

The Classical Drama of India

*Studies in its Values for the
Literature and Theatre of the World*

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I

Introduction

THE SOMEWHAT unusual form of this book, which is determined by the character of its subject, warrants a short prefatory explanation. If the truly remarkable Sanskrit drama were more familiar or readily accessible than is in fact the case, a descriptive method would be rightly preferred. But in fact no account that is not concentrated upon fundamentals can be seriously rewarding. The book is, accordingly, a sequence of reflective essays built around a central idea, developing a single thesis from various angles, considering first the features of the Indian drama the nearest to that of the West, and so coming by deliberate degrees to the unique problem posed by a theatre at once spiritually contemplative and theatrically successful. The reader should not, then, anticipate an historical survey or a comprehensive description. The earlier chapters define the aims which this drama serves, the later chapters, the means which the playwrights employ through their manipulation of form and detail.

Few books have thus far appeared in English and surprisingly few in the Western languages as a whole dealing with the Sanskrit theatre in any general terms whatsoever. Studies in India itself have been in almost every sense of the word dispersed, issuing from many hands, appearing in widely different parts of the country, and as a rule treating some highly specialized topics. Feeling, perhaps, that an insuperable wall has been created by the outside world against a current interest in the Sanskrit theatre, the Indian scholars themselves have shown scant interest in interpreting to others the splendors of their dramatic literature. In short, they have written relatively little from the point of view of comparative literature. Meanwhile the attention of the West has been primarily

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occupied with its own rich accumulations of drama and has, fortunately, made some fruitful excursions into the theatre of the Far East, especially of China and Japan. Even that eminently going concern, the dance-theatre of Bali, has attracted popular attention in the West and recent Hindu dancers, as Shan Kar, whose art dispenses with language, have seemed better carriers of the spirit of India than the great dramatists who wrote some fifteen hundred years ago in a language now almost exclusively academic.

A further obstruction to fresh study by English scholars has been the oblique blessing of an undoubted masterpiece in exposition of literary and dramatic history, A. B. Keith's *Sanskrit Drama*, published over a generation ago. Few Indians have thus far written with equal authority. So thorough a survey, generous in its extent, meticulous in its documentation, and mature in its judgments, apparently has had for several decades the dubious good fortune of discouraging fresh inquiry. Yet his unquestionable erudition notwithstanding, it has gradually become clear that Keith wrote from a number of prepossessions ill adapted to favoring a broad-minded or sympathetic view. His defect is partly owing to a commitment to British morality but much more to a conservative view in aesthetics leading him to discover the norm for serious drama in Greek tragedy and the ultimate wisdom in theatrical opinion in the theories of Aristotle. Thus classical prejudices are superimposed upon British principles, the British principles themselves leaning considerably more upon the precepts of Matthew Arnold than upon the practices of Shakespeare. Keith approached Indian drama and poetry with an analytical mind but a cold heart. Within the last forty years, a warmer and more sympathetic understanding has developed. Imagination in the theatre—or out of it—is very different today from what it was in the times of Pinero. The change in the times encourages a new outlook.

Because its method is primarily speculative, this book is organized on lines totally different from those of an orthodox history of dramatic literature. The evolution of the drama from the historical viewpoint is barely mentioned; none of the singularly vexed chronological puzzles are debated; no author is studied intensively; no apparatus for scholarly research is proposed and no textual exegesis offered. No philological problems are discussed and analysis is presented more with the English-speaking reader or even stage-producer or man of the theatre in mind than the professional

Sanskrit scholar. The writer himself is not of that fraternity but author of several books dealing with poetry, drama, and comparative literature. It is from the standpoint of world drama and world literature that the Indian plays are reviewed, with confident belief that from this perspective they will be found worthy of high place among plays in a harvest comprehending all times and lands.

The first chapter defines both the likeness and difference between English poetic drama, especially the Shakespearean and Elizabethan, on the one hand and the Sanskrit on the other, interpreting the theatre presumably the less well known, at least in England and America or even in such a country as Japan, with reference to that more readily accessible to the modern mind wherever it exists. Comparisons are made not to the advantage of one and detriment of the other but simply to clarify what their respective aims are, where these are alike and where they diverge. The second chapter, more judicial, more pragmatic, and less specialized, discusses the simpler question, why certain plays, unlike others, still have validity not so much for audiences in India itself (though that question is by no means disregarded) as for audiences today throughout the world. A succeeding section examines the imaginative modern plays closest to the Sanskrit in spirit and in form.

Since Indian drama is deeply grounded in Indian thinking, both philosophical and religious, the fourth chapter offers an exposition of the spirit of the drama in relation to that of serious and reflective Indian literature in general. The architecture of the successful native theatre was strictly determined by the spiritual terrain on which it was built, even though no other literary or artistic expression of Indian culture in its final form closely approached that of the stage—no more, for example, than Shakespeare's plays are "representative" of Elizabethan literature as a whole.

The fifth and most crucial chapter expounds the book's main thesis, an exposition of spiritual equilibrium as the goal to which the plays aspire.

Most of them are homogeneous expressions of a highly sophisticated court culture and many, as the masterpiece of romantic comedy, *The Little Clay Cart*, even reflect a well developed urban life. But throughout all the plays the current of religious sentiment runs strong. In a few dramas, the best of which, interestingly enough, lie outside the general pale of Sanskrit, religious feeling and folk-culture actually predominate. A chapter on the sacred drama is

primarily concerned with two such works, the famous Tamil play, *Arichandra*, from southern India, and the Tibetan traditional drama, *Tchrimekundan*. Analysis of these should illuminate even the main stream of Sanskrit drama, since they are unsurpassed distillations of religious conceptions in dramatic form.

The Indian drama, it should be confessed, must reveal certain inveterate delinquencies, especially in Western eyes. If as dramatic art it has certain great virtues, so it has also palpable defects. Often both these qualities, ironically enough, arise from the same core of experience and mutually interpret each other. A short chapter, then, examines features which this writer, at least, can only regard as deficiencies in the literature, in the theatre, or in both. There are also qualities that tend to limit the appeal of inferior plays to the land of their origin. Chapter Seven is thus the antithesis of Chapter Two. One deals with plays falling short of universal currency, the other, with those sharing in it.

Three chapters follow offering a general view of the technique of the plays. One is concentrated on a single convention, the use of swooning, from a close study of which much of the aesthetics of the Sanskrit drama can be deduced. There follows a more excursive statement of the style in which the plays were presumably first presented and which must, at least to some extent, be used whenever they are successfully performed. Thereafter is an analysis of the technique of the plays considered primarily as dramatic literature.

Finally, lest the argument remain too abstract, too negative, or too doctrinaire, two major plays representative of the two most important types of drama known to the Hindus are studied with considerably closer attention to detail. The words comedy and tragedy do not apply here though they do give a rough and approximate analogy. *The Little Clay Cart* is surveyed as an example of the *prakarana*, *Rāma's Later History*, of the *nātaka*. The flight of the central chapters into the abstract will, then, be terminated by a landing on the firm surface of specific, material achievement, where the spirit and doctrine are made flesh and thus manifested in the art of a supremely poetic theatre.

Such is the program. Descriptions of scenes are occasionally repeated so that they may be viewed afresh from new angles and ground retraced to facilitate further advances. The succession of chapters each in a sense an essay in itself will, it is hoped, be found

appropriate in introducing a subject so full of controversy, of theory, and, for some readers, perhaps, of news. Although the book as a whole aims at critical unity, the ideas constitute a system of component parts which in turn result in chapters measurably self-sufficient. Furthermore, if progress on little-travelled paths should offer some difficulties, these may be eased by the presence, as it were, of landing-places between the stairs.

