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# Singularity, Inexhaustibility, Insight: What Sanskrit Poeticians Think Is Real

Let's say you are a novelist or a poet, composing a rather long text inhabited by characters of your own invention. At some point you get stuck; there seems to be no way to extricate the heroine, Z., from the extraordinary tangle of circumstance and inner conflict that she has gotten herself into—no, sorry, that *you* have imagined for her. (That's the problem with these characters: they very rapidly acquire a surprising autonomy and a certain irreducible integrity vis-à-vis their creator.)[1] Eventually you decide that, for the sake of the novel, maybe even for Z.'s own sake, the best thing is simply to kill her off. In our literary ecology, no one would doubt your sovereign ability to do just that. After all, Z. is only imaginary.

So you concoct a death scene, maybe even a funeral, and everyone inside the novel along with the readers outside it, to say nothing of the author, has somehow to come to terms with the sad loss of Z. Even I can't help feeling a slight twinge, though I hardly knew her.

But what if Z. were suddenly to turn up on the street or in your study and demand attention, protesting loudly that she is still very much alive?

Now let's say that you're a bard specializing in epic stories in Sanskrit; you sing the familiar, inherited tales called *itihāsa* or *purāṇa,* probably to an audience of villagers in some corner of medieval India. Tonight you are describing the melodramatic moment where the young Kṛṣṇa kills his uncle and tormentor, Kaṃsa. Here, too, someone might say about you that tonight you are "killing off" Kaṃsa *(kaṃsaṃ ghātayasi).* As it happens, the famous seventh-century commentary by Jayâditya and Vāmana known as the *Kāśikā,* on Pāṇini's grammar of Sanskrit, makes a provision for precisely this sort of idiomatic usage. The *Kāśikā* is commenting on *sūtra* 3.1.26 of the grammar, *hetumati ca,* which enjoins the use of the suffix Ṇic to

produce a causative verb. So along with such prevalent and, in India, remarkably useful forms as *odanaṃ pācayati,* "he causes [someone else] to cook the rice," we can also generate sentences such as "he is killing off Kaṃsa" *(kaṃsaṃ ghātayati)* or "he is binding [the demon] Bali in chains" *(baliṃ bandhayati).* That is, the storyteller is narrating these episodes, thereby causing Kaṃsa to be killed or Bali to be bound. In this same passage, a very similar usage is said to be normal for astrologers, who may know, for example, about the conjunction of various planets; we can say that the astrologer literally "joins X to Y" *(puṣyeṇa yojayati/ maghabhir yojayati).*

In a way, the Sanskrit idiom is quite unsurprising. Indeed, we quite naturally use it ourselves. There is, however, a difference between the first and second examples. The novelist who imagined Z. has, we assume, the right to do away with her. The Indian storyteller, however, is repeating some piece of the tradition that (a) everyone knows and (b) is thought to have really happened—possibly even to have happened many times, in each successive, self-repeating cosmic age. So there may after all be a distinctive twist to the *Kāśikā*'s observation about reported speech. I'm not at all sure that the storyteller is not making Kaṃsa die yet again, in some quite factual way, just as a classical drama about the god Rāma may, at certain ritual moments, be seen as an arena in which Rāma does become entirely present and real.[2] Or, to take a somewhat milder position, we could say that the storyteller presents the story in such a powerful way that he makes the death of Kaṃsa palpably real to his audience.[3]

Clearly, there is a problem here, one that can be formulated in various ways. In the Tamil dance-drama called *Hiraṇya-nāṭakam,* the actor playing the god Nara-siṃha, a man-lion, and wearing his enormous orange mask is often said to become possessed by the deity to the point that he breaks the bounds between performance and ritual reality: "Last year the actor was so full of the god that he actually attacked and devoured one of the spectators."[4] On the other hand, classical poeticians such as the great Abhinavagupta (eleventh century) are careful to distinguish what normally happens in the theater from just such ritual modes *(āveśa).* The difference is a matter of principle, not of degree. And yet these same poeticians are fond of telling us that the poetic world with which they are professionally concerned is a kind of ultimate reality, utterly free from the constraints of fate and from the usual unhappy concoction of pleasure and pain that we all recognize as the stuff of everyday experience.[5] What, precisely, do they mean?

Or, stated more simply, what is it that counts as real for these theorists of artistic production and effects, the sober and erudite embodiments of a scientific discipline that is generally hardheaded, empiricist, rigorous, shaped by logical categories of analysis, and often rather skeptical? In India, poetics, the *Alaṅkāra-śāstra,* is one of the central sciences, a natural extension of the great paradigmatic discipline of grammar—not a primary arena for metaphysical speculation about Being in the mode of, let us say, the famous ninth-century Kashmiri text *Yoga-vāsiṣṭha-mahārāmāyaṇa,* where there is nothing that is not imagined (hence both "true" and unreal).[6] For this very reason, because of the care and caution with which it examines a clearly delimited field, poetics constitutes a useful point of departure for forays into the life of the South Asian imagination.

We will proceed as follows, charting a somewhat constricted course through the *śāstra* and its major theoretical texts and paying attention to the way basic notions evolved over roughly a thousand years, from the middle of the first millennium to the seventeenth century. We begin with the figure known as *utprekṣā* ("flight of fancy") that, more than any other, focuses the problem of truth and reality as the poeticians articulated it. We will then look briefly at the theory of suggestion, *dhvani,* and the closely allied notion of *rasa,* "flavor"—the culminating synthesis of thought on poetics in the narrative the tradition tells itself about its history—from the perspective of this problem. Important issues about creativity and inexhaustibility arise organically in the framework of this discussion. We then turn, in the next chapter, to the central concept of *pratibhā,* "inspiration" or "imagination," especially as it was developed by three maverick figures among the great theoreticians—Rājaśekhara, Kuntaka, and Jagannātha. The science of poetics is the most obvious place to look for a full-fledged, nuanced theory of imaginative praxis in classical and medieval India; we should, however, never forget that there is a necessary and enduring lack of congruence between the poeticians' views and the actual praxis of the poets themselves, as in any great literary tradition.

### 3.1. "Smoke, Light, Water, Wind"

Take a striking example, which I owe to Gary Tubb, who has discussed it together with related instances in two important essays.[7] The great poet Kālidāsa conjures up a vignette in which a dark rain cloud—which has been sent as a love messenger, *dūta,* by an exiled *yakṣa* spirit to his distant

wife—is momentarily resting on a mountain peak during the north-bound journey:

*channopântaḥ pariṇata-phala-dyotibhiḥ kānanâmrais*
*tvayy ārūḍhe śikharam acalaḥ snigdha-veṇī-savarṇe/*
*nūnaṃ yāsyaty amara-mithuna-prekṣaṇīyām avasthāṃ*
*madhye śyāmaḥ stana iva bhuvaḥ śeṣa-vistāra-pāṇḍuḥ//*[8]

Its slopes veiled by groves of ripening mangos,
and with you[9]—black as a glossy braid—on its peak,
the mountain will grab the attention of passionate couples
among the gods, looking down from above,
like a breast of the goddess Earth with a black nipple
at the center and all the rest pale gold.

Imagined as seen from above, the mountain is a visually striking mass of pale golden mangos ripening on the trees (during the monsoon month of Āṣāḍha, always a period of intense erotic emotion in Sanskrit poetry), with the dark rain cloud coiled, like a woman's sleek black braid, around the peak at the center.[10] In short, it is like seeing a breast. But what exactly does "like" (*iva,* in the middle of the final quarter) mean here? Is this a somewhat daring, though appropriately erotic, metaphor? The monsoon season is suffused with passionate longing: the roads have become impassable because of the rains, and lovers who, like the *yakṣa* and his wife, are separated at this season can hardly bear the torment; those lucky couples who are together can give themselves over, undisturbed, to desire. Naturally, then, an amorous pair of gods who steal a moment to look down toward earth will, upon seeing the mountain, think of a breast. But are they projecting or imagining something that we would certainly assume is quite "unreal"? Not necessarily. Vallabhadeva, the earliest commentator on the text (early tenth century?), says tersely, *ataś ca kṛṣṇa-cūcukaḥ samasta-pītaś ca mahī-kuca ivety upamā,* "This is a simile: it is like the breast of the Earth, with its black nipple amidst the rest of its golden flesh." Later commentators, however, such as the great Mallinātha, think the poetic figure is *utprekṣā,* "flight of fancy." Mallinātha, in fact, spells out the implication of his categorization: "You [the cloud] will rest, as it were, on the breast of your beloved, the Earth, like a lover who, exhausted from making love, falls asleep on the breast of his beloved."

