta-subjective principle as the sole source of sustainable joy, there grows in one a sense of responsibility for the surveillance and maintenance of the overall stage, players, and inherent drama. In this sense, the turn-out-to-be interdependent individual becomes a co-director, a co-supervisor and co-caretaker, along with God. The analogy of the dream-world experience as a platform for one's

⁵ *Dharma* e *mokṣa* are part of a larger doctrine of *puruṣārthas* (lit. "human aspirations"). According to it, there are four major aspirations of human condition, in ascending hierarchy. The first and the second may be called mundane aspirations: *kāma*, the objective desire for the satisfaction of one's instinctive-organic-sexual needs; and *artha*, the search for material prosperity, recognition and power. The third and the fourth may be called religious aspirations: *dharma*, the search for an afterlife paradisiacal condition through the practice of ritual and morality; e, finally, *mokṣa*, the realisation of one's real nature as a condition free from all desires, ignorance and suffering. The ultimate teleology of *nāṭya* as *mokṣa* is exemplary pursued by the Śaiva Tantric philosopher Abhinavagupta.

double-role performance – that of an actor as well as of a director – could well be used as an illustration.

From the cosmic drama to the theatre drama: performing arts as spirituality are religious schoolings for training the individual to achieve excellence in acting and directing and, consequently, to accomplish the perfect performance. Performing arts as spirituality conform, therefore, a micro-cosmos meant to reproduce, in depth and *in toto*, the orderly and harmonic ways of reality as God’s own manifestation in form of mutually cooperative and co-existent entities. In this context, performing arts can be seen as life laboratories, which instead of creating artificial conditions or merely imitating empirical dealings, constitute a micro-platform for the re-plication, in ideal conditions, the authenticity of life and reality. Here, ideal conditions mean, specifically, the “cathartic/purified” stage-world that results from the cleansing of all accidental and distracting dust-factors – including, essentially, one’s egocentric leanings and designs. This experiential laboratory of theatre-drama is a truly “factory” of recollection powered by the methodology of *meditative performance*. It aims at extracting in one – actors, directors, and audience - the juice or essentiality of life. One’s shift from ego-centrality to God’s or cosmic centrality – lying everywhere and nowhere – brings freedom from all mental and physical obstacles and full transparency to the unity that binds together all beings: the full content of one’s consciousness is, ultimately, realised as being “in me”, not being “mine”; and topical delight (*harṣa*) becomes ultimate and sustainable happiness (*ānanda/śānta*). Again, Antonin Artaud’s words provide the best western version of classical Indian aesthetic project as soteriological meditative performance. He says: “Art is not the imitation of life, but life is the imitation of a transcendental principle which art puts us into communication with once again” (DERRIDA, 1978, p. 234).

Body as Protagonist and Emotions as its Dynamics: the *rasa* Doctrine

The main protagonist factor of (the methodology of) *meditative performance* is the body. What does “body” (*śarīra/deha*) actually mean in this context? In Indian aesthetic philosophy, there are three basic meanings. In the first meaning, body means “individuality” (*jīvātman*). It includes everything that defines self-identity as opposed to

others' identity, comprising, therefore, both physical and mental aspects of individuality. One could also call it the form of the "I" or "ego". This first meaning, however, is just the raw material for the systematic process of re-signification that constitutes performing arts as *meditative performance* and spiritual *summo bono*. The second meaning points, precisely, to the teleology of that process: the notion of the cosmos as a concert of individual "bodies", as a super-body, the manifested form (if I may say so) of Supreme God (*paramātmān*). Accordingly, the dynamics of contemplative performance makes one realise that one's body is actually not one's, but an interdependent sharing with all other bodies, and, therefore, a common collective participation in God's body. In doing so, contemplative performance could be described as a semantic journey, whereby the second meaning, i.e., God's body, is realised as encompassing the first, i.e., my body.

The third meaning demands further remarks, since it is close to the western primary sense of the word, being therefore invariably involved in recurrent translations: it refers the gross or material body (*sthūla-śarīra*), also called "flesh". If, in the Indian context, the gross body is usually treated as part of the larger context of one's false sense of individuality, in western circles it has been often referred to as part of a dissociative process of intra-individuality. In fact, the western anxiety over the body is largely a reaction to its disqualification and forgetfulness, within a process which has somehow expelled it from the constitutive and vital makeup of individual existence. The roots of this disqualification could be traced to Christian presumptive links between sin and body, Christian notion of salvation as an afterlife and get-rid-of-the-body condition, and, finally, Enlightenment rationalism. While western reactions tend to appeal for the re-integration of the body as a vital and substantive dimension of a larger individual self, other voices, among which I include those akin to Indian aesthetic philosophy, have also called for a more radical reaction. The basic assumption is that, being the body as materiality the most immediate and visible connecting bridge and common ground between individualities and, perhaps, the most uncontrollable factor of all components of the "I"/"ego", the forgetfulness of the body reflects, in fact, the forgetfulness of otherness. This assumption would, in fact, be congruent with the main symptom that comes along with the forgetfulness of the body: solitude and solipsism. As such, the forgetfulness of the body would imply much more than the forgetfulness of

“my body” or “my self”: it would imply the forgetfulness of “materiality” in general, the common ground-stuff of all beings, the fundamental platform that enables communion and love and, therefore, the experience of oneness with the other. In short, from an Indian aesthetic perspective, the western rescue of the body would be tantamount to exhorting one to giving and sacrificing oneself to the other or to the representative of all others, the Supreme God.