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ONE OF the most remarkable of dramatic literatures has for nearly a thousand years been wrapped in a cloud through which, it may fairly be said, only occasional beams of light have emerged. Such is the drama of ancient India, never adequately interpreted by criticism since the period of its flourishing shortly after the beginning of the Christian era to a little before the completion of the first Christian millennium. We know it as arising largely under the stimulus of the brilliant court cultures once distributed throughout India and as gradually becoming extinct as a creative force during years when the Islamic invasions materially altered the face of the Asian sub-continent. Many of the legends forming its plots survived all changes and do survive even to the present day. Its influences, as well-known, are still felt in the presentational arts—drama, puppetry, symbolic dance—extending even from as far as Tibet to Bali. But the languages in which the plays were written have become almost as divorced from world-currency as Anglo-Saxon from the average American or modern Englishman. Moreover, it must be acknowledged that the acting styles are nearly as far removed as the original languages. Although Indian dramatic traditions are older and probably more important in a comparative view than those of the Far East, the Indian heritage has been less well preserved than that in Japan or even in China. Nor have the vicissitudes of this heritage in its native land been relieved by any consistent efforts abroad. Many surviving plays have, to be sure, been translated into the European languages, especially into English. It is well-known that they have at times been much praised as dramatic poetry and their original force as pieces for the theatre has been at least acknowledged by scholars. Most of

the translations, however, were made from fifty to a hundred years ago ; many are either stylistically out of date or were originally intended merely as aids to linguistic study, not contributions to dramatic literature. But changes are now visible. Under the spell of an increasing national pride in India since the Second World War there have been a fair number of productions in Sanskrit, given as a rule under academic auspices, the learned character of the languages promoting such presentation. Elsewhere two of the plays, Kālidāsa's *Shakuntalā*, and Sūdraka's *The Little Clay Cart*, have been seen at widely spaced intervals, usually given by amateurs, and generally with a sentiment of esotericism, in versions greatly altered and abridged, colored by strong incursions of Western romantic sentiment.

The prospect that the unfavorable conditions will be materially relieved derives from the persistent view that the plays are of high intrinsic value and the fact that they are gradually becoming better understood and more effectively reinterpreted. In India itself the dramas seem destined to be increasingly performed both in the original languages and even in translations addressing a wider audience than these tongues can ever be expected to reach. Outside India the prospect brightens perceptibly. New and more useable translations are becoming available, while the restive departure of Western stages from nineteenth-century realism or naturalism encourages the cultivation of this supremely imaginative drama. Its myths have persistent value ; its poetry is much closer to the mind of the West than is the poetry of the Far East ; its sheer theatricality and continuity in pantomime elevate it far above a merely provincial theatre. To the greater part of the world, Sanskrit may be a "dead language," but both the poetry and theatricality of Kālidāsa, Bhavabhūti, Bhāsa, Sūdraka and others still prove eminently alive. Their plays must always have much to teach us regarding the arts of acting and playwriting as well as of poetry itself and offer inexhaustible treasures of psychological, religious, and spiritual insight. Ranging from the comparatively naive to the superlatively sophisticated, they serve many purposes and many different audiences.

A discussion of the problem calls for a brief introductory statement regarding its scope, though the circumstances are, naturally, well-known to scholars. The full extent of the early Indian dramatic literature cannot be computed. To begin with, the chronology

presents insuperable difficulties. Fragments of early works exist and the tradition merely peters out around 1000 A.D. with a gradual decline in force that can neither be strictly dated nor defined. Plays that have survived are of many sorts and in several languages. Although their key-language is Sanskrit, scarcely a single important play is wholly in that tongue. Sanskrit is, of course, used in conjunction with one or more dialects, the former serving almost as a liturgical language, for the chief characters or scenes, and the popular dialects for the less exalted roles. The most important features of Sanskrit drama extend to the Tibetan stage and to drama entirely in other tongues, especially the Tamil of Southern India. It must be frankly acknowledged that many plays are of small value, indeed of almost no value whatsoever as surviving works for the modern theatre either in or outside India. Some of these inferior works are erotic trifles, others, wooden allegories, the one, too slight, the other, too rhetorical and pretentious to rise to imaginative or lasting power. Probably some fine pieces still remain to be unearthed. It will be remembered that less than fifty years ago thirteen plays, several of high worth, were discovered in a single manuscript collection ascribed to Bhāsa. From the total deposit at the present time at least fifteen representative plays lie within range of successful production in virtually any quarter of the civilized world. This chapter is in substance a defense of this statement.

The putting on of the plays calls for a strenuous though by no means an impossible exercise of thought, patience, imagination, and research. None is easy. But their production rests potentially within the grasp of any actors reasonably acquainted with poetic drama and stylized acting. Though large audiences cannot be expected for long runs, the plays are within the reach of good repertory companies. University theatres and groups with some training in dancing or in poetic speech enjoy an advantage. A few plays are metaphysical, a few appeal to children; several are distinctly urbane and witty in the connotation of these words implying high sophistication. Almost all encourage spectacular presentation, researches in pantomime, the aesthetic use of costume and stage-properties, and artful elocution. Though no play is according to Western terms completely secular or religious, the range extends from works predominantly secular to those predominantly religious. Our view begins with consideration of the more secular as possibly,

though by no means certainly, the more readily serviceable today.

It is regrettable that *Shakuntalā* has been more often read and seen abroad than *The Little Clay Cart*, for the former has leant itself to much sad dilution, to sentimental, romantic interpretation, leaving Kālidāsa's sterner and more religious conceptions unrealized. *The Little Clay Cart* is, on the contrary, theoretically at least more ingratiating and rewarding for contemporary actors. To be sure, it is very long. In fact, it is the length of two plays and was presumably compounded of two. But abridgment to proportions which seem reasonable to modern playgoers is at least possible and the separate acts, ten in number, may occasionally be given with far more success than implied merely in theatrical exercises. Sūdraka's words all but define an inspired stylized acting; pantomime is wedded to language with a firmness hardly duplicated in the entire scope of world drama. The detailed picture of customs and manners of a medieval Indian city-life notwithstanding, the play remains astonishingly fresh and universal. Both the pathos and the humor, the emotional depth and the intellectual acuteness, are wonderfully sustained and clearly intelligible. It is probably an easier work for an intelligent modern reader or actor to understand than any by Aristophanes or even by Plautus. Although Indian critics, as a rule devoted to a more metaphysical stage, do not regard it as their chief drama, it is potentially by far their best dramatic export. Both *Shakuntalā* and *The Little Clay Cart* have been sadly diluted but Sūdraka's play has never been dissipated and perverted as Kālidāsa's has been. A school of acting anywhere in the world can hardly find a work from which more can readily be learned. Especially for theatrical purposes, the best recent translation is that by Revilo Pendleton Oliver.

An erotic element is conspicuous in most Hindu dramas, as in most Hindu art. But there are a few outstanding exceptions in the theatre and, incidentally, where the relations of men and women are not in question, sex is seldom conspicuous, partly because where friendship is regarded as ethically quite as important as love between the sexes and second in ethical value only to family life, homosexuality has nothing remotely as conspicuous a place in Hindu thought as in that of Greece, Rome, or even modern Europe. The concept "plotting" suggested to the Hindu mind plots both of statecraft and of drama. Thus, the central figure in a few plays is a witty and idealized prime minister, utterly devoted to his

sovereign and resorting to fantastic devices to achieve political ends. Two such statesmen are at times pitted against each other. These features govern the story of a notable play by Visākhadatta, *Mudrārāksasa*. The conduct and quality of this work seem only superficially removed from us in time. It is a tense drama, clear, sustained, and consistent from beginning to end, artistically effective and realistically convincing. Though lacking the poetic and religious profundity of possibly more important and representative Sanskrit plays, it shares with them great driving force and is, in fact, one of the most concentrated of all in its effect. It could easily prove gratifying to a modern audience.

Less austere in sentiment and more lightened by humor and fantasy is Bhāsa's *The Minister's Vows*, which also centers attention on intriguing ministers. A love story is implied but not presented in action. Thus, two major figures in the plot, the king, Udayana, and his destined bride, Vāsavadattā, are both bypassed with extraordinary ingenuity. In almost every scene they are the chief subjects of discussion yet nowhere appear. Nevertheless action remains lively. By analogy, several elephants, all named, are important in the action yet they, too, are not represented on the stage. The scenes are animated and the story easy to follow. The action grips attention. Suspense is handled theatrically. The whole is a political fable, lacking deep poetic significance but with the bright sparkle of a truly ingratiating poetry. It has long been and will long continue to be notable dramatic entertainment. The audience fairly smacks its lips in gusto at the contention of the rival ministers.