At first glance, the difference between the two figures might not seem so very great. It does, however, touch on the question of interest to us. *Utprekṣā,* as we will see in a moment, assumes a certain imaginative leap, something that goes well beyond a mere simile, *upamā.* The latter, moreover, tends to depend on comparing the subject to a familiar, real object. Thus to classify the image in our verse as simile is to imply that the Earth, being a real goddess, does actually have real breasts. This seems to be Vallabha's position. To call the figure *utprekṣā* is to focus on the imaginative reconfiguration of reality that is basic to all examples of this class. We can read the word *iva,* "like," in either way. The poet has not determined our interpretative stance; it is really up to us, as we can see by the commentators' disagreement.[11] In a sense, it all depends on what we think about the whole poetic enterprise in this text, that is, about the somewhat bizarre master trope of asking a cloud to carry a verbal message of love and reassurance to a lovesick wife far away.

Kālidāsa has, in fact, explicitly thematized the issue in one of the opening verses of the *Megha-dūta,* as we have seen.[12] A cloud, he tells us, is just a hodgepodge of smoke, light, water, and wind—not a sentient being (v. 5). How could the *yakṣa* then entrust it with his message? The answer is that lovers tortured by separation will appeal, in their distress, to anything or anybody. So right at the start we have a direct metapoetic statement about the delusional or fictive nature of the primary trope.[13] We know perfectly well that we are in an imagined domain, with its own compelling power. In effect, the entire text is one long *utprekṣā,* continually instantiated in specific figurative expressions. This is not to preclude the possibility that a different kind of reality is somehow brought into play in the course of our entering into the poetic illusion. Perhaps "reality" is too limited a word in such contexts.

### 3.2. *Utprekṣā* and "Apprehension"

We can now reformulate our question. It is not quite enough to ask, "What did Sanskrit poeticians believe to be real?" We have to add: "Real in what sense?" Or better still: "Real to what effect?" Comparisons with purely philosophical domains, such as Advaita Vedânta, or with the luxurious exploration of the imagination in the *Yoga-vāsiṣṭha,* will not really help. The poeticians must be allowed to speak for themselves. Fortunately, they do

address these themes with considerable vigor and with a sensitivity to various competing points of view. They have much to say about the precise nature of the cognition triggered by a work of art, and from the beginning of the tradition they are also fascinated by the logic of perception that operates within each of the major figures. Let us start, then, by taking a close look at some of the attempts to define *utprekṣā* in terms of its reality content.

*Utprekṣā,* as we have already seen, comprises a flight of fancy in which there is usually some element of comparison, though not a comparison amenable to full analysis in terms of the classical logic of the simile, *upamā.* We have also already intimated the reason behind *upamā*'s insufficiency in this case, that is, the fanciful, imaginary nature of the object of comparison *(upamāna),* be it a substance or a verbal process.[14] When the starting point is an imaginative leap, ontological issues cannot be far away. What interests us is the way such issues are defined.

The early attempts at defining *utprekṣā* speak of a certain "otherness": thus Daṇḍin (early eighth century) says that *utprekṣā* is "imagining something, whether sentient or insentient, as acting in another mode [*vṛtti*] than usual" (*anyathaiva sthitā vṛttiś cetanasyetarasya vā/ anyathotprekṣyate yatra tām utprekṣāṃ vidur;* 2.221).[15] In most cases, what lies behind the notion of something other than usual is the attribution of conscious intention to an insentient object, as the definition itself suggests.[16] Thus the Sun sends its morning rays into the groves and pries open the flowers as if it were searching everywhere for its defeated enemy, now in hiding, Darkness.[17] The subjunctive, "as if" element, which is central to the figure, is explicitly signaled by some verbal token in the verse (like *iva* in our example from Kālidāsa). The fancy is thus largely taken up with imagining an impossible or highly unlikely motivation for what may be a rather ordinary action or event. In the example, *utprekṣā* replaces the literal, naturalistic observation that the flowers in the grove unfold at dawn; now we know why they do so. Note that simile alone cannot explain this verse—not merely because of the complexity and dynamism of the figure, though these deserve attention, but above all because of the poet's imaginative, anthropomorphizing drive.

Later poeticians—Vāmana, Udbhaṭa, and especially Rudraṭa—introduced more powerful, also more subtle, elements into the definition of this figure; we cannot follow their debates in any detail here. But by the time of Ruyyaka (c. 1150, Kashmir), the discourse on *utprekṣā* has shifted into a primarily epistemological mode focusing on the question of what part or

aspect of the figure can be seen as "true" or "real." The shift is meaningful and consequential. Even the basic terms have changed: the classical *upameya* (subject of the comparison, that which is compared) and *upamāna* (object of comparison, that to which something is compared) now tend to appear as the *viṣaya,* the "domain" (of the figure, or of the cognitive process active in it), and the *viṣayin,* that which forms, shapes, or molds this domain.[18] What is more, Ruyyaka reclassifies *utprekṣā* as forming a pair with *atiśayokti,* hyperbole, on the basis of a shared cognitive process that he is the first to call *adhyavasāya,* "determination, apprehension."[19] *Adhyavasāya* is what distinguishes the two figures in question from others, such as *rūpaka*—metaphoric identification—based on *āropa,* "superimposition." It is one thing to impose the form of the object on that of the subject of comparison without forgetting that they are not really identical, but quite another to apprehend X a s Y while maintaining a clear awareness of what is or is not real in this imaginative vision. Let us see how Ruyyaka explains what happens.

He first offers a definition: "*Utprekṣā* occurs when there is an apprehension [*adhyavasāya*] in which the *process* [*vyāpāra*] is predominant." This elliptical *kārikā* is then expanded in a prose passage of some obscurity:

> When the object of comparison [*viṣayin*] swallows up the subject [*viṣaya*]*,* so that there is the perception of nondifference, that is apprehension. It has two subtypes—in the process of being completed, and completed. The in-process type entails a p erception of the object of comparison as unreal. This falseness derives from a perception of some element [*dharma*] belonging to the object, and possible [only] with reference to the object, as being connected to the subject domain. Such an element may take the form of either an attribute or an action. When one considers the question of whether such an element can or cannot come into existence, one may come to the conclusion that the basis for its coming into existence is not truly real, while the other [subject domain] is truly real. When you take something unreal as real, that is an "in-process apprehension." The process itself is the main thing. A "completed apprehension" occurs when the object of comparison, although in fact unreal, is perceived as real. Its reality derives from the absence of any reason to regard it as unreal, unlike the previous case. In this case the end result of the apprehension is predominant. Among these two possibilities, that apprehension in which the process is primary, and the perception is in the process of being

achieved, is what is called imagination, conceit, conjecture, speculation, or *utprekṣā.*[20]

Ruyyaka's understanding of *utprekṣā* could perhaps have been stated more simply. He is interested here, as I have said, both in *utprekṣā* and in *atiśayokti,* hyperbole; the first exemplifies the in-process apprehension, the second the completed apprehension. Thus if one were to say, for example, "Look! Surely the moon, as it were . . ." *(nūnaṃ candra iva),* that is *utprekṣā.*[21] If one says simply, "Look at the moon" (meaning "look at her face," *candraṃ paśya*), that is *atiśayokti.*[22] In both cases, according to Ruyyaka, an identity is established between subject and object of comparison. But in the first example, the object, *viṣayin,* continues to be recognized as unreal—which means that our heroine's face is not really the moon, and we know it—and we will also usually find some explicit marker of this fact, as in the phrase "surely" *(nūnam)* or "as it were" *(iva).* The identification, that is, is still in process. In the second case, we have lost all signs of the unreality of the object, and even our awareness of this unreality may have gone; the coincidence is fully achieved, and the unreal object has swallowed up the real subject along with the latter's evident reality.

