

THE SUBLIME OBJECT OF DEVOTION

The study of aesthetics privileges the imagination. Since the source texts of this study belong, by and large, to the Indian literary and philosophical imagination, it would make our task easier if we flag an Indian “imperative” at the outset: “In India aesthetic and epistemological categories cease to be distinct since the culture accepts the ontological dependency of philosophy on figuration.” Paul de Man, whose words lie behind the definition of the “Indian imperative” just given, raises this view to the level of a universal principle when he writes: “All philosophy is condemned, to the extent that it is dependent on figuration, to be literary and, as the depository of this very problem, all literature is to some extent philosophical.”¹ De Man, however, also recognizes that this claim can be made because neither literature nor philosophy has definable limits, and because both are “sites” for ideological thinking or analysis. In other words, aesthetics is as much a space from which critical thinking can take place as ideology, and a critical theory that ignores the role and function of aesthetics has profound limitations. Systematic critical thinking about the nexus between art and ideology and between art and philosophy is then advanced as a way of integrating the domains of philosophy, aesthetics and ideology. If, however, claims have been made on behalf of Western aesthetic ideology, notably by de Man and Derrida, that the domain of aesthetics is not neutral, that it invades other discourses and that it offers critiques of society as such, similar claims have not been made on behalf of Indian aesthetics nor indeed on behalf of Indian culture.

To begin to entertain even the possibility of engaging with Indian aesthetics from a comparative perspective we have to put to rest a few ghostly specters that continue to haunt us. Among them are some quite perverse Orientalist positions of the kind taken by classicists like S. H. Butcher, who said that what India had was in fact a feminine imagination that because it ran “riot in its own prodigal wealth”² could never produce art of the quality of Greek and Roman antiquity. The centrality of figurality and aesthetics in philosophical thought was hence immediately nipped in the bud through claims that “India [was] a land dominated by imagination rather than reason.”³ In these endlessly reprised criticisms, imagination (the domain of aesthetics, of figuration) was simply presented as an antiphilosophical faculty (not as an essential part of it), which in turn produced a “civilization” totally lacking in practical politics or ethics. And even when Western discourses of “empirical realism,” positivism, or scientific linguistics were deployed to examine Indian culture so as to give it some kind of objective legitimacy, the results were the same: the culture, it was felt, simply didn’t possess the necessary apparatuses for ideological self-critique. The doubts raised here were endorsed by Husserl too who remained skeptical of Indian philosophy on the grounds that it did not raise genuinely critical questions of “validity, grounding, and evidence.”⁴ And finally—a point made by Ronald Inden repeatedly—the idea of human agency (“the realized capacity of people to act effectively upon their world”⁵) was never introduced as an historical factor in discussions about India, one suspects largely because it was felt that a nation lured to sleep by its sense of fatalism had no place for the individual as agent.

So much then by way of claiming a space for the importance of the interdependency of philosophy and figuration. To move on with our argument, how then do we go about giving legitimacy to Indian ways of thinking, how do we reinscribe the imagination back into philosophy (and vice versa) and respect Indian culture as an object of knowledge in terms of its own intrinsic ways of thinking? To begin with, what we must avoid are two established Orientalist practices: the empirical and the romantic. But we should also be careful of the “easy” postmodern alternative that, in the name of the contingent and the primacy of the human agent, sets out to underplay the extent to which individual, group or local histories and agents frame their discourses of empowerment in preexistent metanarratives and are in turn framed by them. Ronald Inden (who makes a very strong case for the contingent and for the local) himself qualifies the demand for the “local” by saying that a cultural dominant like the renouncer-ideal has been put to productive use in India. Although Inden explains the success of Gandhi’s nonviolence rhetoric in terms of a prior, Orientalist construction of the Hindu character, the fact remains that alongside the rhetoric there was also a body, a corporeality, Winston Churchill’s dismissive “naked fakir,” that confirmed the *paramparā* or the metanarrative of the saint as the renouncer who acquired power through *tapas* or excessive austerity.