These two plays, though of good quality, are in a distinct minority, political plays being less popular and amorous themes, whether in secular, mythological, or religious drama, taking the ascendancy. Two amorous romances of superior merit, Bhāsa's *Vision of Vāsavadattā*, and Kālidāsa's *Mālavikāgnimitra*, have collected astonishingly little dust through the centuries. The former contains much the same element of political intrigue as found in *The Minister's Vows*, but is far more inspired in its passages of romantic sentiment depicting a kingly lover and two rival queens. In its theme Bhāsa's play is remarkably modern, for it deals in Proustian fashion with the rival claims of imminence and memory, and in virtually an Expressionist fashion with the similar demands of reality and illusion, actuality and dream. Not a word is wasted in a succinct and almost perfect work of art. In its fantasy it resembles *Twelfth Night*,

yet is in some ways more poetic, for it dispenses with the hard, Plautan core of Shakespeare's play, which, all its Elizabethan fecundity notwithstanding, rests on a Latin foundation. There is great emotional warmth in Bhāsa's romance, resembling in this respect the finest scenes in Beaumont and Fletcher's tragicomedies.

Mālavikāgnimitra has suffered unjustly from some blunt comparisons with Kālidāsa's two other plays, which obviously stand on a higher plain of poetic achievement, not to mention enthusiasm. The lesser play looks like deft craftsmanship in work done on commission, the two others appear as spontaneous art. Yet as contribution to a Spring Festival this light and graceful comedy proves highly gratifying. Though not as rich a drama as *A Midsummer-Night's Dream*, it occupies a place in Kālidāsa's trilogy of plays comparable, perhaps, to Shakespeare's "Dream" among his more than thirty works. One is reminded, too, of the light comedies by John Lyly with mythological themes presented at Queen Elizabeth's court, as *Endimion*, and *The Woman in the Moon*. Apart from the extraordinary delicacy and sophistication of the Sanskrit play on intrigues within a Hindu harem there is little to perplex a modern audience. The mythology itself is inescapably charming and acted before us, not left in the obscurity of allusion to a faded Pantheon. For example, that so young and sprightly a heroine as we have here will cause a spring-time tree to blossom at the touch of her foot may offend science but seems crystal clear to poetry. Unquestionably the play was often given in India out-of-doors. A more attractive comedy for an out-of-door summer theatre today would be hard to discover. It is light but by no means slight, for such precision of footing is rare.

Unlike *Mālavikāgnimitra*, the majority of Sanskrit plays surviving as potential theatre do more than introduce myth incidentally; they rely upon it as the major element in their story. And this firm basis in myth goes a considerable distance to accounting for their survival, or, in other words, for their nearly timeless, or universal, appeal. The plots are based largely, though not exclusively, on the two great classical epics of India, the *Māhabhārata*, and the *Rāmāyana*. For many centuries these massive poems stood behind a large part of Indian presentational art, their fertility in inspiring at least the folk-arts extending even to the present. Their force was most powerful in the earlier periods of the literary drama. The majority of Bhāsa's plays, the earliest important body of drama

known to us, treat these epic themes, as a rule to much advantage. There are, to be sure, relatively poor plays based on the epics. Thus Bhāsa's *The Coronation* reads more like a hastily composed, rapid-fire scenario than a dramatic poem. His *Statue Play*, on the contrary, is a highly sensitive and well composed poetic drama on a major episode in the *Rāmāyana*. Especially after its opening scene, action progresses with the utmost clarity, Rama's story told almost as directly as Shakespeare tells Othello's. The many verbal indirections and understatements are as a rule thoroughly perspicuous to a reasonably appreciative audience familiar with the best idiom of dramatic poetry. Bhāsa's *Karna's Task*, deserving unqualified praise, is one of the most moving of all one-act plays, in some ways not unlike the late, verse dramas by William Butler Yeats. Played with the high seriousness which it demands, it should deeply impress any spectator favoured with a moderate degree of spiritual insight. In substance it dramatizes the *Bhagvad-Gītā*, the most spiritually elevated section of the *Māhabhārata*. Doubtless the original audience experienced the force of this profound drama more deeply than could be expected of a modern audience ; yet even without a philosophical understanding of the *Bhagvad-Gītā*, and even in translation, this succinct little tragedy becomes almost unspeakably moving. Bhāsa's play will always be a reflective and spiritual drama of the highest magnitude, all the better artistically because the predominantly didactic poem that stands behind it is so thoroughly translated into the action of an enthralling drama.

Many pages of the Indian epics are, indeed, far removed from meditations such as the *Bhagvad-Gītā*. Some will seem to modern readers more like the saga mythology of Scandinavia or to resemble the early and relatively savage mythology of pre-Homeric Greece. This violent, primitive, and brutal action at times transfers itself into impressive drama. *Venisamhāra*, by Bhatta Nārāyana, possesses these qualities. To be successfully produced it must, accordingly, be played in a very different manner from any style required by other plays mentioned in this discussion. But it is a moving story, firmly of a piece, full of pain, trouble, tragedy, and despair. Though possessing little of the grace or luminosity found in the works of the more famous Sanskrit dramatists, it comes close to expression which the violent West has long known and knows only too well today. It may remind us of *The Song of Roland*, or even of stark dramas based on heroic incidents of the latest war. Potentially,

at least, the play has by no means passed out of the repertory of world drama.

Kālidāsa is exceptional, for he possesses a suavity and dignity, a poetic richness and containment, matched seldom and possibly most closely by Sophocles. Both his two masterpieces are myths for the stage and must be so understood and presented if they are to yield their true meaning. The heroine, Shakuntalā, in other words, must not be made to resemble Goethe's Dorothea, no matter how well the producer recalls Goethe's praise of Kālidāsa's work. Her play is not a romantic drama but a sacred drama. The same holds even more clearly for *Vikramorvacī*, a less elaborated work, though a little more difficult for modern actors to present, especially because of the climax of its poetry, the long soliloquy comprising the greater part of Act Four. The hero, to be sure, vehemently addresses many living forms of nature. But for most of the scene no response follows, unless a barren echo be held an exception. Yet without question, save for minor reservations, *Vikramorvacī* clearly comes within the potential of outstanding dramatic performance today, though still one of the most intensely Indian of all plays.

Although popular India has devotedly cherished the Shakuntalā legend, Indian scholars have expressed scarcely less esteem for Bhavabhūti's masterpiece based on epic sources, *Rāma's Later History*, than for Kālidāsa's *Shakuntalā*. Bhavabhūti's work is a treasure for the theatrically elite, one of the most intense and stirring of all Sanskrit plays and marking in many ways the high-point of the great mountain range of serious dramas on Hindu epic themes. Action is at a minimum. There is virtually no plot, no intrigue, no antagonist, no comic relief. Yet as lyric drama profoundly adapted to stage performance this work has few rivals. Its theatrical qualities, no less than its psychological, moral, and philosophical properties, make it typical of the Indian theatre at its best. A major dramatic poem, indeed almost a miracle of virtuosity, it offers a supreme opportunity for the producer. Little in the play clouds it from modern eyes if only it be performed with a fair degree of imagination and skill. The theme is at heart simply the disintegration and reintegration of family life, revealed in a myth on nature's fertility, the loves of earth and sun. Whereas *The Little Clay Cart* is the most practicable of Sanskrit plays throughout the world, *Rāma's Later History* is the most challenging.

A final instance of myth in a play that strikes one first of all as secular and mythological rather than as religious is Bhāsa's *The Adventures of the Boy Krishna*. This apparently was originally performed, as it must be performed today, with a spirit of naïveté, conscious and sophisticated, perhaps, but none the less frankly naive, as though directed, Blake-like, to the child-mind. It is Krishna at play. It relates the miraculous adventures of its hero as a child, one of the symbolic themes most deeply beloved in Hindu art. Much singing and dancing is called for. The conception is that of a pastoral but of a pastoral, like *A Midsummer-Night's Dream*, whose plot is propelled by Puck, vastly enlivened and invigorated by folkore, a play not so close to the decadent, Hellenistic, purely literary pastoral of ancient Sicily as to the folk-dramas of medieval, rural England. The Indian fantasy retains complete freshness and captivating charm. It can best be given today in the Western World before an audience in which there are many children, probably as a production primarily for children, possibly even by children. This is the type of play which everywhere successful directors of theatres for the young, as the inspired and cosmopolitan-minded leader of the famous theatre for children in Antwerp, Cory Lievens, have consistently found popular. Exotic as the play's imagery or fable is to the world at large, its heart is native everywhere and always. For successful performance it calls, of course, for good dancing, good music, and bright spectacle.