But it is *utprekṣā* that concerns us. Note the dual awareness that seems to be maintained in the listener's mind: something unreal is being identified, but not in a complete or final way, with something real. You have to be able to maintain the tension between real and unreal to experience the full effect of the figure. The discussion takes a strictly logical turn; there is always some element making the transition from the object domain to the subject domain, and what we want to examine is the existential ground of that element. As the commentator, Vidyācakravartin, says: "What element [*dharma*] are we talking about? And by what logical criterion [*pramāṇa*] can we judge it? The perception of reality or falseness applies to its basis [for coming into being, *āśraya*]. . . . Thus a judgment of truth or falsehood is not without logical criteria. We recognize what is unreal when the ground of its coming into being does not produce an awareness of its ultimate reality."[23]

This amounts to saying that the object of comparison is, in the case of *utprekṣā,* always unreal, unlike the subject of comparison.[24] We could also say that in such a case the fictionality of the figure remains clearly in view. The tension retains a dynamic quality; a certain space opens up in which the imagination can come into play. Another commentator, Samudrabandha

(late thirteenth–early fourteenth century, Kerala) makes a slightly differ-ent distinction between the in-process and the completed apprehension. In the former, *utprekṣā,* what is swallowed up is the perception or recogni-tion of the subject. In hyperbole, *atiśayokti,* what is swallowed up is the very form or self of the subject.[25] In other words, *utprekṣā* ends up as a kind of "seeing as X"; the everyday perception of the subject is overpowered by the imaginative one. Hyperbole, on the other hand, leaves nothing over of the original subject, as when raw rice is turned into cooked rice.[26] Is hyper-bole, then, fiction or fact?

A fiction, no doubt; apparently, one whose fictionality has been sup-pressed or masked. The figurative reality has swamped any normative, object-driven one. But is this not the aim of poetry—to replace the hum-drum world, at least for a moment, with a more powerful and malleable one, infused with an imaginative dimension that makes beauty real? We do indeed find such statements in the Sanskrit *alaṅkāra* texts.[27] But it is striking that the discussion of *utprekṣā,* the most imaginative figure of all, by Ruyyaka and his commentators keeps bringing us back to the cognitive content of an *utprekṣā* moment, and in particular to the struggle such a moment triggers in the listener's mind. Differential truth-claims continue to exist within a figurative process predicated on the notion of fictionality.

Attempts to refine the problem further easily slip into questions of illu-sion or straightforward error. "Apprehension," says Vidyācakravartin, commenting on the beginning of this same passage in Ruyyaka,

> is definite knowledge. In everyday experience, it has two forms: correct and incorrect [*saṃyag-ātmā mithyā-rūpaś ca*]. Neither has any relation to figuration. If you correctly identify a pearl oyster shell, or if you wrongly perceive it as silver—in neither case is there anything striking [*vicchittiḥ kā-cit*]. What we take for artistic figuration is a projection [*adhyāsa*] dis-tinct from both the above, in which, while knowing [the distinction], we say, "This thing is *in* [or *on*] that thing." The result is an unearthly strik-ingness. It, too, has two paths. Sometimes the *process* of apprehending is primary, and sometimes it is the subject domain that has been fully ap-prehended [as the object]. Only the first case is *utprekṣā.*

If Vidyācakravartin is right, what attracts our attention in *utprekṣā* is not the subject and object in their own right but the cognitive business of bringing them into relation to each other. We are, in short, made to see into the workings of our mind when it combines something true or real

with something false or unreal. Note that "true" and "real" are not synonymous, nor are "false" and "unreal." And while the ability to distinguish truth from falsehood is clearly relevant to this discussion, the passage seems to have shifted toward an apprehension of what is real. This kind of introspection, which somehow manages to keep the two different truth-values apart even in the course of combining them, generates a characteristic inner mode with its own integrity. The Kashmiri commentator Jayaratha gives this mode a name lifted from Ruyyaka's own list of terms culminating in *utprekṣā: sambhāvanā,* "imagination."[28] Moreover, Jayaratha clearly distinguishes imagination from doubt, *sandeha,* on the one hand, and from *tarka,* logical deduction, on the other. Imagination, he says, occupies an intermediate space between doubt and certainty, like the mythic figure of King Triśaṅku, who forever dangles upside down between heaven and earth.[29]

Jayaratha goes on to offer his own subdivision of apprehension, *adhyavasāya.* Once again we find two types, in this case distinguished by the factor of motivation or intention. Sometimes apprehension of identity—between the subject and object of comparison—happens naturally, without premeditation or purpose. In such a case *(svārasika),* the apprehension is simply a mistake. A separate figure, *bhrāntimat,* is based around such misapprehensions. When the moonlight pouring into a room is so intense that the cat licks at it on the floor, assuming it to be milk, or an exhausted lover tries to wrap herself in it because she thinks it is her nightgown, that is *bhrāntimat.*[30] Notice that in this figure, the listener or reader knows perfectly well what is real and what is illusionary; he or she attends to the mistake made by someone else, inside the poem. In other cases, however—we are still following Jayaratha—we can identify a purpose *(prayojana)* behind the apprehension, in which the distinction between true and false is maintained by the poet as well as by the reader. Once again, such a motivated *(utpādita)* apprehension can be either in-process or complete. There is a convergence here with Vidyācakravartin, who also distinguishes unconscious or natural *(svārasika)* error from poetic design; the latter, while issuing from lucid awareness of the distinction in truth-status, has imagination as its inner force *(kalpanâtmā).*[31]

To operate in this figurative domain, imagination requires a high-grade, tensile suspension in which reality and unreality come together in the mind of the listener or spectator without resolving the contradiction between them. "Suspension" may, however, give too static an impression; as we saw,

the process itself is primary. *Utprekṣā* could thus be said to be an ongoing negotiation between two perceptions—one seemingly "true," the other "false"—that are made to converge by the very existence of the two structural poles of the figure, the subject and object of imagined comparison.

About a century and a half after Ruyyaka's pathbreaking discussion of *utprekṣā,* another major poetician—Vidyānātha, writing in Warrangal in the Telugu country in the early fourteenth century—slightly revised the terms of Ruyyaka's analysis. Specifically, he made room for the explicit possibility that either the subject or the object of the comparison could be unreal—that is, could be "swallowed up" by the other.[32] He thus effectively spelled out a conclusion implicit in Ruyyaka's way of thinking about the two relevant figures. To conclude this section, we can take a quick look at how Kumārasvāmin, commenting on Vidyānātha's *Pratāparudrīya* in the late fifteenth century, lucidly explicates the processes involved:

> When the poet applies qualities such as sweetness, which belong to the object of comparison, in this case the moon,[33] to its subject, in this case the [beloved's] face, clearly knowing the face *as a face*—saying "Surely this must be, as it were, the moon"—then the moon, being unreal, appears to be swallowed up by the "faceness" of the face, which is perceived as ultimately real. But since the perception of truth and falsehood as being simultaneously identical is impossible, and because words like *nūnam* ["surely"] are capable of conveying a sense of reality even to the object of comparison, we speak of an apprehension that is still *in-process.* It is the ongoing process of apprehending that predominates. But when the word "face" is not uttered and the poet simply says, "This is the moon," then the object of comparison, though unreal, is perceived as real. The absence of the word "face," which is what produces [in the former case, *utprekṣā*] the sense that the moon is unreal, makes this [hyperbole] possible. In this case the subject, though real, is swallowed up and concealed, thus appearing unreal. Here what predominates is what has been [finally] apprehended.[34]

Thus there are linguistic triggers, slight residual markers—evidentials— that generate a sense of reality; the absence of such a trigger may be enough to make the real appear unreal, though probably not enough to do away entirely with the base awareness that we are within the magnetic field of figuration. A trained listener will recognize hyperbole when he or she hears it and will not crudely literalize its message. Still, the whole description of

these figures is saturated with the terminology of real and unreal, as if there were a danger, lurking in the back of the theoretician's mind, that the unreal could indeed "realize" itself, at least in consciousness, at least momentarily. What is more, it is the interplay of these two ontic categories that gives the relevant figures their effective punch.

