

Rasa, or Knowledge of the Self

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Reviewed by Kathleen Ferrick Rosenblatt

From metaphysics and dance to the training of elephants and mechanics, for the Hindu, all doctrinal bodies are linked by a common goal, call it deliverance, consciousness, or unification; in learning archery or grammar one learns to know oneself.

—“The Origin of the Theatre of Bharata”

As a young avant-garde writer of the Twenties, in league with the surrealists, René Daumal went beyond the kind of dabbling in mysticism and the occult that was fashionable for the period. At the age of sixteen, he taught himself Sanskrit and became familiar with the essence of Hindu philosophy through the writings of René Guénon. In 1932 he became press secretary

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to Uday Shankar, a Master of Indian dance who was the first to introduce this art form to the West, and with him traveled to the United States. The influence of these teachers and of G.I. Gurdjieff, his spiritual master for thirteen years, gave Daumal an intimate knowledge of Eastern thought.

As a Westerner, poetry remained for Daumal one concrete mode of understanding and knowledge still accessible to modern man. In turning to India and the East, he found his beliefs confirmed regarding the importance of art and poetry as a means of transmitting truths that were otherwise incommunicable. The ancient texts affirmed his innate understanding of how the clarity

of the poet's or musician's internal state determines the effectiveness of his art.

In this collection of essays on Hindu poetics, the title, *Rasa*, translates into English as “taste,” “relish,” or “savor:” the essence (*Atman* or soul) of poetry. Daumal summarizes the definition of *rasa* as follows: “Taste is the moment of conscience (and consciousness) that a true work of art should evoke in whoever has an interior being and a measure for judging; a moment of waking to oneself arising from a particular emotion provoked by a true work of art.” This word “taste” best exemplifies the coordinated action of all three centers of a human being—mental, emotional, and physical (in communion with the written word, evoking a reality of sound and sense).

Daumal's genius made him the first Western writer able to penetrate Hindu writing and seek out the soul (*rasa*) of its art. He was so intrigued with the con-

cept of *rasa* that he discussed it in four different essays (two of which are excluded from this collection, but are found in the French collection of his essays on Hinduism). This perception of relish or taste permeates the Hindu texts collected here as well as Daumal's discussion of them. He translates two ancient treatises that expound the theory of *rasa*. The first is the first chapter of an ancient work on Hindu dramatic art by Bharata, *Natya-sastra* (*Treatises On The Theatre*). It is a huge work on theater and dance compiled from the second to the sixth century A.D. Daumal chose the first chapter of this encyclopedic text, a mythic tale about the birth of theater, wherein the gods and goddesses, jubilant over the new art form, donate their services to it. The *Natya-sastra* is truly "sacred knowledge" packaged in pure delectation: a re-enactment of how things came about "in the beginning," which needs to be communicated "to skillful beings, beyond the fire of knowledge, who walk with daring and who have conquered inertia."

Daumal was receptive to this primal notion of theater as exercise and ritual rather than mere representation. His own works (*A Night of Serious Drinking* and *Mount Analogue*) have a mythic ritual structure underlying them. He thus passed on to us this exotic dish as an illustration of why Art was initiated as the "fifth Veda," why *rasa* was thought necessary to make the great truths palatable to our dull minds.

In Sanskrit, the word for poet and for priest is the same: "*kavi*." In ancient times the essentially sacred nature of poetry was in the domain of the priest; all poetry was basically prayer, and all prayer was poetic. The Veda itself was considered to be "Sacred Utterance" (Mantra), of divine origin and was, for the most part, transmitted orally. This was in keeping with the cosmological theory that sound (Vak) held

a primordial place among the sensory qualities.

