

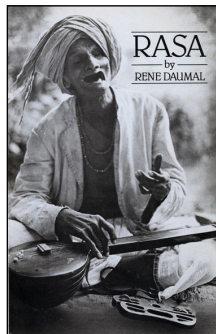
# Wrathful Guardian: The India Essays of René Daumal

A Review of  
*RASA or knowledge of the self:*  
*Essays on Indian Aesthetics and Selected Sanskrit Studies*  
by René Daumal

Edited by **Claudio Rugafiori**  
Translated by **Louise Landes Levi**

Published by  
New Directions, 1982 (out of print)  
and now  
in a new edition by  
**Cool Grove Press, 2023**

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*RASA*, edited by Claudio Rugafiori, was compiled from Daumal's essays and translations, published and unpublished; included are a selection of "Oriental Reviews" and reviews of the performances of Uday Shankar's dance company, Paris 1931.

The essay below, a review of the New Directions first edition, appeared in Clayton Eshleman's journal *Sulfur*, 1984. It was reprinted in *The India Book*, O Books, 1993, and updated for the present Cool Grove edition.

—Tej Hazarika, publisher

Dug into the earth's crust  
for drug stone,  
turned mountains to ash looking for metal,  
followed rivers back to their source.  
Then groveled woefully  
before kings.  
Hooked on spells,  
hung up on weird arts  
I wandered the burning grounds—  
but never shed craving—  
never obtained a single pierced  
cowry shell.

Grieve, brother—  
great was the king with his  
inner circle,  
flanked by wizards,  
pale women, proud warriors,  
scribes setting it down  
as it happened.  
Bow to time—  
a whole kingdom  
swept into memory, onto the pathway  
of legend.

—*Bhartrihari*

René Daumal is best known in this country as the author of an odd, haunting little book, *Mount Analogue*, that remained incomplete at the time of his death in 1944. It has grown over the years into something of a cult item, its reputation quietly and mysteriously flourishing at a distance from literary circles, and it sells with unwavering consistency out of the metaphysical bookstores. An earlier novel, the purgatorial *Le Grande Beuverie*, is more feverish and a great deal more humorous. Under the title *A Night of Serious Drinking*, a translation appeared in 1979, but it will not become so popular because it lacks *Mount Analogue*'s mysterious transparency. Unfortunately Daumal's poetry remains largely unavailable in American translation. Kenneth Rexroth, Armand Schwerner, Louise Landes Levi, and a few others have published isolated poems; Cid Corman once devoted an issue of his *Origin* to Daumal's writings; but no representative book has appeared. With *RASA* the first collection of Daumal's essays has become available in America.

During Europe's fervid, excitable period of modernism in the years after World War I, Daumal carried on a wary dialogue with the Surrealists. A fascination with death as an adolescent prompted him to experiment with carbon tetrachloride, trying to bring himself as close as possible to a death-like condition while still fully conscious. Years later in his writings on Hindu music he would articulate a belief that Time and Death are the great enemy with which the human being wrestles.

But those early experiments confirmed his intuition that a complete revaluation—or revolution—of consciousness could be provoked, freeing the experimenter from the painful web of social conditioning. This allied him to the Surrealists, and Breton invited him as a young man to join their camp. Daumal's fiercely mystical temper however—and doubtless a suspicion that Marxism was yet another nail in the Occidental coffin—caused him to recoil from the strict political allegiances Breton demanded. Non-rational states of mind—dream, drug intoxication, contemplative trance—suggested other directions, and he found particularly intriguing the relief they cast on linguistic possibilities. He discovered in Oriental cultures a long experimental tradition which was probing the correspondences between language and contemplative, or visionary, modes of perception. Dedicating himself to a study of Sanskrit, and to the poetic and yogic systems stitched into the fabric of the old texts, he helped found a poetic group of his own, *Le Grand Jeu*, which practiced what its members called *experimental metaphysics*.

Results of *Le Grand Jeu*'s excursions into the inseparable domains of language and consciousness surface throughout Daumal's writings. These writings also mark the first concerted effort by a European to vitalize modern poetry with the tenets of Sanskrit poetics.

The essays make for thorny reading due to what seems at first glance a stylistic oddity, but in fact serves a calculated purpose. Prodigious notes that follow each essay, enlarging upon its terms, often cover more ground than the essay itself, as though through the notes Daumal had set about rewriting the whole thing from some utterly different direction. I suspect his models for this heretical method were the Sanskrit texts themselves—cryptic texts, pithy and epigrammatic, which lie embedded in so-called “commentaries”—

commentaries which trace elaborate loops around the earlier text, picking up each whiff of thought and following it into some hidden lair.

Don't be put off by Daumal's hermetic methods. There exists on our planet no linguistic architecture comparable to Sanskrit. For the Hindus it is "their Pyramid, their Sphinx, their Ziggurat, their Pantheon," and exhibits a dizzyingly perfect construction. This same architectural exactitude characterizes Sanskrit poetics, which considered grammar an accessory science, along with phonetics, etymology and metrics. India's poets and critics drew on a spectrum of sciences, linguistic and psychological, taxonomic and liturgical, in order to furnish their toolkits with instruments for the exploration of thought and emotion. The precision of these instruments, and the wholesale unavailability of most of them in America until now, make this book of interest.