What have we learned so far? A central poetic trope, *utprekṣā,* is defined, on the one hand, in terms of the relative reality-content of its members and, on the other hand, in terms of an ongoing, unfinished cognitive process that may in itself demand most of the reader's attention. Such a trope is not susceptible to classification as valid or invalid, true or false; more precisely, the knowledge that lies at its core cannot be classified in these terms. Some different sort of knowledge is involved, apparently sparked by the unresolved tension between real and unreal *within* the figure. This other knowledge is linked to imagination, a generative principle or faculty that has its own claim to truth.

### 3.3. "A Little Extra": On *Rasa, Bhāvanā,* and Resonance

Sanskrit poeticians have tried to say something about this other kind of knowledge. In fact, we find ourselves close to the heart of their discussions about aesthetic experience, its epistemic and ontic status, and its true purpose. Some of the materials are very well known, in particular those relating to the theory of *rasa* or aesthetic "flavor" as crystallized in the magisterial synthesis of Abhinavagupta (c. 1000, Kashmir). I want to look briefly at a few selected moments in the centuries-long debate about what happens in the mind of a spectator at a play, a debate recorded for us by Abhinavagupta himself in his commentaries on the *Bhārata-nāṭya-śāstra* and on Ānandavardhana's *Dhvanyāloka.*[35]

Perhaps the clearest statement about what the spectator's knowledge is *not* comes from a mid-ninth-century poetician known as Śrī Śaṅkuka, whose theories are known to us through Abhinavagupta's (clearly somewhat programmatic) summaries.[36] Śrī Śaṅkuka offers a mimetic theory of art built around the intertwined notions of imitation, *anukaraṇa,* and inference, *anumāna.* He thinks the delight that affects the spectator results from a rather complicated set of inferences about the actor and what he or she represents onstage—in particular, about what the represented character is feeling (i.e., *rasa*).[37] The poetic-dramatic text is, as the spectator knows, a fiction sustained by all the artificial *(kṛtrima)* factors and devices used to

unfold the illusion—although the spectator tends not to realize this at the time.[38] Both the actors and the spectators have to work hard, the first in order to generate the illusionary world of the drama, the latter at logical or inferential thinking. All of this produces in the audience an awareness that cannot be defined as doubt *(sandeha),* truth *(tattva),* or error *(viparyaya)*— just as we saw in the case of figuration. Rather, the logical status of the spectator's cognition can be stated as "This is that" *(asav ayam),* a statement that is distinct from "This is *really* that" *(asāv evâyam).*[39] Moreover, this cognition, lacking as it does any perceptions that might contradict it *(viruddha-buddhy-asambhedāt),* and rooted in direct experience, cannot be invalid. It is also quite capable of being causally effectual (as false cognitions can sometimes be).

Śrī Śaṅkuka spells all of this out by excluding a whole set of possible cognitive positions from the spectator's response. The spectator is *not* thinking, "This actor is happy,"[40] or "This actor is really Rāma," or "This actor is unhappy," or "This actor might or might not be Rāma," or "This actor is similar to Rāma." Rather, the cognition takes the form "That Rāma who is happy— this man [the actor] is he." The twelfth-century poetician Mammaṭa restates Śrī Śaṅkuka's logical map a little more clearly:

> The perception [of the spectator] is quite distinct from cognitions that are true, false, dubious, or based on similarity, *e.g.,* (1) "He [the actor] is Rāma and Rāma is he," (2) "He is Rāma"—but no, a later cognition rules out the first and shows us that he is not Rāma, (3) "He might or might not be Rāma," and (4) "He is similar to Rāma." Rather, it is like looking at a painting of a horse.[41]

These four possibilities are, as the commentator Vidyācakravartin tells us, the four main cognitive options in everyday experience *(tatra tāval laukikī pratītiś catur-vidhā).* What happens in the mind of the spectator at a dramatic performance is something altogether different. When one admires a painting of a horse *(citra-turage hi kautuka-daśāyām),* the question of its particular reality or unreality does not arise; one sees a generalized or universal horse in a perception that is "dense with wonder" *(camatkāraika-ghana).*[42] For the Sanskrit poeticians, this notion of wonder, *camatkāra,* is one of the keys to any understanding of artistic experience; in the context of logical cognitive process, wonder is clearly of another order than everyday perceptions.[43] It apparently defies standard analysis in terms of truth-claims.

Although Śrī Śaṅkuka's views were ruthlessly rejected by his successors, including Abhinavagupta— in the eyes of the major theoreticians, mimesis is simply not an adequate basis for artistic experience—he does point to something important that should not be obscured by the direction the theory later took. It is as if Śrī Śaṅkuka were saying to us: You cannot ask a poem (or a painting) if it is true. The moment we phrase the question, we have utterly vitiated the reality. Poetic reality is real, but we cannot know it to be real in the way we know other things. We know the poem or the painting is generated through "artifice" and is, in a trivial sense, fictive, but this knowledge does not change the fact that we know the poem or painting to be real in its own terms, whatever they may be (also in terms of what it does to us).

The stumbling block for Śrī Śaṅkuka, as Abhinavagupta shows, lies in his insistence on inference. By his own account, Śrī Śaṅkuka shows that any normal truth-claim presented onstage must be invalid—for the simple reason that Śrī Śaṅkuka thinks an imitation is going on.[44] In other words, Śrī Śaṅkuka, rather like the tradition of Aristotelian poetics in the West, is stuck in a representational mode, whereas Abhinavagupta (and his brilliant precursor Bhaṭṭa Nāyaka) were convinced that there is nothing truly representational about dramatic or poetic art. This is a critical point. To think of our painted horse as representing something is to make the same old mistake of asking whether it is or is not real. There is another way. Similarly, if the poor spectator is expected to engage in a lengthy process of logical deduction or inference, then all we really have is a theory that explains what fails in artistic production. Normally, Abhinavagupta will show us, there are far more important things for the spectator to do; also more important things for him to know.

So what does happen in the theater? Again we find ourselves faced with the generative and integral role of the imagination, which, however, is meant to work along certain regular, predetermined lines. Abhinava's predecessor Bhaṭṭa Nāyaka made the decisive breakthrough by introducing into poetics the notion of *bhāvanā*—generating, bringing into being, "production."[45] We encountered this term at the very outset of our study, where we explored its links with memory (for the Nyāya logicians) and linguistic expressivity per se (for both the grammarians and the Mīmāṃsaka ritualists).[46] Sentences, we should recall, are driven by the urge to bring something into being—something real, we might add, by virtue of the driving forces of expression *(vivakṣā)* and conceptualization *(vikalpa, kalpanā)* in

and of themselves. But a literary work also brings something into being—something unusually powerful, even overwhelming, if all goes well—and it does so, at least according to Bhaṭṭa Nāyaka, by a process of *bhāvanā* or *bhāvakatva* that is analogous in certain ways to the way linguistic statements in the Veda generate ritual action in the ritual performer.