As regards the actual methodology of *meditative performance*, Indian aesthetic philosophy defines existential performance as bodily interactions through means of emotions (*bhāva/rasa*). Emotions are deemed to be the binding link between individuals and, as such, to contain in themselves the secret of the unity of all things. Accordingly, *meditative performance* as a religious method of self-transformation takes the form of an active contemplation of emotions. Its constitutive principles are enshrined in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* (2021), the major esthetical treaty of Indian classical tradition, compiled by Bharatamuni around the 1st century. Within a broad perspective which equally embraces mundane objectives (*kāma* and *artha*) and entertainment (*krīḍā*) (BHARATAMUNI, 2001, 1.108 & 1.113), the ultimate goal of Indian aesthetic philosophy is to promote a pedagogy of the self (*dharma* and *mokṣa*) (BHARATAMUNI, 2001, 1.108), through an investigation of performing emotions described as a “critical re-visiting of everyday life” (*lokavṛtānukaraṇa*) (BHARATAMUNI, 2001, 1.112). Its religious-philosophical developments are manifold, both in context of the Upaniṣads and the Tantras. These include the Śaiva Tantric master Abhinavagupta (10th century) and his work *Abhinavabhāratī* (2006) and the Vaiṣṇava Upaniṣadic-Tantric master Rūpa Gosvāmin (16th century) and his work *Bhaktirasāmṛtasindhu* (2003), a precursor of the Hare Krishna Movement. Both these authors draw fundamentally from the aesthetic philosophy of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* their main soteriological paths of spiritual realisation.

The *Nāṭyaśāstra* presents an exhaustive codification of the resources meant to promote theatrical performance: linguistic and poetic tools, semiotics of bodily gestures, dances movements, musical structures, choreographic models, themes, and the pre-requisites for directors, actors, and audience. Combining performances “to be seen” (*drśya*) (BHARATAMUNI, 2001, 1.7-12) and “to be heard” (*śravya*) (BHARATAMUNI, 2001, 1.7-12), the main goal of Bharatamuni’s aesthetic philosophy

is to produce in all involved players, an “aesthetic experience” or “an aesthetic event of self-realisation”, which could be defined as a “purified emotion”. If the general term for emotion is *bhāva*, the technical term to denote the purified emotion, the goal of all performing arts, is *rasa*. While it is certainly a difficult word to be translated in English, its original sense can give us an important clue of what is at stake: *rasa* is primarily related to the juice or nectar squeezed out of a plat or a fruit⁶. In the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, *rasa* is defined as an event of “tasting the essence” that comprising, as such, “everything that involves delightful savouring” (*rasyate [āsvādyate] anena iti rasaḥ*) (BHARATAMUNI, 2001, 6.31-32). More specifically, *rasa* points to an event of “savouring emotions” in their essentiality, bringing to one sheer delight (*harṣa*) or aesthetic pleasure. This general definition refers, primarily, to the impact caused by the work of art – a play, a poem, a dance, a music, a statue, etc. – in the audience and, secondarily, to the previous and continued impact it generates on actors, directors, and artists in general involved in its production. These two aspects are, sometime, presented in the form of the metaphor of the seed-tree-fruit sequence. (BHARATAMUNI, 2001, 6.38) The seed is the original aesthetic experience of the artist, the tree is the performance that embodies the original experience, and the fruit is the aesthetic experience of the audience.

The doctrine of *rasa* or “savouring the emotions” classifies eight main emotions as characteristic of human existence, both in its (quotidian) raw form and in its corresponding “purified form” that results from *meditative performance* or aesthetic experience. The eight major purified emotions (*rasa*) are as follows (BHARATAMUNI, 2001, 6.1-76)⁷:

- (i) *śṛṅgāra* or love/passion;
- (ii) *hāsya* or mirth/laughter;
- (iii) *kāruṇya* or compassion;
- (iv) *raudra* or fury/hatred;
- (v) *vīra* or heroism;
- (vi) *bhayānaka* or disgust;
- (vii) *bībhatsa* or terror;
- (viii) *adbhuta* or wonder.

⁶ A reference to the sacred nectar of Soma plant (*somarasa*) offered and consumed in Vedic rituals, which is supposed to confer immortality.

⁷ The discussion on the eight *rasas* takes the whole chapter 6, whose understanding should be complemented by the reading of chapter 7, dealing with the “raw emotions” (*bhāva*).

