

The Aesthetics of Kathakali

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MUCH HAS BEEN WRITTEN on Kathakali, the traditional dance-drama of Kerala. But a precise evaluation of the aesthetic quality of this form is, perhaps, yet to be attempted.

A form like the European opera tolerates a great number of conventional devices—which destroy verisimilitude—and moves on impatiently to the confrontation which is its *raison d'être*: that between the virtuosity of the singer and the alertly critical connoisseurship of the audience. In the case of forms less loaded with conventions, like the normal range of dramatic presentations, the aesthetic experience belongs to the opposite pole, that of involvement or identification. The experiences are certainly not mutually exclusive. But the typological distinction is valid: for, in listening to an operatic singer, evaluatory appreciation dominates and identification with the role he or she happens to be playing is recessive; in the response to a dramatic role, identification dominates though sensibility may be unconsciously or even consciously evaluating the histrionic talent of the actor. The uniqueness of Kathakali seems to lie in the fact that it manages an unusual rapprochement of these polarities, allowing—actually demanding—sensitively critical connoisseurship of the highest order and also achieving an involvement which is more intense than usually possible in the experience of the normal range of dramatic presentations. This needs clarification.

In the music and mimesis of the European ballet, the former is instrumental and therefore evocative of mood rather than programmatic in a detailed way: the mimesis likewise is a large response to the rhythm and feeling of the music. The smoothly integrated flow of music and body action thus easily develops a momentum which involves one too by empathy and sweeps one along. In Kathakali, on the other hand, there is a full-fledged verse text and the factors that constellate in the total presentation are such that they favour appraisal by taste rather than involvement in feeling. First of all, there is the separation of the roles of singing and acting. This creates a curious aesthetic situation, because the songs are supposed to be the speeches of the actor, that is, of the character whose role he is playing. What we confront therefore is not so much a character speaking and

acting, an integrated personality, as a virtuoso mime who proceeds to translate the verbal text into gesture and expression. This aesthetic emphasis on *presentation*, as against *identification*, is reinforced by several factors, like the punctuation of every strophe of the song by a dance sequence and the repetition of every verse. Since, in normal drama, no one interrupts himself or repeats himself like this, verisimilitude is not obtained. This in itself is not a defect, since it was never sought in the first place. But the difference in the aesthetic intention should be noted. It abstains from assimilating the spectator in an identification and stimulates him to be critically alert to the mimetic performance.

The conventionalism of diction and imagery in Kathakali has generally tended to obliterate individuation of characters through their speech-style. The erotic entreaty of the hero reads very much like the lyric in which the villain makes his similar, but possibly more urgent, appeal. Typological distinctions are managed massively by the magnificent make-up and by the pattern of gross action and incident in the enacted story. There are subtleties in the mimed dialogue, but the dialogue itself does not reveal differential traits and the subtleties are not aimed at revelation of character in depth.

Instrumental music can arouse feeling and mood without the mediation of verbal association and the evocation is usually swift and smooth because of the direct stimulation of the sensibility. But the Kathakali has a text. Now, if language is initially a structure of denotational meanings, it becomes suitable as an instrument of aesthetic communication only to the extent that it relies less and less on the hard concreteness of denotation and more and more on the elusive power of connotation which Mallarmé and the French Symbolists called suggestion and Ananda Vardhana and Abhinava Gupta in India called resonance (*dhvani*). But an important feature of the Kathakali tended to pull quite in the opposite direction, towards an even harder concreteness. This was the whole system of mimetic gesture.

Now, ever since Charles Darwin studied the physiology and evolutionary history of expressive modes of behaviour it has been known that symptoms like trembling, horripilation, blushing, etc., are directly determined by the chemistry of the endocrine system which is triggered by signals from the nervous system and triggers in turn glandular discharges that step up the respiratory rate and blood circulation and bring about other expressive changes. The mere perception of such changes in another can induce them in oneself by sympathetic induction. Gestures are not so deeply linked with the chemistry of the body. Nevertheless some gestures have acquired

a fairly universal intelligibility in their meaning.

But the very important point to note is that the Kathakali gestures form a complex system of signs with attributed meanings, not symbols of incarnated meaning. By first folding the hand and then slowly spreading out the fingers, it is possible to indicate an opening flower and the gesture is likely to be transparent to everybody. But most of the gestures are not mimetic in this way. Further, each gesture stands for several things. Thus the Pataka Mudra is formed by holding up the hand (as if calling for order) with all the fingers stretched except the ring-finger which is bent inward. Now, shown by both the hands, this Mudra can mean any one of the following: topographical locations like the earth or the underworld; climatic features like cloud, lightening, cold; indications of time like noon or evening; architectural features like palace, street, archway, moat; animals like elephant, lion, bull, crocodile; and quite a few other things, the list numbering thirty-six. The relation between a word and its denotation is not an intrinsic relation. The word is a sign, not a symbol. The poetic use of language always involves the transformation of the sign into the symbol. What has happened in Kathakali is the growth of an extensive gesture-language which in fact reverses the direction of aesthetic transformation. For the denotational meaning of the gesture is attributed, not intrinsic. And the skill of the spectator in decoding the actor's gesture code is basically extension of the semantic exercise of spotting meaning from sign. In spite of the fact that the text is in verse it is prose discourse repeated twice over, delaying further the aesthetic communion through the symbol.