Though all the plays dealing with myth partake generously of religious feeling, those just considered do so with some degree of indirection and we naturally think of them first of all as poetic mythology, not religious propaganda. But there are several deeply religious plays explicitly pious and even more fit, it would seem, for the temple than for the court and proclaiming the ascetic virtues of sacrifice, rectitude, non-resistance and contemplation. Their austerities may not be generally put into practice but even today are still powerful and in some respects more compelling to man's conscience than ever. Conspicuous among works that contain such idealism and retain high theatrical potency are Harsa's *Nāgānanda*, and two lyrical dramas a little outside the pale of Sanskrit literature but clearly a part of the great Indian dramatic tradition, the celebrated Tamil play, *Arichandra*, ascribed to Renga Pillai, and the Tibetan buddhistic drama, *Tchimekundan*, ascribed to the Talelama, Tsongs-Dbyangsrnyamthso. These are very eloquent works, quite

capable of presentation today on a poetic stage. The story of the Tamil masterpiece is basically that of *The Book of Job*, with the considerable differences occasioned respectively by their Hindu and Semitic origins. *Arichandra* gives relatively much more attention to the wife and offspring, revealing the central place of family life in Indian thought. The Tibetan drama further presents a contrast between power and mercy.

Nāgānanda requires little or no cutting or arrangement. The two other works, long and episodic, resemble novels in dramatic form. Nevertheless, where both content and theatrical inspiration are initially so strong, adaptation even to the modern stage is by no means difficult or embarrassing. In fact, there is no really authoritative text for either of these dramas, which, like the Western *Everyman*, have persisted from century to century with extensive accretions, deletions, and adulterations. Their initial impulse is powerful and unmistakable, their poetic and theatrical energy no less vigorous. Here are two rich mines, one in the loftiest Himalayas, the other in the tropical lowlands of Southern India, from which theatrical gold may still be extracted. Such plays may be successfully produced in an essentially secular theatre but are possibly best suited for production by actors under sponsorship of a religious institution, for they reach the very core of religious consciousness itself, where all distinctions between sects and creeds vanish before the disclosure of the religious heart of universal man.

All fifteen dramas described in this chapter are of value in challenging the skill and inventiveness of the performers. Hardly any artifice or convention known anywhere to the world's stage is missing in this most synthetic dramatic literature. Soliloquies, asides, the pantomimic creation of scene and stage properties, imaginative choreography, musical embellishment, simultaneous speaking, simultaneous action of two or more scenes, elaborate montage, stylized acting, naturalistic acting, poetical expression, realistic and colloquial expression, impressionism, expressionism, the physical and the metaphysical, the secular and the divine, ritual, humor, emotional intensity, farce, parody, and fantasy—all are carried to advanced stages of development. True, the Hindu drama lacks much that exists in the Western drama, just as it achieves much that the Western drama does not achieve. Character delineation, an expression of uncompromising will power, tragic purgation, satirical sharpness, logical or dialectical thinking, are

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not carried into their more advanced phases. The emotions implied are much more violent than in most European drama but in sympathetic production are intimated rather than naturalistically expressed, the aesthetic demand for form and control surpassing the indulgence given to direct projection of feeling. The basic theme of all Indian drama is spiritual equilibrium, poise between opposites, rest and fulfillment at the center of violent motion. Sanskrit drama is from the Western point of view that ultimate paradox, a successful contemplative drama. In the acute theoretical criticism of their dramatic art Indian actors are enjoined to stand above the emotions expressed, no matter how violent; both they and the audience are charged to maintain with a severe and spiritual discipline the contemplative view of life. This is a highly convincing aesthetic and the modern world has similarly discovered it to signify an ingratiating outlook in philosophy and religion. Sanskrit plays commence and conclude with prayers to the god of dancing and art, Siva, destroyer and creator. Surely, much is to be gained, whether in the theatre or in life itself, by propitiation of such a profoundly meditated divinity.

4

*Sanskrit Drama
and the Modern Stage*

A MOVEMENT in drama or any other art has two distinct values, namely, the absolute value, or pleasure, which its works afford in direct experience, and the relative value, or degree to which they stimulate fresh activity. Of course these two aspects of a classic as seen in perspective are far from being mutually exclusive. Whatever stirs and delights us must influence our own mental and possibly even our social activity. But at least in terms of analysis, the two aspects must always stand apart. A classic pleases us in itself and contributes to the forces that fashion our own creations. Whenever it is really alive to us, or, in other words, when it answers the definition of a classic, it performs both functions. It is remembered for having distinctive qualities that works of no other school possess, whether reference is made to either time or locality, and yet at the same time it is endowed with the potency to enter into the circulation of our own blood.

Although the conclusion of earlier chapters has been that the best Sanskrit plays are capable at the present time of giving warm enjoyment, they have been considered rather in respect to themselves and our own more general standards of value than in relation to specific movements or works of twentieth-century origin. More comparison has been made between Sanskrit works on the one hand and the Greek or Elizabethan on the other than between the Indian stage and specimens of current movements in the theatre. The contention has been that the Sanskrit masterpieces resemble planets circulating about a central sun; that they are present to stay; that they have the power to delight not only our own century but, in somewhat different terms, any civilization of which we can ourselves at the present time dream. We have been concerned with

their value indiscriminately in relation to time. But they have, of course, a particular relevance for our own time and, as it seems, a relevance of more than usual potency. Not only are they in a broad sense of the word timeless; they are especially timely in terms of recent trends of thought and taste. In grasping for a metaphor, one thinks of the view of Mount Fugi from various areas of Japan. The mountain is always there, at many times veiled or actually hidden, at certain hours with exceptional clearness in the atmosphere becoming preternaturally vivid, approaching the spectator as though it has been violently dislodged. Our own times constitute one of the moments in cultural history when the Sanskrit drama looms in vivid proximity.

For a score of centuries, drama in the Western world has, even in advance of other art forms, favored an objective view of experience. It has in general depicted life in social terms and at times analyzed it in intellectual terms. Its address has been to the social consciousness or to the mind of the audience. It has not, except in certain cases of the religious drama, addressed itself directly to the soul of the individual spectator. Its form has been narratory; it has favored direct projection of action and has emphasized the difference between persons, the contentions arising from these differences being found the very essence of drama itself. Western drama, in short, has depicted the clash of personalities, stressing the view that different men wear different masks. Its conception has been antithetical, for example, to the lyric of self-expression. Criticism has contended that each major playwright, to be sure, stamps his works with the mark of his own personality but maintained that their basic meaning is objective rather than autobiographical.

While the Western drama delights in surprises and looks outward, Sanskrit drama takes the opposite course. In content it is psychological and spiritual rather than social, ethical, or intellectual; it aims to establish the felicity of equilibrium in the soul of each spectator. It stresses the likenesses, not the dissimilarities, of men, depicting them as different only insofar as the exigencies of its myths demand. Its final goal is to proclaim the unity within the universe itself and thus to refute what might be called the multiverse assumed in the secular drama of the West. It depicts the soul in repose, not in action; its image is the seated Buddha, not the javelin-throwing Zeus, or at least the god Siva dancing within the circle of his own sovereignty, not the charioteer urging his horses through tempestu-

ous waves. Its ideal form is neither narratory, dynamic, nor centrifugal but, metaphorically speaking, musical, plateresque, and magnetic. In its structure all lines lead inward as if to the center of a circle, to the navel of the body or the chalice of the flower. This form may at first seem to defy the very principles of drama themselves and indeed if drama be as Aristotle declared it, the most celebrated of Sanskrit playwrights are among the least of dramatic poets. But the modern mind is strongly tempted to pass beyond the Greeks. Clearly, within our own century much of the most admired dramatic poetry has moved with an ever increasing volume in the direction of the Sanskrit.