What does actually mean an “emotion in its essentiality”? What is the fundamental difference between a “purified emotion” and its quotidian “raw form”? What is, after all, *rasa*, the aesthetic experience *par excellence*? We stated above that performing arts are like laboratories of life, ways of revealing life in its essentiality. Therefore, a purified emotion is an expression of a reversal of the mindset that prevails in one’s emotional dealings in quotidian life. The prevalent mindset of day-to-day life is marked by a distinctive disturbance: a positive or negative attachment that impels us towards the acquisition or rejection, the grabbing or destruction of the multitude of one’s objects of interaction. Attachment is described as a subjective egocentric design or interest, which is responsible for a superimposition of illegitimate attributes on one’s objects of desire or aversion. In other words, attachment promotes a kind of distortion that instead of actually bringing us closer to things, prevents us from ever noticing their real nature. The unavoidable consequence of this attitude is the recurrent experience of suffering. Therefore, to purify an emotion through *meditative performance* involves an extraordinary and guided effort to re-visit the objects of relationship and neutralise the egocentric designs that distort one’s perception of their real nature. What remains after the cleansing elimination of those distorting factors are the real and spontaneous “reasons” that compel us, imperatively, to relate to things through emotions: the trans-subjective dimension of emotionality, i.e., the immanent power behind each and every emotion, is the magnetic force that brings things together, that unites (or re-unites) things that have always been ontologically united in the oneness of God.

Rasa is, therefore, the purportful result of a pedagogy meant to purify emotions, i.e., to get them rid of the alien elements of subjective and egocentric intentionality. This implies that whatever the raw emotion is set to be “tasted”, even the most seemingly negative one, such as “hatred” (*raudra*), the resulting aesthetic experience is always a pleasant one: after dismissing the disturbing factors, the emotion’s essential functionality as connector or re-connector between subject and object, prevails. To stress the fact that the resulting pleasure is actually an affirmative experience and not just an anesthetic relieve due to a repressive control of desires, the purified emotion is understood as a real re-unifier of things mutually forgotten. In fact, re-union is described by latter commentators as “participation” in the ever-present universality of

things (*sādhāraṇīkaraṇa*)⁸ or, in theocentric terms, in the oneness of the Supreme God. In other words, instead of a subject's "attribute", purified emotions are emotions rescued in their dignity of being universal platforms for the gathering of all things, for the "becoming one [with] the other" (*tanmayībhavana*)⁹ in God. Accordingly, *rasa* or aesthetic experience could, finally, be classified as a sort of intellectual intuition into the real nature of things.

Concluding Remarks

To conclude, I will stress upon two major points. First, classical Indian aesthetics as propounded by Bharatamuni's *Nāṭyaśāstra* comes remarkably close to classical Greek aesthetics as enshrined in Aristotle's *Poetics* (2008)¹⁰. Despite modern interpretations that tend to rely upon a dubious "east-west" antinomy, I firmly believe that the major constitutive elements of what I call an *existential project of self-transformation* are present in both traditions: (i) an impersonalized experience of delight (*eudaimonia/harṣa*) resulting from the purification or contemplation of emotions; (ii) a cognitive event (*anagnorisis/jñāna*) as the realisation of the universal dimension of things (*kathólou/sādhāraṇīkaraṇa*); (iii) a *meditative performance* that enables the transition from the particular to the universal, as a "laboratory" of dramatization of existence. The term denoting this aesthetic dive into the depths of reality is *mimesis* in Greek and *anukaraṇa* in Sanskrit, whose English rendering as "imitation" has been responsible for many interpretative mistakes. Indeed, *anukaraṇa* or *mimesis* is, fundamentally, a "critical re-visiting of everyday life" (*lokavṛtānukaraṇa*) (BHARATAMUNI, 2001, 1.112), with the objective of eliminating the veils that hide the unitarian source of universal communion as divine "possession".

Second, classical Indian aesthetics, rather than a matter of chronological location – past, present or future –, reflects a fundamental attitude towards performing arts, as contemporary life and work of Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore clearly shows. This

⁸ Explicative notion of the ontological foundation of aesthetic experience (*rasa*), first proposed by Bharatamuni (2001, 1.55-106). This notion is exhaustively and philosophically refined by Abhinavagupta in his commentary on the *Nāṭya-Śāstra* titled *Abhinavabhāratī* (2006).

⁹ The notion of *tanmayībhavana* is elaborated by Abhinavagupta in his work *Dhvanyālokalocana* (s/d, 1.2).

¹⁰ I closely follow here Leon Golden's interpretation of Aristotle's *Poetics*. See, in this regard, his article *Mimeses and Katharsis* (GOLDEN, 1969).

fundamental attitude, which is at the core of what “classical” actually means as the corresponding English term for the Sanskrit word *śāstrīya* (lit., “scholastic”), presents the following features:

- (i) an established belief in a fundamental non-dual ontology, wherein all things hang on a principle of unity;
- (ii) a project of spiritual transformation which involves a communitarian setup and an ultimate self-realisation that goes beyond words;
- (iii) a dynamic tradition, always adjusting itself to specific forms of suffering and ignorance, and to specific times and spaces;
- (iv) a scholastic tradition, based on the continuity of methods, on pedagogical structures of dialogue between masters and disciples, and on disciplines that demand the fulfilment of pre-requisites;
- (v) a general posture at odds with postmodern thinking and modern metaphysical discursive designs, being, at the same time, supportive of “alternative modernities”.

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Recebido em 18/02/2021
Aceito em 16/04/2021

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