Bhaṭṭa Nāyaka's major contribution lay in harnessing the Mīmāṃsā theory of *bhāvanā* to explain what happens in a spectator's mind when he or she is moved by a dramatic or literary performance. For the Mīmāṃsakas, *bhāvanā* is a "teleological" process that ultimately produces the promised fruit of a ritual by moving the ritualist to enact a Vedic injunction and (no less crucially) by amplifying the original injunction with the various procedural details necessary for the performance.[47] In short, language—we are speaking about authoritative, Vedic language, but the Vedic paradigm operates on other linguistic levels as well—is effectual and contains within itself all that is required to induce an action and its consequences. Something very similar happens in the theater, another language-informed domain, albeit one using a distinctive kind of language, rich in tropes, phonic and syntactic textures, and other features proper to literature. This particular kind of poetic language fulfills itself in the listener's or spectator's experience of intense pleasure, the "output," so to speak, of the *bhāvanā* generative system. This insistence on pleasure is highly nontrivial; it deliberately marginalizes other potential aims of a literary work, for example, moralistic and didactic goals. But it is not just any kind of pleasure. Bhaṭṭa Nāyaka—and Abhinavagupta in his wake—were eager to characterize specifically the emotional state induced by art.

Bhaṭṭa Nāyaka coined a word for it: *bhogī-kṛttva,* "pleasuring" or "experientialization" (in Pollock's neatly corresponding neologism). The experience in question has extraordinary *(alaukika)* qualities such as self-absorption, the "coming to rest" in oneself *(viśrānti)* or turning inward *(antar-mukhatva),* a forgetfulness of the outer world, and, above all, a "tasting" *(āsvāda)* of the *rasa* in all its fullness. The sense of satisfaction this tasting produces is akin to what great Yogis feel.[48] Bhaṭṭa Nāyaka seems to have thought that this altered state of consciousness could be further defined in relation to four distinct "mental planes" *(citta-bhūmi),* depending upon the major *rasas* involved (the erotic, the heroic, the gruesome, and the furious).[49] Abhinavagupta reformulated the primary features of this total aesthetic experience as fluidity (deobjectification, *druti*), expansion *(vistara),* and illumination *(vikāsa)*—a set that became canonical. According to Abhinavagupta, ulti-

mate consciousness *(saṃvid)* should naturally have these aspects, but it is usually blocked by constriction and confusion; what the poem or the play achieves is simply the removal of these latter forces, so that consciousness can happily rest in itself, in its innate goodness, brilliance, and joyfulness.

It is quite possible, however, that Bhaṭṭa Nāyaka conceived of this goal in a more nuanced manner; Pollock pointedly calls it a "complex kind of living-through, or disengaged engagement with, the various emotions."[50] The disengagement may well remind us of the floating, unfocused awareness of the village goddess, an inner mode that I have tried to connect to the elusive metaphysical ideal of the Advaita.[51] In any case—and here we come back t o *bhāvanā* or *bhāvakatva*—the basic move that makes this "pleasuring" possible is, according Bhaṭṭa Nāyaka's highly original insight, a "universalization" *(sādhāraṇī-karaṇa)* that does away with the particularity of the characters on the stage, at the same time completely removing any egoistic investment on the part of the spectator in the emotions they are triggering.[52] In other words, the Rāma we see on the stage is not the historical figure and epic hero but a stylized abstraction that is meant solely to provide a basis for a transient internal reorganization of the spectator's emotional reality. The stable emotion *(sthāyi-bhāva)* that the character *should* be feeling actually overtakes the spectator from within through a mode of empathic identification that lacks all personal, egoistic features; the happy result is an oddly depersonalized pleasure defined as savoring the *rasa*. It is almost as if the taste were there—fully accessible, free of blockage or constraint, and entirely real—without the taster. Universalization, along the lines just described, transports the spectator beyond his or her normal, everyday awareness into a state of delicious self-forgetfulness and rapturous absorption, free from anxiety, doubt, and the usual background noise of consciousness. Abhinavagupta insists that such a state is, in fact, our true, radiant nature, the very ground of our being, though it is obscured by quotidian experience. It is the great merit of the aesthetic media of poetry, drama, and music that they can restore us to "ourselves," at least momentarily, by inducing the radical self-forgetfulness that is defined as a flood of *rasa,* the fullness of liquid, pure, impersonal feeling.

There is no denying the tremendous explanatory power of this theory, which utterly transformed the terms of discourse within the tradition of Indian poetics; but at the same time we cannot help but notice how odd it is. We'll come back to the question of the spectator's mental state in just a moment, but notice first how "universalization" does away, in a si ngle,

sweeping movement, with everything that makes any given character in a drama distinct from others of his or her type. It almost makes no difference whether we are looking at Rāma or Udayana, at Śakuntalā or Sītā or Vāsavadattā; the particularities of plot, too, become quite secondary to the business of *rasa* production by means of typologized abstraction. So radical is this way of understanding artistic endeavor that it cannot possibly be true for any classical Sanskrit play, although it took the discursive-theoretical tradition several centuries to recover from the rampant universalizing impulse. For our purposes, however, and in order to address again the problem of what counts as real, this kind of *bhāvanā* requires one further level of analysis.

Where, we might ask ourselves, is imagination in all this? The answer, though insufficiently theorized by the orthodox Kashmiri poeticians (unless, of course, it was fully worked out in Bhaṭṭa Nāyaka's lost masterpiece), is that the internal mechanism of *bhāvanā/bhāvakatva* depends primarily on acts of imagination on the part of the spectator or listener. We find clear statements to this effect in summaries of Bhaṭṭa Nāyaka's view by somewhat later theorists such as Dhanika and Siṃhabhūpāla.[53] One way to state what happens is as follows: Within the heightened linguistic world of the theater, and given the basic receptivity of the spectator to the expressive process that is being enacted, universalization of the emotion is what enables the spectator's imagination to establish a personal link to what he or she is seeing. The spectator now sees the emotional reality of the character, denuded of its particularity, as linked to something that exists in the spectator's own mind. Once Rāma ceases to be the historical Rāma and becomes only an embodiment of noble (or passionate, or heroic, or tragic) feeling, suitably enhanced by the whole set of auxiliary factors built into the performance, then the spectator is free to identify himself or herself with that character and, very immediately, with the character's emotional reality. It is the imagination, and only the imagination, whatever we might want to call it—*utprekṣā, vibhāvanā, bhāvanā, pratibhā,* et cetera—that can forge this empathic linkage. Imagination alone can bridge the gap between character and spectator, perhaps because of its capacity for resonance and high-velocity communication between discrete minds. *Bhāvanā,* in the poeticians' usage, thus transcends its roots in grammar and syntax and even, for that matter, its unique association with the theory of ritual acts— for, confronted with the particular challenge of poetry, *bhāvanā* necessarily puts into play its innermost mechanism, a capacity to imagine and thereby

reappropriate an emotional reality that was hitherto largely veiled, buried, or occluded. Once imagination effectively kicks in, overcoming the entropic resistance that is inherent to mental life, the full-bodied tasting of pleasure can begin.

But this statement by no means exhausts the operation of the imaginative faculty in the context of aesthetic experience. There are at least two other related domains in which imagination is decisively present. First, the language of poetry—which Bhaṭṭa Nāyaka refers to b y a g eneral term, *abhidhā* (distinct from the semanticists' usage of the term to mean "denotation" alone)[54]—works by means of the integrating capacity of imaginative insight. No other part of the mental apparatus is capable of enabling the illuminating understanding without which figuration, to name but one crucial element, remains lifeless and ineffective. Second, imagination suffuses and makes possible what the poeticians call "resonance," *saṃvāda,* with reference to a specific set of cognitive activities.[55] We will return to *saṃvāda* later.

Note that imagination, in the sense relevant to this discussion, is not about discovering or inventing something new, except perhaps in the sense that a mathematician might discover a hitherto unanticipated, preexisting formal linkage among discrete realities. The spectator at the drama does not have to invent the stable emotion underlying his experience of savoring. It exists a priori within his or her mind and in the world outside his or her mind. What does have to happen is the recognition that *that* emotion, sparked by words, gestures, and music, is actually *this (my)* emotion, accessible to my experience now in the special circumstances of the aesthetic setting. Such a discovery may well feel intoxicating, and it always includes an imaginative leap.

Thus according to the Kashmiri theorists, at the height of the aesthetic process we imagine not some delimited and particular object but a generalized, nonindividualized reality. Anything overly specific, especially insofar as it attracts some form of egoistic involvement on the part of the spectator, can never unblock a co nsciousness that suffers precisely from being exiled in the constricted domain of the concrete. Moreover, there is something to be said for the shared, collective work of the depersonalized imagination, which seems to be active in the theater.