The question we return to—the question of legitimacy already foreshadowed and the power of figuration in Indian thought generally—must not be discussed in isolation and principally in terms of an oppositional discourse in which on one side of the divide is theosophy, archetypal symbology, and romanticism and on the other is empirical history, quantitative sociology, pragmatic literary history, and the primacy of the human self as agent of change. If we were to adopt an oppositional logic, we would have to accept that Orientalist and Enlightenment discourses made no contribution to our understanding of Indian culture. Nothing can be further from the truth.⁶ Even totally mistaken readings are readings nevertheless and when such (mis)readings come from William Jones or Hegel we do have to take them seriously and not dismiss them outright. If, as well, we would want to argue that Indian thought itself has to be examined in terms of the hermeneutics of literary and philosophical interconnections and not exclusiveness, then again we need to critically examine everything that has been written about the culture. Unlike far too many Western apologists, in a postcolonial world Indians themselves are no longer testy or anxiety-prone about how history or the colonizer may have read them.⁷ Indeed, the entire Indian commentarial tradition (itself highly fractious and unstable on questions of truth) is one of openness and debate and not one of exclusivism. It is for this reason that we need to debate Indian culture from comparative and interdisciplinary, from ideological as well as transcendental perspectives. Misreadings, after all, can be much more exciting than readings that have room for no alternative entry points, readings so defensive or derisive that one cannot engage with them productively, let alone critically.

Ever since the publication of Edward Said's singularly influential *Orientalism*,⁸ we have witnessed an interest in the "Orient" distinguished by an awareness of what James Clifford has called "discrepant readings" and engagement with native informants.⁹ These novel critical readings and engagements have, however, been characterized as well by discussions on the extent to which the Western "I" itself was constructed through erstwhile Orientalist discourses. In the studies of both Inden and Kate Teltscher¹⁰ this is readily evident. Yet it could be argued, and persuasively one suspects, that in the margins of Hegel, William Jones, and Schlegel (let alone Jung, Eliade, Zimmer, and Joseph Campbell) some such awareness of the subject being contaminated by the objects of analysis was always present. If we take a leaf out of current postcolonial theory this knowledge is not as extraordinary as it sounds because any engagement with the Other affects both the source culture and the receptor culture. Note, for example, the position of the subject as Schlegel praises a Hindu race for whom no conception in the "department of metaphysics [was] unknown":

But this absorption of all thought and all consciousness in God—this solitary enduring feeling of internal and external union with the Deity, they [the Hindus] have carried to a

pitch and extreme that may almost be called a moral and intellectual self-annihilation. This is the same philosophy, though in a different form, which in the history of European intellect and science, has received the denomination of *mysticism*.¹¹

The speaking subject here learns as he finds in classical Hinduism a definition of mysticism missing from Western texts. It is clear—as in Schopenhauer as well—that such definitions would have a significant impact on European understanding of mysticism. By itself, the degree to which the European self gets “contaminated” is not particularly interesting. What is interesting especially in Schlegel’s remarkably representative passage is the use of a discourse that is not unlike the discourse of high Sanskrit critical commentary. German idealism read India romantically for sure, but it rarely read it as an “enigma” in the way in which British empiricism so often did.¹² To ignore that tradition of discursive representations of India helps no one at all, and certainly not those of us who wish to give India a presence within contemporary critical and cultural theory. In a strange sort of a way that heritage is part of the history of Hinduism itself, especially when that Hinduism is being written about in English and for a largely non-Indian audience.

To get on with the task of examining questions of Indian aesthetics more fully I would want to look at an aesthetic order that has rarely been applied to Indian culture. This aesthetic order is the sublime. The proof texts that I will be using for the Indian sublime belong to the religion of the “emotional laity,” the essential feature of which is “devotional theism.”¹³ Since devotional theism is the central tenet of Hinduism itself (any working definition of Hinduism must emphasize worship or puja, and devotion or bhakti), its discussion, and its development, would provide us with important texts and ideas with which to examine questions about Indian aesthetics as such. Devotional poetry, after all, is *the* dominant genre of Indian literature in much the same way as Sankhya philosophy is *the* dominant philosophy of India. A good many texts that were not composed with devotion in mind were gradually brought into the fold of devotion either through interpolations or through reading practices that transformed them into allegories of the sacred. In Indian literary history there are in fact two major continuous literary genres to around the end of the sixteenth century at least: devotional verse and epic narrative. The third important genre, drama, gave Indian literature its theory (and especially the theory of *rasa*) and hence occupies a kind of “arche-generic” place in the tradition. Dramatic modes of narration are used extensively in the epic as can be seen in the explicit use of the device “he said” (Sanjaya *uvāca*, “said,” Arjuna *uvāca*, etc.) throughout. However, the push to recode epic (and dramatic) narratives through the devotional was so strong that in time composers of these narratives certainly but characters too (albeit selectively) were given Godlike status.