To begin with a view of British and American drama one may consider Dylan Thomas's remarkable poetic play, *Under Milk Wood*, conceived, to be sure, as a poem for radio recitation but more than once seen in versions more or less overtly theatrical. The work complies with almost all the characteristics outlined in preceding descriptions of Sanskrit drama except, possibly, in its extreme use of local color, which may well lead the spectator to feel, here lies a Welsh village, not the City of Man's Soul. The satirist intrudes upon the role of the idealist or dreamer. Much the same holds true for the plays of Samuel Beckett. Here the pessimism, to be sure, is extreme; but pessimism is by no means absent from oriental religious thought, though Sanskrit drama on the whole outwardly stresses a more cheerful view of existence. *Waiting for Godot* is not a play about an action. It is precisely a play about no action, as its title suggests. It ends as it begins. Its remarkably theatrical qualities lie in the style, not in the action; or, to express the thought differently, in the pantomime or "business," not in a story which simply does not exist.

Chiefly through music-drama and the irresistible tendency of man to unite music and the theatre a half-oriental form makes itself felt and all imperatives of the Aristotelian form are dismissed. The Gertrude Stein-Virgil Thompson, *Four Saints in Three Acts* illustrates this. It is more a pageant than a play and more a shifting of tableaux than a pageant. Above all it is a symphony made visible or a dance with elaborate music and spectacle. Each act has its own mood (the Sanskrit "rasa", the European "movement"). In its inspired initial production this was widely recognized as providing a thoroughly gratifying theatrical experience. The new school of metaphysical poets has clearly contributed the most to

this departure from orthodox Western drama. In this category few writers are more typical than Conrad Aiken. His notable play, *Dr. Arcularis*, is, to be sure, in one of its phases merely a detective story, a type of art essentially melodramatic and overwhelmingly Western. Sherlock Holmes was no Bodhisattva. But insofar as the entire play is conceived as a dream or vision at the point of death as experienced by a fairly representative man and as symbolical meditation upon the cardinal conditions of human life, it resembles the meditative theatre of India. The heart of Aiken's play is spiritual and non-objective.

Aiken, to be sure, shows a penchant for autobiography and autobiography is a type of expression distinctly foreign to the impersonal impulses of the Sanskrit stage. The personal confession of both Catholic and Protestant, the one leading to verbal confession to a priest, the other, to written confession to edify a reading public, alike belong to a civilization built upon self-consciousness, antithetical to the mystical cultures of the East aspiring to super-consciousness. Hence the leading dramatists of relatively modern times using the stage for autobiography at once approach and diverge from the oriental stage. Insofar as they become to a large degree non-objective, they approach the Oriental; insofar as they tend to magnify rather than to nullify individuality, they prove violently occidental. Strindberg is here the supreme case in point; his expressionist plays violently wrench Western drama from its traditional position. But one is never quite sure how far *To Damascus* and *The Dream Play* are intended as autobiography of a distressed Christian or as outlines of universal man. These elusive plays might be collected under the ambiguous title, "Strindberg or Everyman". Both of Strindberg's two revolutionary tendencies in the theatre, one toward self-expression in the theatre and the other toward symbolism, announced a revolution. The first merely divorced his plays from the outlook of the Renaissance. The second pointed clearly in the direction of the East. His essentially poetic vision weaned him from the naturalistic theatre and cast his thoughts toward music. Avowedly he conceived many of his mature plays in relation to musical sentiment and form. *Easter* is a progression of scenes based upon the marvellous passion music of Haydn, *The Ghost Sonata*, a similar work indebted to Beethoven. In both cases inspiration moves also toward the Orient.

Another great European playwright moved, as he became in-

creasingly the poet of the theatre, in a similar direction. Pirandello was passionately devoted to music and for a considerable period in his life attempted to work out a film projection of the Beethoven symphonies. That this project in course of time passed largely into the unscrupulous hands of Hollywood, with Walt Disney and Stokowski as its servants, in no way diminishes its aesthetic importance. Pirandello's own last work, his incomplete *Mountain Giants*, is his own unfinished symphony. It calls for considerable musical accompaniment and betrays much of the oriental concern for "rasa". The acts are movements, each with its own emotional tone. This is not "straight" Western theatre. It is a theatre increasingly bent in an Easterly direction.

The preoccupation with a form capable of being abstracted and stated in more or less musical terms, as variations upon certain themes, is conspicuous in Eugene O'Neill's most revolutionary play, *The Iceman Cometh*. There is a sense in which here little or nothing happens. Or, to put it differently, the most dramatic changes lie in the lighting, not in the action. At the end all but two of the chief characters are seated on the stage just as at the beginning, though the illumination is dimmer than ever. The characters sit exactly as musicians in a chamber orchestra. One man, weaker, or possibly stronger than the rest, has committed suicide. Another has come and gone, distinguished from the rest chiefly by his superior power to personify their common predicament. He is the *deus ex machina* of a machine that from the humanitarian point of view conspicuously fails to work. The movements (one cannot properly speak of the "action") are cyclical. There is no "intrigue" or "plot". Only O'Neill's violent pessimism, relieved, to be sure, by some finely humorous, cynical irony, conceals from even the most superficial glance the playwright's marked approximation to the form and spirit of the Sanskrit stage.

Before entering upon the later and more definitive parts of this exposition, it will be well to remark that in the present chapter observations on the Sanskrit theatre itself made in earlier sections of this book, especially as to its thematic structure, will be assumed and attention turned chiefly toward revealing analogies in the theatre of the West. Yet it may be wise to re-examine at least briefly certain formal devices in construction of the typical act of the Sanskrit play which distinguish it from act-construction in Western drama. In a word, the act division has considerably

more significance in the East than in the West. That each act has its prevailing *rasa*, or mood, that it requires the use of special formulas for its introduction and only to a less degree for its conclusion, are conspicuous features. Each act is required to develop certain themes belonging to the play as a whole, to recapitulate in its beginning what has already occurred on the stage, or, more often, what has occurred in an intermediate time off the stage. No Sanskrit play is merely a sequence of one-act plays, although several of Bhāsa's short works were quite possibly given as parts of a longer entertainment. But despite this articulation, the act in the typical play has all the completeness of an ideal movement in a musical composition. It may well be that Western music in the last three hundred years has achieved a sophistication in form comparable to that of the Sanskrit stage and that the Indian theatre itself in this regard actually forged ahead of Indian music. In any event, the Westerner seeking an intimacy with the Sanskrit theatre discovers that Western drama provides him with less fundamental aid than Western music. To look to *Shakuntalā* for what the West regards as basically musical qualities rather than essentially dramatic qualities is no poor strategy nor in the end a derogatory comment on Kālidāsa as a playwright.

The Western dramatist and poet closest to the spirit of the Eastern art is, presumably, Federico Garcia-Lorca, especially if attention is focused on his longest play, *If Five Years Pass*. The emotional violence of his three tragedies on Andalusian women is indeed far from Eastern practice and more nearly approaches that most typical of Western dramatic forms, melodrama. An underlying primitivism in Spanish thought, whose most conspicuous outcropping in recent years is in the art of Picasso, seems indeed far from the gentle sophistication of the Sanskrit *nāṭaka*, although farce is much the same the world over, whether in Lorca's puppet-plays or in the bawdy trifles delighting popular audiences in ancient India. As the most highly conventionalized and impersonal type of theatre, the *commedia dell'arte*, which Lorca closely approaches in his light and witty entertainments, *The Shoemaker's Prodigious Wife*, and *The Love of Don Perlimplin and Belisa in the Garden*, the most nearly approximates the abstraction of the Indian stage. But it is not in this respect that the most revealing analogies are to be found. The plateresque quality of his form and its musical structure and spirit are the qualities chiefly apparent in *If Five*

Years Pass and are so firmly based on his thought and work as a whole that a few comments on his life and non-dramatic poems are useful as introduction to the analysis of his powerful "surrealist" play.

Lorca knew how to write plays of the most varied sorts and how to follow patterns developed on various stages of the Western drama. The narrative elements conspicuous in the "Andalusian" tragedies rest on the firmest basis of Western tradition. Influence of the golden age of Spanish drama, with Lope de Vega and Calderón at its head, appear in the relatively tame, early and derivative piece, *Mariana Pineda*. He was skilled in almost pure *commedia dell'arte*. Never, of course, does he stray into the fertile field of the comedy of manners nor into the stony area of the problem play in the accepted sense of those words. Nor does he write strictly neo-classical drama, though the choral elements in two of the Andalusian plays and the two levels of style reflected by the alternation of verse and prose suggest in turn the Greek and the Elizabethan manner. No matter how he writes, however, he is even within each individual work highly versatile and always the poet; thus in two very general respects comparable to the Sanskrit dramatists. His radical experiment with form in *If Five Years Pass*, where he boldly deserts orthodox European practice and turns toward the East, is most strongly revelatory of a mind steeped in the very essence of music.