What about knowledge, the particular cognitions present in artistic enjoyment? They are, we are happy to di scover—following Abhinavagupta's radical extension of Bhaṭṭa Nāyaka's theory—still very much part of the

whole process. The spectator does know something, though what he knows is not a reality normally accessible to direct perception *(sākṣātkārāyamāṇa-tva)*. In fact—shades of Śrī Śaṅkuka—it is not an ordinary perception, nor is it false *(mithyā),* ineffable *(anirvācya),* similar to something familiar *(laukika-tulya),* or a superimposition *(tad-āropâdi-rūpa).* It is something you can taste *(rasanīya),* and as such, it is free from the constraints of the particular *(viśeṣântarânupahitatvāt).* One way to describe it is as a kind of intensification of reality *(upacayâvasthā).*[56] Anyway, being a taste, it has an integrity and a reality resistant to ontological questioning of the type that has plagued many modern discussions of this issue.[57] In our (obviously anachronistic) terms, a taste is not susceptible to falsification.

Without lingering over the point, we might at least take notice of Abhi-navagupta's two somewhat surprising analogies relating to the spectator's cognitive state. Having defined the *rasa* experience as a direct perception in the spectator's heart, one free from the obstacles that usually clutter our awareness, he mentions the universalizing factor *(sādhāraṇya);* it is some-thing not delimited *(parimita)* but rather expanded *(vitata),* as when one realizes the universal concomitance of smoke with fire *(vyāptigraha iva dhūmâgnyor)* or of trembling with fear. Have we returned to the logic-driven cognitions of Śaṅkuka? Not quite. The thrill that comes from estab-lishing concomitance is expansive, since it moves away from any individ-ual fire and smoke toward a level of abstract, universal law. There is sheer wonder, *camatkāra,* in this discovery, as there is when a theatrical perfor-mance works its magic on the audience. The spectators achieve the neces-sary depersonalized, universalized awareness, *sādhāraṇī-bhāva,* because the two sets of constraining perceptual or experiential factors—time, space, a perceiving observer, and so on, one set belonging to our everyday world, the other to the fictive world of the play—simply cancel each other out *(niyama-hetūnām anyonya-pratibandha-balād atyantam apasaraṇe).* Notice how, once again, a certain tension between true and false, real and unreal, held in suspension, seems to spark the transition in awareness that poetry can achieve.

What is seen on the stage is not an object *(siddha),* nor is it fully know-able through the usual criteria of knowledge *(aprameya).* Yet our cognitive processes are still intact as we watch the play: the spectator, says Abhi-navagupta, has *not* simply disappeared *(atyanta-tiraskṛta),* nor has he or she survived as a full-fledged, "polished" or "crafted" individual consciousness *(ullikhita).*[58] Again and again we are told that this special awareness generated

by poetry is something out of the ordinary, and that it is really a savoring or tasting set free from anything that could, in normal life, block it. And there are still other ways to characterize this awareness—for example, as dense and continuous *(ekaghana),* also as somehow restless, insatiable, and dynamic.[59] But there is also a linguistic component to all this, one naturally central to the question of cognition. Just as in a Vedic ritual context, certain injunctions, technically couched in the past tense, have to be interpreted by the ritualist in an imperative mode by a semantic transfer *(saṅkramaṇa)* away from the literal meaning, a person qualified for aesthetic experience *(adhikārin)* reaches toward a perception that has "a little extra" *(adhikâsti pratipattiḥ)*—something beyond a literal semantics.[60] Poetic *bhāvanā,* the very heart of the entire enterprise, is the production of this enhanced, intensified, nonliteral, nonindividualized, linguistically motivated, densely continuous consciousness.

Linguistically speaking, there is another term for it—*dhvanana,* "reverberation," or *dhvani,* the "reverberating" or "resonant" sound that is the core "self" of poetry, according to Ānandavardhana's masterwork of poetic science, the *Dhvanyāloka.*[61] When we go beyond the literal, and also beyond logically extended, transferred usage *(lakṣaṇā),* we find ourselves in the echo chamber of *dhvani* or *vyañjanā,* both normally translated as "suggestion." But we should not lose sight of the original meaning of *dhvanana/dhvani,* which goes back to the early grammarians' distinction between any individual's particular articulation of a syllable *(vaikṛta-dhvani)* and the abstract sequence of phonemes underlying each such articulation *(prākṛta-dhvani,* to use Bhartṛhari's terminology). If we go still further back, not historically but philosophically, to the creation of linguistic expressivity as such out of something more akin to music, we will encounter the *sphoṭa,* the unitary, potential syllable or word waiting to "burst open" into articulated meaning. The world is alive with the phonic energies analyzed in these categorical levels—the same energies utilized by the poet who deliteralizes language and thereby makes the underlying reverberation audible.[62] That, in fact, is what we listen for in a poem, along with the whole range of meaning-laden playfulness and the necessary "twist" *(vakratā)* built into most poetic speech. If we are lucky, we can hear sound emerging from a presemanticized, potential level to one saturated with all kinds of specific resonances and meanings, a compelling process not far removed from what happens in musical performance, according to the musicological texts.[63] What is real to our perception is just this deep reverberation, the extra,

intensified piece of knowing—which, however, is not knowing X, or even knowing or seeing X as Y (as in *utprekṣā*). The content of what is known to the mind of the listener—content that, as we saw, is not amenable to the naive question "Is it real?"—reflects the always astonishing movement, via indirection, from a latent, generative order of sound to the specific echoes that can become "real" in the ordinary sense of the term. This is how poetry brings something into being *(bhāvayati)*—in effect, by amplifying a preexisting echo. In such a world, poets can easily let ordinary objects—these somewhat crude crystallizations, almost the recalcitrant residues, of intra-linguistic process—fend for themselves.

### 3.4. Inexhaustibility

There remains, for our present purposes, one crucial notion, a somewhat surprising outgrowth of the set of premises and intuitions embodied in Abhinavagupta's great synthesis of poetic theory. We have to return briefly, from another vantage point, to the question of the general and the specific.

As we have seen, the Kashmiri poeticians, unlike Descartes, insist upon generalization, *sādhāraṇī-karaṇa*—a movement away from the particular to a nonspecific, almost abstract perception—as the key to all successful imaginative or artistic experience.[64]

> *Rasa* in Sanskrit poetics is not an emotion. It is rather the idea of an emotion, depersonalized through the process of conventional observations. . . . The aesthetics of court poetry are aesthetics of distance and ideation, rather than immediacy and feeling. The personal experiences of the poet, if there are any, are dissolved in the sea of faceless abstractions through meticulously controlled and ordered literary elements in strict adherence to accepted conventions.[65]

Aesthetic moments, then, are "real" only insofar as they are imagined or brought into being in a highly patterned and generalized way. No one is interested, in this context, in the particular smoke and fire that burned down a particular, historical village.