The transformation of the pan-Indian epics (the *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahābhārata*) into a religious mode is too obvious to be repeated here. However, as a relatively autonomous genre not necessarily linked to drama and the epic (Tulsidas's sixteenth-century epic the *Rāmacaritamānasa* is an exception here) devotional verse's great moment comes somewhat late and is historically connected to the advent of the so-called bhakti (devotional) movement which reached its glorious period in the first half of the second millennium C.E. It has been argued that in India devotional poetry signals a decisive break in Hinduism that occurred when a predominantly intellectual and ritualistic religion shifted its religious practices to incorporate the concept of loving communion/union with a personal God. In the intellectual version of Hinduism as presented in the canonical texts or, more accurately, valorized through Orientalist readings of classical Indian high culture by Indians and non-Indians alike, the emotional dimensions of life were seen very much as an aberration unworthy of any systematic philosophical reflection, and largely rejected out of hand as a means of understanding the intricacies of religion. Clearly a principle of exclusion was at work here that, in the hands of the clerisy, led to the delegitimation of the emotional and the glorification of matters intellectual in religion. Matters of feeling, when seen through this principle of austere intellectualism, were a function of art and not of belief, and emotion, the dimension that underpins judgement, had no place in the religious encounter. The exact moment of this demarcation and distinction is, however, not at all clear-cut since even in the great text of Hinduism, the *Bhagavadgītā*, karmic certainty is tempered by the need for a degree of emotional engagement: "my devotee is my beloved," says Krishna at one point in the text. The search for the original moment is always difficult, but specially so when "an ontology of plurality-with-unity,"¹⁴ to borrow Inden's very rich idea, is the defining characteristic of the culture in question. Inden himself, however, denies, it seems, any possibility of the transcendental by generalizing the "factual character of the world."¹⁵ Transcendental investigations can be critical investigations in that they take us to conditions, like the sublime, that need to be addressed in ontological terms.

SUBLIME AESTHETICS

"Whereas the beautiful is a metaphysical and ideological principle," writes Paul de Man, "the sublime aspires to being a transcendental one."¹⁶ De Man is referring to Kant's well-known distinction between the sublime and the beautiful where Kant speaks of the beautiful as a thing that achieves the ends (the teleology) of freedom by means of nature (what Lyotard calls the "principle of a teleology of nature for freedom"¹⁷) and the sublime as a thing that informs us about "the teleology of our own faculties . . . about the relationship between imagination and reason."¹⁸ For the beautiful nature is a

frame, a reference; for the sublime nature resists totalizing and hence cannot be linked to a prior order, history or teleology. Shot through with contradictions, and emphatically connected to the limits of our own faculties, the sublime is “a purely inward experience of consciousness”¹⁹ and is not, as Kant himself observes, “to be looked for in the things of nature, but only in our own ideas.”²⁰ Attractive as well as repulsive, pleasurable (in the nirvanic sense) but also painful (in the physical sense), beyond the “parergon” and yet meaningful because, finally, it has to be contained within the law of reason, it is never an objective fact as such although it is signified by natural elements that are impossibly vast, or so “absolutely great” that they are beyond any kind of “adequation.”