Lorca was a gifted pianist, an amateur composer, a favorite pupil of Da Falla, a sponsor of musical performances and research, and equally devoted to popular and sacred music, to the music of the flamenco dance and of the Catholic mass. Whatever he wrote, showed the impact of music upon him, whether the essay, the short poem, the longer poem, or the play. He delighted in musical accompaniment for the reading of poetry, sharing with his countrymen as a whole a fondness for that best of accompanying instruments, the guitar. Though poetry, drama, and play-directing were his professions, he was in a sense a professional in nothing and an amateur in everything, during his brief life reaching considerable dexterity and skill in all the arts, including painting. Better than any other figure of his times he exemplifies the tendency of the age to a synthesis of the arts. He wrote in color and painted in caricature. His colors sing; he can write a narrative ballad inspired by the color green. White and black are passions to him. Whereas Michelangelo

declared that a single majesty inspires all the arts, Lorca takes a less platonic and a more pragmatic position. He finds practical relations between the arts and thus achieves the total theatre of movement, speech, color, form, dance, and music, both vocal and instrumental. No art as he employs it is ever out of sight of its sister arts. His conception of the theatre in these respects, he seems never to have formulated for print but its significance in terms of inter-continental culture remains clear. The Granada of his birth is historically the link between the European peninsula that is Spain and the African-Asian world symbolized by the Alhambra. Lorca idolized the Islamic tradition. In so doing he presumably never realized that he was also in his own terms effecting a passage to ancient India, where the synthesis of the arts, both in theory and in practice, was achieved more firmly than at any time in the West.

Music, then, was merely one, though presumably the chief, of the arts whose influence swayed the course of his writing and at least in his own eyes operated greatly to its advantage. He was wholly accustomed to think of such relationships and even to act upon them quite unconsciously, as part of his birthright. A large proportion of his minor poems have received musical settings; all his more popular plays have received operatic settings, a few of them several times over; successful dances have been composed on the inspiration of both his poems and plays. The latter have been the special delight of stagedesigners and producers. Like Kālidāsa, Lorca thought in the most comprehensive of aesthetic terms. He thought also in terms of relatively intense and short-winded literary and dramatic units, in this regard again suggesting the influence of musical compositions. It is almost as though his strong lyrical sense tempted him to accept Poe's celebrated dictum on the impossibility of the long poem. Most of his poems are brief. His plays are also brief and sharply divided into acts. The chief of his non-dramatic poems, his *Lament for Ignacio Sanchez Mejias*, is in strict sonata form, the first movement dominated by the harsh theme, "at five in the afternoon," the second, by the bitter theme, "I will not see it," the third, by the heavy oppression of allusions to stone, the last, by exhilarating themes of revival, announcing that the stone has been rolled away from the door of the sepulchre. That this is one of the most profoundly musical of modern poems is obvious to any sympathetic reader but the condition is still further manifest when, as on certain phonographic recordings, it is chanted

by a fine Spanish voice and with the accompaniment of an elegiac guitar.

If In Five Years proceeds from the same hand and mind that fashioned the great chant for the dead bullfighter, though the play is, of course, less essentially tragic and more bitterly ironic, never passing in its mood beyond the astringency of the poem's second movement. There is really no narrative. In the first of its three acts A loves B, while B is cold; in the third and last act B loves A, while A is cold. These are the two major figures. Both are sensitive beings caught in the trap of time. In Act Two a pair of vulgar and insensitive beings wear themselves out in their own animalistic passion, the girl meanwhile deserting A, hitherto her unrewarding lover. Every figure represents a new inflection of the unifying idea, the invidiousness of time, not so much because all things are time's victims through death—though this thought supplies a minor level for the action and a symbolical character or two—as because time decrees that there is no stability for either the human heart or mind. One character lives on memory, another on anticipation; another, a vulgar sensualist, on attempts to snatch the passing moment. Still another, the "Old Man," a slightly more sympathetic character than the rest, is unconvincingly resigned to the luxuries of retrospection and the unrealized surprises of a future as yet unthinkable. The symbolic figures associated with death express time's ultimate irony. These are, in Act One, a dead cat and a dead child, in Act Three, a clown wearing a death's-head and a harlequin, who plays a "violin" with two strings while chanting repeatedly certain theme lines in verse. An imposing but brittle department-store mannikin that can neither live nor properly die supplies the secondary theme of supernaturalism in Act Two. The play is all a very conscious artifact yet by no means dry or concocted. Emotions are strong and tender. No character bears a personal name. All are treated as musical motifs. And all breathe the impassioned life of music itself. The form is scarcely known to Western literature outside the twentieth century. It approximates the most nearly to Western music and to the Sanskrit stage.

As already indicated, the treatment of the individual acts strongly supports the analogy to music, just as the treatment of the four parts in the great *Lament*. Act One is pensive and melancholy; Act Two, bitter and satirical; Act Three, supernatural and tragic. Gestures are repeated, always with a difference. Words and phrases

are echoed; at times the words are inverted, exchanged between different characters, or subtly turned around upon themselves. The first few lines of the play are a quiet crescendo, or montage, the last few lines, in a corresponding but inverse form, a quiet diminuendo. Every page and line of the dialogue is alive with musical sentiment, as all actions and gestures proceed with rigid but not too rigid musical precision to the swift conclusion.

This play, written largely, it appears, in 1929, seems in some ways to have been fifty years ahead of its times. Lorca himself withdrew it from rehearsal not on the ground that it required rewriting but that with the actors, facilities and means at his disposal it could not be produced to his liking at the time. He also gravely doubted that it would be popularly applauded in aesthetically conservative Madrid. Moreover, he well knew that plays on Andalusian themes, with their strong coloration in terms of local folkways, would be warmly received. Subsequently he wrote three powerful plays less conspicuously inspired by music and less strongly symbolic, *Blood Wedding*, *Yerma*, and *The House of Bernarda Alba*, together with the patently musically inspired but far less elaborate *Dona Rosita, the Spinster*, or *The Language of Flowers*. Abruptly his life came to a violent end. The surrealist play was only posthumously published and has never received a truly analytical appreciation from its critics nor an adequate representation on the stage. Nevertheless it is perhaps the best of all fantastic dramas of our century, at least the equal in moving force and artistic excellence of any expressionist play from the North of Europe or any surrealist play from the South. The most musically profound of all Lorca's plays, it is almost alone among them in not having received some successful transposition into a musical or choreographic form. But such is the history of Federico Garcia-Lorca's works and no comment on comparative literature, aesthetics, or dramatic art. In its disillusioned tone the play differs greatly from Sanskrit drama and approaches O'Neill or the early T. S. Eliot. It is also clearly a tour de force, a prodigious effort of a somewhat isolated genius in Madrid working against the main current still flowing through his time and place of living. Yet it is conspicuously modern in the sense that European abstract art is modern, that expressionism, impressionism, subjectivism, surrealism, and neo-metaphysical poetry, and the music of Stravinsky are modern. It seems still prophetic of things to come. It is also reactionary in that it har-

monizes with the fundamental qualities of Sanskrit drama as these were unfolded over a thousand years before and many thousand miles from Lorca's homeland. The play, like the character of its "Old Man," looks both forward and backward in time. It is both rear guard and *avant-garde*. Although the significance of this particular work has, owing to the fantastic inadequacy of criticism, never been widely recognized, it epitomizes I believe, better than any other both those tendencies in our artistic life rightly declared "modern" and those which look backward to a possibly still richer flowering in the gardens of the Sanskrit stage. It would be too tame a description to call it a passage to India. For the careful reader it affords a firm bridge.