*"The artist is, above all, an artisan, whose task is to make certain objects according to certain laws and with a certain goal. First, of course, he must know the material with which he works. Therefore, the poetic art is founded on a science and doctrine of language usage."*

To the Sanskrit poet heightened emotional tension required heightened accuracy in language. In ordinary daily talk, the gap between thought and expression may remain comparatively wide without menacing consequences. Not so as a person approaches the core of Self. *Rasa*, what Daumal calls "the essence of poetry," is the terrain on which verbal expression and the pitches of emotional experience draw into precise correspondence. Just as significant perceptions demand a language that can externalize them, the *rasa* theory assumes that a heightened employment of language will evoke a visionary suggestibility, a spiritually aroused condition, in its audience. Roots of this assumption go deep into prehistory, back to that compendium of prayer, curse, chant, lyric and love-spell, the *Rig Veda*—earliest "poetry anthology" that survives in an Indo-European language.

Among the Vedic *rishis*—poets, or literally "seers"—a mysterious intoxicant, personified and addressed under the name *Soma*, dominates the poetry. Small wonder—*Soma* was the instigating beverage of the *rishi*'s vision. The poets glorified it, a liqueur decocted from a secret plant also known as *Soma*, as the agent of supernatural vision. Its botanical identity has been in doubt now for three thousand years. What is without doubt is that it delivered a terrific psychotropic kick—from which poured inspired bardic utterance. Over the course of several centuries *Soma* vanished from use, a later breed of hierophants substituting inert botanicals for the original plant.

No one knows whether *Soma*'s harvestable source gave out, whether priests guarded its identity too zealously, or whether some revisionist led an inquisition against its users. Subsequent poets and visionaries replaced it with a variety of disciplines—the elaborate practices of yoga and tantra that work forceful transformations upon what the Buddhists call "the three mysteries"—body, speech and mind. Yet the concept of *Soma*, deeply saturated into the poet's art, crops up again among the poets of classical India, etherealized and thinly disguised as *rasa*—the wizard power of charged language within a controlled poetic context. Daumal's own inquiries—leading from sacerdotal drug ingestion to the

edges of linguistic frenzy—curiously parallel this unfolding. The poem, once a confirmation, the incontrovertible outcome of a cleansing of “the doors of perception,” becomes itself *instigator* of that terrible beauty. This verbal transformation of the human Self the poets called *rasa*.

*“Savor (rasa) is the immediate interior perception of a moment or particular state of existence provoked by the functioning of the methods of artistic expression.....(the rasas) are named, metaphorically, after the emotions or rather the psychophysiological operations of which they are the intuitive ideas: erotic, comic, pathetic, furious, heroic, horrific, repugnant, wondrous.....each (rasa) has its particular rhythms, prosodically expressed by the combinations and articulations.”*

Poems by a deliberate methodology transform human consciousness; they arouse and regulate particular “moods” and perceptions which restore us to ourselves; they convey information ordinarily inaccessible or garbled; there are reasons why poems do this, and we can talk about these reasons without recourse to fuzzy metaphysical terms. Sanskrit poetics mapped out a startling number of terms for this discourse. While most of Europe still suffocated in a colonialist approach toward non-Western peoples, Daumal excavating a vocabulary, a set of archaic language practices, which he hoped might lead Europe out of the derangements of bourgeois thought.

What concerned the Sanskrit critics (themselves generally the poets) was the poem’s formal structure—its use of image, rhyme, rhythm and figure of speech—and how that public structure could waken the torpid privacies of a reader, provoking *rasa*, what Daumal calls “an immediate experience, a gustation of life, a pure joy, which relishes its own essence as it communes with the ‘other’—the poet or actor.”

Daumal’s intention in these essays was not to examine in detail the specific rhythms or articulations by which Sanskrit poets achieved their ends. Methods of poetic craft vary from language to language, each tradition commanding its own. It also requires far more than a nodding acquaintance with Sanskrit to benefit from the particulars of its prosody. But by drawing the parameters of this poetics and defining its salient terms Daumal has reintroduced certain poetic discoveries that have been absent from the Western world for millennia. These are methods—practices—ideas—not attended to by a politically neutralized criticism which regards the human person and his or her society as “finished” or intact. A basic premise running throughout India’s aesthetics, is that the pursuit of art is a science of human freedom. Only the transformative effect of poetry—on its audience, on its practitioners—is of interest. The rest is packing material.

Yet it is not a distinction of the Sanskrit poets alone that they worked with the *rasas*, those roars of awakening which make the human person real. Whatever the culture, any poet works the same ground. You can pick examples from your own bookshelf. But the construction of a vocabulary that probes the fine relationship between language and emotion, between poet and audience, is something no other tradition has undertaken with comparable urgency. Daumal’s *RASA* is the best available inroad to this search.

It is a short book. It lays bare the bones and translates a few seminal texts. Daumal, like some wrathful Tantric guardian at the gateway to liberation, sometimes strikes a posture of rather forbidding fury—but remember, he was trying during the 1930’s to lucidly

explain the methods and contexts of India's poetry and music. He had to do so in the face of uncomprehending critics and their bourgeois audience on one side, men and women entrenched in their certainty that European culture was the pinnacle of human achievement. On the other side were popularizers, Theosophists, National Socialists, the whole carnival of busy misfits bending the texts of India to their own dubious goals. It required some ferocity to clear the air.

A variety of scholarly works, mostly inelegant historical surveys by contemporary pundits, Western and Eastern, offer expanded studies of Sanskrit poetry, its techniques, its development. But *RASA* is the sole excursion into Sanskrit poetics with a modern practitioner of the language-arts for a guide. There is nothing culturally quaint, nothing parochial going on here. The propositions with which Daumal worked—and before him the Sanskrit poets whose techniques of ecstasy go deep into the Paleolithic past—remain contemporary and compelling as poetry.