Here the problem of verisimilitude comes into play. Abhinavagupta lists a failure of verisimilitude, or general improbability, as the first obstacle to the release of *rasa* through watching a play.[66] The dramatic reality must have a minimal consistency and integrity. Elsewhere, however, the issue is examined in another light. The relevant passage is strategically placed at

the very end of the *Dhvanyāloka,* in the fourth and final chapter, which deals with the question of creative originality and its inexhaustibility in principle. After a long and nuanced discussion of particularity versus generalization, in which Ānandavardhana concedes that poets can and should depict subjects in their individual character, "as they really are," he brings up the subject of *saṃvāda*—the shared or coincident perceptions that, he says, are common among highly intelligent people (such as gifted poets).[67] In other words, we will often find poets treating similar subjects in similar ways. Here Ānanda anticipates one of the more common modern complaints about Sanskrit poetry—all this, however, in the context of an attempt to prove that good poetry will always be fresh and new.[68]

*Saṃvāda,* he goes on to tell us, is "similarity of one thing to another." It may take several distinct forms, just as it does in the case of living people— a reflection in a mirror, a painted picture, or a body that just happens to look like someone else's. Now comes the unexpected recommendation: the poet should shun the first type (mirroring), since it has no real "self" of its own *(ananyâtma),*[69] and also the second type (the painted portrait), which has a worthless or empty self *(tucchâtma),* but he need not avoid the third type (similarity in bodily form), since it has a definite self. "You cannot say that a person is the same because he happens to resemble another person."[70]

Take a moment to consider what Ānandavardhana is saying. Ostensibly he is exploring what it means when one poet reproduces an idea or phrase used by another, but Ānanda's statement extends beyond the notion of technical imitation to a more general theory of poetic production. Perfect verisimilitude, as in a reflection, is valueless in art; it is no more than a dead, mechanical reproduction. Beautifully crafted paintings are no better than mirror images. They are utterly meaningless for artistic purposes. Poetry is simply not mimetic. It is probably not even representational in any significant sense. But what about the physical likeness of one living person to another?

The analogy is of considerable consequence. In ninth-century Kashmir, no less than in twenty-first-century Jerusalem or Berlin, individuals, although they may resemble one another, are understood to be unique. Resemblance, in itself, is an impoverished heuristic principle. Still, we know there are certain given "facts" or, if you like, conventions with which the poet begins his work: "A subject, if it has a truly distinct self, even if it conforms to a configuration used before, glows like the face of a pretty girl,

which poets compare to the moon."[71] Women's faces are, by definition, like the moon—as we saw in the context of *utprekṣā* (where, however, the moon is not quite real). So what? In itself, this fact of life is rather trivial. The real question is what the poet does with his inheritance. Ānandavardhana explains in the prose *vṛtti* following this verse: "A subject that takes up the shadow [or: reflection, beauty, *chāyā*] of something ancient and lovely will attain ultimate beauty, just like a body. And there is no fear of redundancy or repetition, any more than in the case of a pretty girl's face that is like the moon." Abhinavagupta, commenting on this passage, adds that when Ānanda uses the word "self" (*ātman;* see above) he means the true element *(tattva)* that is the inner essence *(sāra-bhūta)* of the subject.

At the very beginning of his book, Ānanda has told us what constitutes the "self" of poetry, its inner life (as opposed to various external, structural and formal elements); only *rasa-dhvani,* the echo that generates "taste," can fill this role. Clearly, it is this same self that is meant here, at the end of the treatise. Thus a poet can, indeed should, reuse the materials available to him from centuries of poetic production; so long as *dhvani* is brought to bear upon them, he will have no reason to fear that he will be accused of boring repetition. The next verse states this clearly, borrowing the language of Śaiva metaphysics: whatever subject bursts upon the poet's mind, charged with light and movement *(sphuritam),* even if it follows some earlier form of beauty, is a good subject for a poem. What is more, good poets who are reluctant to compose on a topic previously used by others can rely on Sarasvatī, the goddess of poetry herself, to supply them with what they need.[72]

This final resort to the goddess is fascinating in its own right. I think it points in a direction that is almost never articulated explicitly in Kashmiri poetics, one much closer to poetic praxis as understood in medieval south India, for example. A rather different understanding of the imagination and its generative mechanisms is hinted at here.[73] But even if we stay within the terms of Ānanda's preceding discussion, we can see something that most discussions of Sanskrit poetry tend to neglect.

The overriding principle of *rasa,* driven by "suggestion"—the indirection that opens up a reverberation in a good poem—has the ability to make even hackneyed topics appear new, "like trees in spring" (*kārikā* 4.4, from this same chapter). So far so good. As Abhinavagupta says (on this verse), poetry occupies the place of springtime (*kāvyaṃ madhu-māsa-sthānīyam),* the mysterious natural force that brings new buds out on barren

branches. In this context, Daniel Ingalls has noted, following Abhinavagupta, that

> the variety of suggestiveness is placed outside the human mind; it is the cause, not the result of poetic imagination. It is as though our authors thought of the objects of the world as existing in a pattern which rendered them amenable to mutual suggestions when viewed by a great poet. The poet's imagination, in this view, would be the medium, not the primary cause, of the creation of new worlds. The worlds would be already there through the magic which underlies *dhvani.*[74]

The poet's task is thus to reveal, through an imaginative series of connections, the particular freshness that *always* emerges from a vision of such relations. However, it is possible, and perhaps more likely, that the poet's vision and the underlying set of hidden interrelationships are mutually determined, each side to the creative transaction shaping and, in a sense, discovering the other; we will return to this point. But the truly remarkable implication of this entire discussion is that such a revelation depends upon, and brings into focus, the singularity of each such poetic perception. Generality, which is more or less taken for granted, and which informs and patterns the presentation of a pretty face as the moon, is no more than the occasion for a singular experience. Singularity means, in terms of this discussion, a particular aliveness animating external form. It is this irreducible aliveness, made accessible by *dhvani,* that forms the true subject matter of any poem and that alone counts as real.

There is no dearth of hackneyed poetry. But neither is there any lack of radical new perceptions that take us beyond the conventional and the mechanical. The potential for such freshness is literally infinite *(ananta),* as Ānanda says again and again. What Bhaṭṭa Nāyaka called *bhāvanā,* this poetic "bringing into existence" through imagination, now seems to depend upon a sensitivity to the singular embodiment, to the lively inner being encased in external form. Every pretty girl's face is like the moon *in a uniquely personal way.* That is what imagination means in this period, and that is why its products are so real. Fictionality, whether operating within figuration (as for Ruyyaka and Vidyācakravartin) or within the dramatic reality onstage (as for Bhaṭṭa Nāyaka and Abhinavagupta), is no more than a pale, though necessary, precondition for releasing this unrepeatable living awareness. Even the process of abstraction and generalization, the heart of Bhaṭṭa Nāyaka's insight about the way imagination works in drama, turns

out to be intimately tied, not without tension, to an earlier but enduring notion of singularity. The tensile combination of the real and the unreal is joined to a perceptual process in which general, nonspecific, or conventional traits are viewed through the lens of singularity. Or we could say that the visionary poet stands somewhere between the reality of endless, generative potentiality, which is nonparticular and abstract, and its repeated, indirect instantiations. Hence his power to work upon the world of objects—but that is another story.

### 3.5. The New Critics: A Seventeenth-Century Perspective on *Bhāvanā*

Before we conclude this initial exploration of the *śāstra,* we should take a moment to review developments in the seventeenth century, when the concept of imagination—including the poet's practice of *bhāvanā*—underwent remarkable revision. We can see something of this in Jagannātha's compendium of poetics, the *Rasa-gaṅgādhara,* composed at the Mughal court in the seventeenth century. Jagannātha is often seen as the last of the great Sanskrit poeticians. He, too, begins his work with a long chapter on *rasa,* but in the course of this discussion, in which Abhinavagupta's canonical view is prominently stated, he offers a surprising twist on the issues we have been studying.

Jagannātha summarizes and analyzes eleven distinct views on the meaning of the term *rasa* in a poetic context, beginning with Abhinavagupta, and without committing himself to any of them. In itself, this encyclopedic review is suggestive of a new, critical stance toward the whole history of the tradition.[75] For our purposes, views 2 and 3, devoted to Bhaṭṭa Nāyaka and to an unspecified group of "new critics" *(navyāḥ),* respectively, are of special relevance.