5

*Sanskrit Drama
and Indian Thought*

THE POETIC drama of India during the period defined in the West by the first Christian millennium would be better understood if one of its major qualities had not been habitually overlooked in Western criticism and in the East presumably at first taken for granted and later allowed to rest largely unnoted. This is best described as "equilibrium," a balance achieved by opposing forces found to the aesthetic imagination to be in harmony and not in collision. This signifies in the general scheme of the play that the action is neither progression nor montage nor marked by either the rise or fall of excitement but by a paradoxical poise that customarily takes the form of circular motion ending close to the point of its beginning. It appears further through elaboration of detail in a symmetry achieved with sharp juxtapositions. However bold the contrasts or conflicts, they are never restless; they operate on a radically different dynamics from those in Western drama. Indian drama suggests the smooth revolution of wheels, Western drama, a mounting progress of the dramatic vehicle to a destination greatly unlike its beginning. Movement and contrast, the essence of dramatic form, are, indeed, conspicuous in the great drama of all peoples, for drama is essentially action and contention. But the treatment of these basic qualities differs vastly according to the philosophy and temperament of different civilizations. The Indian stage is so deeply committed to the profound cultivation of its own form, which in turn reflects a formula for life itself, that it dispenses with many attributes held at various times essential to the serious drama of the West, as characterization, naturalism, heroic accomplishments by exertion of the will, and sharp effects of climax and surprise. Time is conceived in Western drama as a forward-moving vista, as if

viewed from a moving plane, whereas in the Eastern drama it resembles a dome continuously visible though pre-eminently expansive.

The simplest and by no means least revealing mode of expressing the contrast is to note that the Western stage in its traditional comedy and tragedy deals typically in narratives that terminate in marriage or in death, recording either a wooing or a plot ending in mortality, while the Eastern stage deals in narratives that hinge on separation and reunion. Its typical focus is not upon wooing but upon the family. It celebrates not courtship but social stability. The lost are found, the generations bound together; the stories echo the seasonal and cyclical myths. The contrasts resemble those in the procession of the year, a circular dance of months and days. The play is not a river ending in the sea, either in mystical union with God nor in fulfillment of human ambition. Rather, it is a celebration of cosmic poise, a highly formal and unmistakably aesthetic projection of life idealistically conceived. Western drama when most eminently serious is heroic, a celebration of action strongly propelled by volition; Eastern drama when equally serious is idealistic as a meditation resolved in peace, possibly presenting a mirror of great calamity and suffering but of disasters overcome by the restoration of normal and harmonious relations, a sentiment of repose overpowering the storm. Thus Indian drama is never tragic in the Western sense of the word nor is it in its lighter modes hilariously comic or Aristophanic. Much as it dwells upon the emotions and shuns violent dialectics or dialectics in any form, it avoids the exuberance typical of Western theatres. It has neither the dialectical exuberance of Bernard Shaw nor the emotional indulgence of Federico Garcia-Lorca.

Equilibrium is an aesthetic or possibly a spiritual ideal, not a logical nor an ethical conception. There can be no problem plays in the Indian theatre, for there is basically only one problem, the celebration of poise. Great scope remains for the playwright's ingenuity and intelligence in achieving the balance of elements and parts but little or no room for moral strife. Forces morally opposed face each other as in a tournament or game. Possibly contrary to a superficial, *a priori* view, no Aristotelian ethical doctrine to the effect that extremes are bad and the mean is good is stated or implied. Instead, the hero may go to the utmost limits of ecstasy or grief and such are assumed entirely normal, as in

William Blake's celebrated apology for emotional unrestraint. But these extremes must somehow balance each other with a balance paradoxically but pragmatically resulting through aesthetic terms in a cancellation of violence itself.

Partly as corollary to this balance is the unmistakably aesthetic conception that emotions are not romantically or sentimentally expressed and that neither actor nor audience experiences the emotions of the play to be those of real life. Indian criticism is explicit on this point and the virtuosity of the equilibrium, which in Indian eyes constitutes dramatic beauty and the very core of drama itself, precludes the familiar Western outlook. Even performances of Indian plays themselves in the West have frequently shown obliviousness to this outstanding aspect of the sophisticated Indian theatre. The plays are dedicated, as the introductory and concluding prayers show, to Siva, patron of music, art, and dance, who in the well-known image balances himself upon one foot while dancing in a ring formed by a fiery serpent, whose head consumes its tail. One ear-ring is masculine, the other, feminine. He is god of destruction and rebirth, of continual, unending movement within the magic circle of immovability, the very deity of spiritual equilibrium.

Some further difficulties in interpretation arise from a deceptive predisposition to suppose Sanskrit drama in some way broadly representative or typical of Hindu culture. Although as we shall presently see, unmistakably the offspring of this culture, it is no more typical of it than Elizabethan drama is typical of Elizabethan thought. In this connection it is helpful to recall that, from causes neither altogether clear nor dark, the world of Elizabethan drama is very unlike the general world-outlook represented by Elizabethan literature as a whole or even by the Elizabethan dramatists themselves when writing for other media than the stage. Thus while Shakespeare's sonnets at times echo his plays verbally, they are really very unlike them, even in point of language, and his two longish narrative poems come by no means close to his great plays, though one of them may be read as a preliminary exercise for the rhetoric of his earliest dramas. Broadly examined, Indian literature and culture likewise present enormous diversities and the most glaring contradictions. There are many religions and schools of philosophy, many levels of culture, much primitivism, much urbanity, much worldliness, much other-worldliness, four castes

and many centuries to be considered. Some Indian traditions have obviously persisted longer than others. The tradition in drama described in these pages is really nameless; it is only roughly associated with the Sanskrit tongue, for much that is fundamental in it holds true also for plays extending geographically from the languages of Tibet to the Tamil of Southern India. Yet a main stem persisted, by the most conservative estimate from about 200 to 900 A.D.—we cannot be sure of the dates, especially where origins are concerned. The great drama seems always to have owed much of its genius to court cultures. With an enormous indebtedness to music and dancing, out of which it may well have grown, it reached an outlook more purely aesthetic than that of virtually any other branch of Hindu expression, in this respect also comparable to the Elizabethan theatre in the total picture of Elizabethan cultural life. It clearly reflects both the typical folklore and philosophy, the manners and religions, of its native land. But it had its own unique accomplishment as well as its own peculiar apologists, as in several important treatises on the theory and practice of the stage.

The accomplishment is so unlike any to be found in the West, that at least perceptible aid is supplied for Western readers when passages in some degree related to the philosophy of the Hindu theatre are recalled from important religious, philosophical, and speculative writings. From their native culture the dramatists naturally picked up valuable threads that must profitably be associated with them. The myths, largely derived from the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyana*, are reworked until they assume quite new aspects, much as Shakespeare reworked his sources in Plutarch and Holinshed. The religious and philosophical statements are more explicit in their bearing on the theory of equilibrium than are the stories; a few of the former suggesting this theory may be recalled.

The conception is approached in the *Isā Upanishad* :

Unmoving, the One is swifter than the mind,
 The sense-powers reaching not It, speeding on before.
 Past others running, This goes standing.
 In it Matarisvan places action.

It moves. It moves not.
 It is far, and It is near.

The Classical Drama of India

It is within all this,
And It is outside of all this. . . .

Into blind darkness enter they
That worship ignorance ;
Into darkness greater than that, as it were, they
That delight in knowledge.

Knowledge and non-knowledge—
He who this pair conjointly knows,
With non-knowledge passing over death,
With knowledge wins the immortal.

Into blind darkness enter they
Who worship non-becoming.
Into darkness greater than that, as it were, they
Who delight in becoming. . . .

Becoming and destruction—
He who this pair conjointly knows,
With destruction passing over death,
With becoming wins the immortal.

That most seminal work, the *Bhagvad Gītā*, contains these statements :

He whom the world fears, who fears not the world, free from exaltation, anguish, fear, disquiet, such a one is beloved of Me.

Who exults not nor hates, nor grieves nor longs, renouncing fortune and misfortune, who is thus full of love is beloved of Me.

Equal to foe and friend, equal in honor and dishonor, equal in cold and heat, weal and woe, from attachment altogether free.

Balanced in blame and praise, full of silence, content with whatever may befall, seeking no home here, steadfast-minded, full of love, this man is beloved of Me.

The *Majjhima-Nikāya* (*Sutta* 63) contains this suggestive passage :

I have not elucidated, Māluṅkyāputta, that the world is eternal; I have not elucidated that the world is not eternal; I have not elucidated that the world is finite; I have not elucidated that the world is infinite; I have not elucidated that the soul and

body are identical ; I have not elucidated that the soul is one thing and the body another ; I have not elucidated that the saint exists after death ; I have not elucidated that the saint does not exist after death ; I have not elucidated that the saint neither exists nor does not exist after death.