In another respect also the gesture-language hampers swift and smoothly continuous poetic stimulation. In the case of poetic figures, as between the simile and the metaphor, the latter is swifter in its evocation because it blends images in the mind, just as the film can blend images visually through double-exposure; but the simile starts with a complete separation and proceeds leisurely to a comparison which never quite melts into a blended identity. The hard, concrete literalism of the gesture-language makes the unitary metaphor inevitably disintegrate into the segmented simile. The text may use the metaphor—"the moon-faced beloved"—rather than the simile "the beloved whose face is like the moon"—but the gesture-language can deal with moon and face only serially and the heavy concreteness given to both entities steps up the polarised separation between the two far more than even the simile does. In the reaction to a verbal metaphor like "elephant-gaited" beloved, the mind abstracts only the impression of the slow, swinging gait. But the

gestural mimesis leads before you the fantastic animal with trunk swinging, fan-like ears waving. This overwhelming presence of the pachyderm destroys any finesse the metaphor may have had initially.

This leads us to the basic difference between the Kathakali and the classical drama. The aesthetic organization of the latter is pyramidal. The apex is the dominant feeling-flavour of the play which will be one of the nine Rasas of classical aesthetics, a doctrinal system that has very strong foundations in psychology. All other feelings generated in the various phases of the evolving episodic stream will be ancillary to the dominant feeling and in fact will serve to nourish and highlight it. In a loose way we can say that the heroic sentiment (Vira or Raudra-rasa) dominates most of the Kathakali plays. But the finer orchestration of classical drama is not present here. The vague impression of focal organization is created by the overall pattern of the grosser action of the play. In each episode, however, the prevailing emotional tonality is autonomous. Strictly it is not the Sanchari-bhava of classical drama which corresponds to Mc Dougall's 'derived emotion'. The derived emotion takes colour from the main sentiment; it always reveals the abiding persistence of the latter; it is in fact a modification of the latter in a fresh episodic nexus. In classical drama in a romantic situation, the reaction of the heroic type and the libidinous type will be distinct though both may be positive responses to the romantic suggestions of the situation. This distinction gets lost in Kathakali. Further, the literalism of the mimetic transcription of the text—and a text loaded with conventional conceits—involves the actor in a lot of 'expressive' sallies which are brilliant but are also segmented, disparate, forging no stable links with character of the dominant emotional temper of the play as a whole.

Classical drama celebrates the triumphant transformation of the actor into the character. But in Kathakali, for the most part, the actor wants to continue to remain as the brilliant virtuoso, solving one by one the problems of complex mimesis which the librettist sets before him. This is a precisely correct way of summing up the situation, for reading through the libretto, we can clearly see that the librettist is devising piquant problems which the actor in fact welcomes as a challenge to his genius. An instance can make this clear. In a work by Irayimman Tampi, a devious conceit is used to pay homage to the moon-like beauty (another conceit) of the heroine's face. The Chakravaka bird-pair is supposed to come together only during the day and to have to separate with nightfall. The verse reads: "Mistaking your face for the moon, and in anguish at the imminence of separation, the female Chakravaka looks with

one eye filled with wistful longing at her mate and with one other flaming with anger at you." Conceit laid on conceit, the whole sequence is artificial. But, for successfully tackling its mimesis, the actor will have to have an almost unbelievable control, one eye and one half of his face expressing sorrow while the other eye and the other half express anger.

In another play, a passage of Racinian psychological complexity involves Ravana registering ten different emotions simultaneously. With that fantastic anatomical equipment of his—ten faces—he is supposed to be able to register all these at once. The actor can do it only serially. But the swiftly serial, and radical, transformation of the expression on the visage does need all the twelve years' training which the good Kathakali actor is supposed to undergo. Here it should also be noted that the masterly painting of the face brings it nearer to the critical gaze, psychologically, focusing attention, with almost the same degree of effectiveness as the close-up in the film can bring it visually, by optical means. Virtuosity in expressive histrionics and connoisseurship, appreciative appraisal, are thus brought together in a very close confrontation in this complex art-form.

If Kathakali had no features other than those we have analyzed in detail, it would not have transcended the level of a very brilliant, but also very sophisticated, art-form. But it had also roots that dug deep into the tradition of the ritual plays like the one on the slaying of the demon Daruka by the warrior-goddess Kali. This legacy made two great contributions: first, a strident vitality that more than compensated the rather over-cerebral stress on conventions in the poetic idiom and the gestural language; second, a numinous awe that fed on primitive, buried religious emotions and broke through with explosive power in the climatic moments.

Classical drama bans the presentation of a mortal combat on the stage. Kathakali, with its roots in the ritual plays on the slaying of demons, cannot do without it. That is why the bee in Kalidasa's *Shakuntala*, who bothers the heroine and gives an excuse to Dushyanta to reveal himself and chase it away, becomes transformed as a demon in the Kathakali version. Though there are romantic interludes of great beauty the overall tonality is strident, one of turbulence and violence. The tempo of the dances sustains this tonality. Though the actors speak no words, the demonic characters frequently burst out in unearthly cries. Their entry also is often very dramatic and violent. They would forcibly seize the "curtain" held up by the attendants and fling it away with violence to reveal themselves. Likewise, some of the demoniac characters would on occasion

move towards the great bronze lamp and whip up its flames by violent gestures while attendants fling into the flames handfuls of fine resin dust which burn for a brief instant like clouds of fire, filling the stage with an eerie light. The hurling of challenges for combat fill the scene with tremendous clamour. There is a special make-up for the demons mutilated in combat which shows them covered with blood and with entrails exposed. Even the sophisticated spectator experiences a shock of terror when he see such an apparition. Sometimes a gruesome figure is chased by the hero right through the midst of the audience. In such moments the confrontation of cool appraisal, which the conventions of Kathakali normally elicit, collapses completely and the spectator is deeply involved in a maelstrom of primitive, half-magical, half-religious emotions.

In the final analysis, it is this continuous interplay of confrontation and involvement, appraisal and identification, that makes Kathakali a unique art-form without a close parallel in any other tradition in the world.* □

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