Endowed with a determinable end and a definite size, they [the things of nature] cannot produce the feeling of the sublime, or let us say the *superelevated*. *Erhaben*, the sublime, is not only high, elevated, nor even very elevated. Very high, absolutely high, higher than comparable height, more than comparative, a size not measurable in height, the sublime is *superelevation* beyond itself.²¹

In this very astute reading of Derrida the beautiful may be found in art because art can be framed or bound (there is a “parergon of the beautiful”²²). The sublime on the other hand is to be discovered, as Kant himself had noted, not in nature as artist, the creator of forms, but in nature as raw and formless: “bold, overhanging, and as it were, threatening rocks, thunderclouds piled up the vault of heaven . . . volcanoes in all their violence of destruction”²³ are its correlates. The beautiful is easy enough to grasp because it presents the indeterminate concept of understanding (the feeling of the beautiful results from a form); the sublime, on the other hand, presents the indeterminate concept of reason because it can be “provided by the without-form,” and is therefore the function of a “higher faculty” in us.²⁴ This being so, it follows, that the desire to totalize the sublime will remain supreme because this is how the law of reason operates. We sense an underlying tension here. Reason must totalize (this is a transcendental fact) but the sublime makes the act of totalizing difficult. To begin with, the sublime resists being articulated in language for the simple reason that the unrepresentable cannot be signified; it creates “a breach . . . in the examination of the aesthetic faculty of judgement,”²⁵ as “the relation of thinking to the object presented breaks down.”²⁶ There is thus on the one hand a failure of articulation and on the other the demand by reason that questions of totality be addressed because the sublime is the point at which the relationship between reason and imagination becomes most acute. It is a question about “the teleology of our own faculties” as the sublime signifies the primacy of reason because it is reason that alone can permit imagination, the faculty of presentation *and* the sublime, to come into being “at the expense of the totalizing

power of the mind.”²⁷ The point is made by Lyotard in the following unusually accessible passage:

Seen in critical terms, [Kant's] Analytic of the Sublime finds its “legitimacy” in a principle that is expounded by critical thought and that motivates it: a principle of thinking's getting carried away. As it is expounded and deduced in its thematic, sublime feeling is analyzed as a double defiance. Imagination at the limits of *what* it can present does violence to itself in order to present *that* it can no longer present. Reason, for its part, seeks, unreasonably, to violate the interdict it imposes on itself and which is strictly critical, the interdict that prohibits it from finding objects corresponding to its concepts in sensible intuition. In these two aspects, thinking defies its own finitude, as if fascinated by its own excessiveness. It is this desire for limitlessness that it feels in the sublime “state”: happiness and unhappiness.²⁸

Here the imagination is elevated “from a metaphysical (and hence, ideological) to a transcendental (and, hence, critical) principle.”²⁹ This is Paul de Man's insightful observation that the sublime is ultimately a matter of transcendental principles, about beings, matters that are always already there. In other words, the difference between the beautiful and the sublime is itself transcendental. In this reading the sublime, an absolute principle of negation, is either present or not present depending upon whether a civilization, finally, has made the necessary linguistic investment in the project. Since the sublime is really a discourse of reflection (how we read a particular object, its substantialization) and not of the object itself (its empirical existence) it follows that certain intrinsic conditions of judgment and certain rhetorical devices are essential for the sublime to exist as a category in any given civilization. This mode of theorizing is a far cry from the theories of an early reader of the subject, Edmund Burke, for whom the beautiful and the sublime were primarily sensationist principles of pleasure and pain.³⁰ As we shall see, part of the difficulty with British Orientalist readings of India relates to the extent to which these readings of Indian culture had Burke's definitions of the sublime in mind. The fact that there is such a thing as pleasurable alienation began to emerge as a useful idea with which to explain the seeming antinomies of Hinduism. Pleasurable alienation or the sublime's lack of (re)presentation in the mind is precisely what the idea of God is to the believer. In both instances—in sublime and religious apprehension—the sense of awe, a mental violence to the imagination, takes us to the dimension of experiencing what Lyotard has called the “pleasure in the Real.”³¹ Kant quotes approvingly “thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image” as the exemplary discourse of the sublime moment because in

this command of the Judaic God lies the essence of the absolute unrepresentability of the sublime.