Bhaṭṭa Nāyaka, we recall, was the first to speak of *bhāvanā* as the distinguishing feature of the spectator's experience in the theater. Jagannātha is interested in characterizing the operation of this *bhāvanā* more carefully (in general, throughout his book he strives to define arguments very precisely, mostly in terms of the "new logic," *navya-nyāya*). So he begins with the statement that a person who is neutral, that is, uninvolved in the dramatic proceedings *(taṭastha),* will not be able to taste *rasa.* But what is going on in the mind of a spectator who *is* involved? Something rather complex. For one thing, he (Jagannātha and Bhaṭṭa Nāyaka are only concerned here

with a male spectator, as will become clear) has to forget something impor-
tant, that is, the fact that the heroine Śakuntalā, for example, is not actually
available to him *(agamyā)*—she is, after all, married to the hero, King Duṣy-
anta.[76] The spectator is supposed to be feeling a generalized desire, *rati,* but
for this desire to focus on Śakuntalā, something in his mind must at least
momentarily block the knowledge that she is strictly off-limits. We might
think that this problem is taken care of by the spectator's projected identi-
fication with the hero of the play, Duṣyanta (for whom Śakuntalā is an
altogether appropriate lover). But no—the spectator knows very well how
different he is from Duṣyanta, who is noble and fearless and, moreover,
belongs to another era; the spectator is a modern man and has to admit to
being rather cowardly. In short, the spectator's awareness is marked by cer-
tain necessary blockages, on the one hand, and by an unbridgeable inner
distance from the actor and his role, on the other. Even at the theater, we
are who we are.

So what *does* happen? *Bhāvanā,* an imaginative universalization, takes
over. The first stage is sparked by the direct meaning of words *(abhidhā)*—
not by indirection, as we may be accustomed to thinking—which sets in
motion a generative process *(bhāvakatva-vyāpāra)* that highlights a sense
of Śakuntalā's desirability *(kāntatva),* conducive to *rasa,* at the same time
blocking the knowledge that she is totally inaccessible *(agamyatvâdi-rasa-
virodhi-jñāna-pratibandha-dvāra).* Now, when Duṣyanta, Śakuntalā, and
the coordinates of time, space, and circumstance have been universalized,
and the generative process has more or less exhausted itself (literally, become
crippled, *paṅgau pūrva-vyāpāra-mahimani*), and when all that is impure[77]
has disappeared through an innate faculty of "enjoyment" *(bhogakṛttva-
vyāpāra),* the spectator can relax into a direct experience, universal in es-
sence, brought about thanks to *bhāvanā,* that takes the form of coming to
rest in his own consciousness.[78] This is *rasa.* It is an experience quite distinct
from prior, ordinary ones, and also from memory; it is neither purely verbal
*(śābdī)* nor mental *(mānasī),* but rather something sui generis, approximat-
ing the ecstasy that comes from "tasting" ultimate reality *(brahmâsvāda-
savidha-varti).*

Apparently, what *bhāvanā* actually does, in this perspective, is to recycle
the stuff of the dramatic context as the various supports, triggers, and con-
comitants *(vibhāva, anubhāva, vyabhicāri-bhāva)* of *rasa.* A new world is
fashioned, with the help of poetic language, before our eyes. Two new ele-
ments in this description should be stressed. First, the generative, imagi-

native process *(bhāvakatva)* clearly involves a kind of distancing, leaving the spectator with an awareness of his own distinct status even as he gives himself to the spell of the play. Second, this distancing effect has to finish its operation before the true goal—"enjoyment"—can be achieved. There is a clear progression through three stages—articulation, generation, enjoyment—and an evident intensification of the spectator's inner experience through this process. The complex, internally divided awareness that exists in the early stages, including the necessary element of blockage or forgetting, gives way to a restful, apparently integral consciousness, which is really an experience of consciousness itself in its own true nature.

But it is with the "new critics" that Jagannātha reaches an entirely unfamiliar, no-nonsense perspective, one in which the cognitive content of the spectator's experience is, once again, the center of interest. *Bhāvanā* is still the basic mechanism at work in producing *rasa.* But this imaginative force is now classed explicitly as a *doṣa,* a false or defective cognition.[79] The spectator himself produces or projects this fictive, imagined reality in which Duṣyanta feels desire for Śakuntalā; moreover, the spectator's own self, *svâtman,* is temporarily veiled by the imagined Duṣyanta identity that has taken over and which is, by definition, a kind of ignorance, *ajñāna*—as in the classical analogy of a person who mistakenly sees a piece of shell as silver.[80] Without the cognitive error, it wouldn't happen, and when the error is recognized, the experience is over. In other words, the "mistake" is willfully, deliberately projected by the active spectator, who feels, as he does so, a special pleasure that cannot easily be distinguished from the "ultimate" pleasure that comes next. His own self makes the fictive reality visible *(sâkṣibhāsya);* crucially, this reality is not amenable to articulation *(anirvacanīya),* which is to say, in classic Vedântic fashion, that it cannot be reduced to the status of being either true or false.[81] The precise reality-content of the spectator's self-identification as Duṣyanta is also resistant to articulation *(avacchadakaṃ duṣyantatvam apy anirvacanīyam).* It as if the spectator were saying to himself, "I, for the duration of this play, am a fictive Duṣyanta who feels desire for Śakuntalā." This desire—nourished, no doubt, by unconscious karmic memories in the spectator—merges with Duṣyanta's rather ordinary desire as portrayed by the actor. In this sense, given that the spectator knows very well that he is not "really" Duṣyanta, poetic suggestion, *vyañjanā,* can be said to operate by creating an in-between space where desire, or any other poetically intensified emotion, is neither real nor unreal.

What about universalization or generalization *(sādhāraṇya)* à la Bhaṭṭa Nāyaka? It is impossible, says Jagannātha (in the name of the new critics), without this special kind of fabrication *(doṣa-viśeṣa-kalpanā)* that produces a sense of Śakuntalā, for example, by repeatedly invoking her name. Once we allow for the conscious, fictive identification with Duṣyanta, the rest follows naturally. The result will be the peculiar tasting that poetry generates and which is utterly different from any other cognitive experience *(vilakṣaṇo hi k amanīyaḥ kāvya-vyāpāra-ja āsvādaḥ pramāṇântara-jād anubhavāt).*

In effect, the whole notion of universalization has been jettisoned. The new critics think they have a more economical explanation of artistic experience. Again there are stages—the linguistic trigger sparks the false cognition, enhanced by all the other factors operating in the dramatic space, that produces pleasure. *Bhāvanā* is no longer about generalizing experience and consequent loss of ego awareness but rather about maintaining the tensile fiction that is neither true nor false. The spectator who gives himself willingly to the feeling seems to hold the tension of true and false within him, to invest in it in the interest of generating the distinctive joy that depends entirely upon this very tension. He remains aware throughout, in a layered, complex cognitive state. And while his knowledge of himself as Duṣyanta is, in the technical language of the logicians, "adventitious" *(āhārya)*—non-intrinsic—his experience in the theater cannot be false, for its effects are wholly real. It cannot, however, be based on valid or correct perception.

We have come back to the problem posed by *utprekṣā* and its processual merging of what is false with what is real, in Ruyyaka's analysis. For the third time in this chapter we have run up against an insistence that what is most powerful, and probably most true, in a poetic moment is the balancing or suspension of real and unreal, or their compacted intertwining, in a mode that allows some sort of breakthrough (cognitive, emotional, existential). According to Ruyyaka, Abhinavagupta, and Jagannātha, each in his own way, the cognitive aspect of poetic experience requires an intermediate kind of knowing, not reducible to a question such as "Is what I am seeing or hearing real?" Any answer to such a question cannot but be wrong. But in all three instances, there is a crucial leap: either one sees something unreal as real and studies the process of their interpenetration, thereby reaching toward an imaginative reality with its own integrity, or one somehow moves through a posited fictive reality to some hyperreal, intensified internal state, still laden with conscious cognitive elements. Still, it is impor-

tant to note in Jagannātha's discussion the fresh spirit of the seventeenth century; his new critics have, in effect, debunked the canonical vision of Abhinavagupta.[82] Epistemic concerns have overruled an ontic enigma, even if these concerns still allow for—in fact require—a readiness on the part of the aficionado to contain the unresolved tension in his mind. For the new critics, too, this combination of irreconcilable truth-values, utterly immune to ontic determination and rooted in an inner perceptual act on the part of the observer, is the key to imaginative experience and its effects. In essence, it now defines imaginative activity per se. But this is only part of a much wider conceptual revolution, which we examine in detail in Part II.