In his chapter "To Approach the Hindu Poetic Art" (1940) Daumal describes how the writing of poetry is a kind of yoga for the poet to discipline himself in order to become a better instrument for "supra-natural" functions. "By serving the (musical) Sound, one is serving the gods Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva because they themselves are made from it." (*Satya Darpana*)

Daumal quotes Visvanatha, a seventeenth-century scholar of Hindu poetics, as saying "Art is not a natural activity of man," the word "natural" here connoting the idea of "automatic," *i.e.*, ordinary or undeveloped. The Hindu term for "natural" (*Prakriti*) describes a person "who has not created a self": he is as nature and environment have made him, with no effort at development on his part. *Prakriti* is contrasted with *Sanskrita* which refers to one who has created an interior being, *i.e.*, "who is twice born." Language is also divided into *Prakriti* (ordinary language) and *Sanskrit* (sacred language).

Daumal himself believed that these qualities of true art can potentially emerge in poetry through the deliberate attempt at communion between the universe and the deepest self (*Tad-Atman*); he considers this communion to be the poetic act. If one strives for this communion, sensing one's inner self in each successive moment, it has the effect of heightening one's consciousness, immediately and cumulatively, as described in Daumal's translation of "Knowledge of the Self," an extract from the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*.

If he knew himself,
if man could say: this is I,
by which desire, for which goal
would his body be inflamed?

He who has found himself, in whom being
buried in the depth of this death has
awakened,
He is all active, he is the author of all,
for him the world—he is, himself, the
world.

This communion is in itself the source of relish; according to the following line of the Upanishads, relish can be found in every breath—if it is sought:

Who indeed, would inhale, who exhale, if
this
ether were not Joy!

Joy here, is the Deity himself, the Essential
Excitant of the Relish (*rasa*)

Taittiriya upanishad

Among the book reviews included in *Rasa* is Daumal's 1934 review of the latest translation of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. His writing is scholarly in the best sense of the word: elucidating the original meanings of words, while avoiding the "metaphysical sauce" of the "theosophistic sacristy." Again, the ancient author and Daumal bring us back to the confrontation of reality in each instant of time, of which death is an extreme but limited form, "after millions and millions of instants, which are the doors of consciousness, *open for us*, but which we have never noticed."

This theoretical concept of union between one's internal self with the great Self can be better understood by the concrete examples offered us in Daumal's two illuminating essays "On Indian Music" (1940) and "Concerning Uday Shankar" (1931).

Even before he had begun to read René Guénon or Hindu philosophy, Daumal understood that in order to attain this union one needed a constant act of negation: a continuous relinquishing of one's belief in one's personality, one's body, desires, beliefs, and memories, and to see one's "I" as separate from them.

Under the influence of Oriental thought, some of Daumal's early undertakings were quite unreligious, unorthodox, and iconoclastic. For a while, he believed along with the Surrealists that the exploration of dreams and the subconscious was in keeping

with the Hindu esoteric tradition. But since Daumal was in direct touch with true masters as well as the original Vedic texts themselves, he was able to transcend an early dalliance with mind-altering drugs and psychic phenomena, and to isolate the occult features that promote a true internal transformation from those that merely promote a more pleasant, peaceable life. By 1935 Daumal could joke about all his exploits and intellectual endeavors in his satirical underworld tour: *A Night of Serious Drinking*. His years of spiritual initiation allowed him to remain active in the face of terminal illness and to write his greatest achievement, *Mount Analogue*.

In discovering India, Daumal had discovered his mother tongue in a double sense of the word: Sanskrit is the mother of all languages, based on a scientifically constructed grammar, and is the prototypal link between sound and meaning. He also found there a "language" that is a matrix (Latin: womb) of a complete world view. Daumal wrote that "the Sanskrit language is intimately linked with a whole architecture of life." The millennia of Hindu wisdom that fed Daumal and the keen insight that he brought to it create a confluence of energy that radiates from *Rasa*.

Even after fifty years of subsequent books on Oriental philosophy, these essays have a freshness and clarity of thought that is unsurpassed. It makes a difference when the author is fluent, expert, spiritual—and, a poet.

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