In a famous passage of the *Samyutta-Nikāya* concerning "the Middle Doctrine" we read:

That things have being, O Kāccāna, constitutes one extreme of doctrine ; that things have no being is the other extreme. These extremes, O Kāccāna, have been avoided by the Tathāgata, and it is a middle doctrine he teaches :

On ignorance depends *karma* ;
On *Karma* depends consciousness ;
On consciousness depend name and form ;
On name and form depend the six organs of sense ;
On the six organs of sense depends contact ;
On contact depends attachment ;
On attachment depends existence ;
On existence depends birth ;
On birth depend old age and death, sorrow, lamentation, misery, grief, and despair. Thus does this entire aggregation of misery arise.

But on the complete fading out of cessation of ignorance ceases *karma* :

On the cessation of *karma* ceases consciousness ;
On the cessation of consciousness cease name and form ;
On the cessation of name and form cease the six organs of sense ;
On the cessation of the six organs of sense ceases contact ;
On the cessation of contact ceases sensation ;
On the cessation of sensation ceases attachment ;
On the cessation of attachment ceases existence ;
On the cessation of existence ceases birth ;
On the cessation of birth cease old age and death, lamentation, misery, grief, and despair. Thus does this entire aggregation of misery cease.

Such passages as these, and there are many, indicate both the spirit and essential form and rhetoric of the Sanskrit theatre.

The surprise which may at first be felt on realizing how much in Sanskrit drama is elucidated by the theory of equilibrium and yet how little it is discussed in the extensive and highly sophisticated critical works produced in India itself should not embarrass the validity of the view. Two civilizations differ in ways that neither realizes fully until they have existed for a considerable time side by side. Moreover, in any culture there is always much that is so completely native as to be taken almost entirely for granted. The Greeks scarcely realized the uniqueness of their emphasis upon logical thinking nor the Greek dramatists their further emphasis upon emotional tension strung lengthwise on the coordinate of time. The Sanskrit dramatists, it seems, hardly realized to what a pronounced degree they relied upon precisely the opposite outlooks, discovering spiritual integration between apparent and logical antinomies, and finding peace that flows from contemplation to be the unifying element even in their narrative and dramatic art. The dynamics of the Western stage draw the breath in, creating the tension of flexed muscles ; the dynamics of the Indian stage let the breath out, creating relaxation and repose. The idealism of the one is heroic, that of the other, contemplative. In each case the work of art is organic, developed from a single seed ; in each case we are confronted with the spectacle of opposing forces. The organisms themselves, however, differ as widely as day from night. Each presumes its own way of thinking and feeling. In each culture the critics justify the outlook known to them and define that technique as the best which most fully realizes the native ideals. But it is the technique that is clearly stated rather than the outlook, as the aesthetics of Aristotle or Cicero, of Bharata or Sāgaranandin, clearly show. It is only when one system is confronted with the other that certain of the most deeply ingrained properties of each become clearly apparent.

Although the purpose of this brief chapter is to state the principle of equilibrium, not to trace its application at large or to describe the multiplicity of its manifestations, a few examples showing its application will naturally be demanded. The circular motion of separation and return must, however, be conspicuous on even a rapid inspection of the most celebrated Sanskrit plays. To begin with the earliest playwright to whom any considerable number

of works has been ascribed, Bhāsa's masterpiece, *The Vision of Vāsavadattā*, describes the supposed death of a beloved queen and her final recovery of the husband convinced that he has lost her. *The Minister's Vows*, another of Bhāsa's notable plays, repeats much the same theme. The "happy ending" of almost all Sanskrit plays operates in this behalf, for where a story falls within the mould of tragicomedy, the action will naturally pass from felicity to misfortune and back to felicity again. Sanskrit criticism itself states that the end of the play should in some way recapitulate its beginning. Bhāsa treats the epics that have the same patterns, as the *Rāmāyana* so conspicuously shows. Rāma loses Sitā twice, first when she is abducted by Rāvanā and second when she is exiled by Rāma himself at the malicious instigation of "the populace". On each occasion she is, of course, recovered. These are themes in four outstanding plays, two by Bhāsa, two, considerably more powerful, by Bhavabhūti.

Shakuntalā and her lover are first happy and devoted to each other, then the dark eclipse of forgetfulness sets in, and at last their reunion is achieved. Purūravas loses Urvacī, only to find her once more. In Harsa's *Nāgānanda* the lovers are separated by a gulf deep as death itself, only to be united, proving, to cite an aphorism in another play, *Rāma's Later History*, that misery and joy are encompassed within the same dominion. What is most remarkable, even in a political play, as *Mudrārāksasa*, where the estrangement is not between two lovers but between two ministers of state, the end of the play depicts their reconciliation, peace being restored by public unity.

The larger part of the significance of the theory of equilibrium cannot, however, be realized until the detailed working out of a single play is examined. This is most clearly seen in the most gigantic of Sanskrit dramas, *The Little Clay Cart*, a work of transcendent virtuosity and choreography. Here every item has its counterpart, though the themes are themselves frequently so complex and subtly interwoven as to escape instantaneous recognition. We presumably experience the integrity of the form before realizing its causes and in fact the symmetry will exhaust the most intense scrutiny. Scene balances scene, as the two perigrinations of Vasantasēnā through the streets, once when pursued by the villain, once when a thunderstorm pursues her as she is in quest of her lover, on each occasion being accompanied by a *vita*. On each

occasion, too, there is a trio of voices speaking with dialectical peculiarities. The balance of flesh and spirit is evoked in the single role of the gambler turned ascetic. The theme of the unlucky but faithful servant, itself a foil to the ultimately lucky Chārudatta, is developed in the story of an impotent but valiant servant who is twice beaten because of loyalty, first to the heroine, second to the hero ; on each occasion he declares that he has done all he possibly can. In the important character of Sarvilaka, thievery and idealism are contrasted with exquisite humor. Chārudatta's poverty is contrasted with Vasantasēnā's opulence, his dilapidated house with her thriving palace. One *gharri* is set off against another, a clay cart is the foil to a golden cart, every incident and almost every speech is a foil to another. The repetition of stanzas under the varying circumstances, the balance of design, for example, in the processional scenes at the four gates of the city, the near-deaths of hero and heroine, each invoking the name of the other, all, even in point of the most minute verbal parallels, support the underlying theory of equipoise. Chārudatta was once rich ; he falls into poverty ; he recovers his riches with interest. In the language of William Blake, who alone among English poets reiterates all the essentials in the cyclic pattern of Hindu thought, even Vasantasēnā was doubtless both virginal and sexually honest once and is in the end elevated to what is deemed the highest moral honour of woman, matrimony. In short, *The Little Clay Cart* preserves the cyclic theme common to almost all serious Sanskrit drama but does so less spectacularly than in the unsurpassed subtlety and consistency with which it develops the factor of equilibrium within the multiple threads weaving its garment as a whole.

The Tamil drama, *Arichandra*, the Tibetan drama, *Tchrimekundan*, are both, like *The Book of Job*, stories of tribulation surrounded by happiness. The hero in each case falls from his splendor only to be restored to it. With much less subtlety than the Sanskrit plays themselves and more indebtedness to the bare increment of folklore, these justly illustrious works follow the same basic pattern as the main stem of the serious Indian theatre.

Equilibrium, as the Indian drama reveals it, is exemplified, then, both in the conception of the plots and, what is considerably more important, in the execution of detail. It is followed, in other words, in the dramatic narratives and in the details of style and execution. Sāgaranandin declares the highest type of play to be that employing

the maximum number of dialects and styles practically available, that is, the play containing the largest number of conflicting elements to be reconciled, for Sāgaranandin himself uses the image of the whole work as developed from a single seed. The conflicts, as analysis reveals, are harmonized by playing opposites off against each other, as summer-winter, light-dark, right-left, war-peace, or whatever the most available contrasts may be. The essence of aesthetic success is conceived as the poise between opposites, somewhat, it may be observed, as in the paradoxes of Kierkegaard. This is at once the form of art and the formula of life, according with the choreography of man's world and that of the stars. For this reason, too, the plays are so vital. Their form and meaning, body and soul, are one. Art has seldom served an ideal purpose more fully. Yet the morality is fundamentally aesthetic. Morality may well be in the subject-matter of the plays but their delightfulness springs directly from their form as art.