The beautiful is about forms and teleology; it is a reflective judgment singularly immediate; it is only in thought without an object in the strict sense of the word. But it is also a distinctly Enlightenment concept and has about it that special ordering of nature that formed the basis of colonization itself. On the other hand, the sublime, being antiform, “is a sudden blazing, and without future”³² and as a consequence is not a form of any special value to Enlightenment instrumentality. Sublime emotion as negation, as lack (of a teleology), as surplus and excess meant that the word was more often used for Indian thought (Hegel’s review of Wilhelm von Humboldt’s lectures on the *Bhagavadgītā* is a case in point) than the term beautiful or the related term “taste.” Pleasure in the beautiful was predicated upon the idea of ratio or proportion in the objects of nature in terms of quality (and this was seen as a very European “principle”) whereas in the sublime one began “with the quantity of judgement rather than its quality.”³³ The magnitude of the sublime—as mathematical (quality) or dynamical (quantity)—being immeasurable defies comparison and creates a chasm between the reflective mind (the signified) and the sublime object (the signifier), which is how many of the early discourses of Orientalism were framed. The same magnitude, the same lack of grounding in linguistic referents is reflected further in the sense of contrariness that seems to be internal to sublime reflections: pleasure and pain, attraction and repulsion, and so on. These contradictory sensations disallow a determinate judgment such as the idea of the absolute because to admit as much would mean that sublime judgment is not an indeterminate “concept of reason.”³⁴ We pause to ask the obvious. Are we not in fact pushing toward the realm of incommensurability and of irreconcilable heterogeneities? Is this not what Lyotard has called an instance of the “differend” because it is subjectively final without a concept of teleology or form?³⁵ The Kantian sublime, as one reading of it has it, erases the differend through the idea of slippage or leakage, and indeed through the idea of reason placing a lid on sublime excess moments after imagination has been given the freedom to enter into sublime abyss. But is this so? Or is it that the experience of the sublime introduces a transcendental principle (transcendental because the object remains unknown) that is almost supersensory or, to use Schlegel’s description of the Hindu imagination, “mystical” and hence incapable of being contained? Can the subject ever return to the law of reason after experiencing the sublime?³⁶

It is clear that aesthetically and politically the category of the sublime may be put to very productive uses. Its capacities of doing “violence” to the order of nature and its freedom have great comparative possibilities especially when it comes to reading disjunctive aesthetic moments in non-Western cultures. It is, as I have already suggested, an idea that is more likely to bypass the restrictions of imperialist discourses than the beautiful, which is confined by a

rather rigid Enlightenment outlook. To repeat a point I have already made, the number of times “Oriental” art has been referred to (explicitly or implicitly) as *sublime* in Orientalist and colonial discourses probably exceeds the number of times the term *beautiful* has been used. The point is that whereas the beautiful is about the West and history, about principles of order, the sublime is a threat to the imagination, a subversive impulse with the sole aim of disturbing or doing violence to the intellect.

In a very real sense the idea of systems of thought doing violence to the intellect generally is at the center of one of the best-known philosophical engagements with the Orient. I have in mind the works of G. W. F. Hegel, the “philosopher par excellence [who represented] like few others the glory and greatness as well as the futility and arrogance of philosophy.”³⁷ In spite of his dismissal of Hindu culture as a product of a fantastic, feminine imagination we need to return to the “Orientalist” Hegel because it is Hegel who allows us to rethink the sublime with reference to India. There is a positive side to this if we recall that “in a truly dialectical system such as Hegel’s, what appears to be inferior and enslaved (*untergeordnet*) may well turn out to be the master.”³⁸ After all, Hegel did concede, albeit dismissively, that there may be something sublime in Oriental cultures too. But there is yet another reason why we turn to Hegel in matters of theories of symbolic form: whether we like it or not on the question of art belonging to the order of the symbolic, we are all Hegelians.³⁹ Hegel’s purely pragmatic fascination with the Hindu world (insofar as Hindu India was a useful example to him of a nation with a totally nonexistent historical spirit that reinforced his understanding of the “fixity of species”⁴⁰) may be used here to suggest ways in which one version of the Indian sublime had already been foreshadowed, negatively as it so happened, in Hegelian aesthetics. There are three key Hegelian ideas that must be noted very quickly at this point. These ideas are: first, Hebraic poetry alone is sublime since it rejects the idea of divine representationalism; second, the sublime itself is the absolutely beautiful; third, there is a schism between the order of language and the order of the sacred. On the second point, one feels that Hegel is remarkably close to Longinus’s sublime (*hupsous*) to the extent that in Hegel’s reading too there is something about an elevated style that exerts on the reader an “irresistible force and mastery.”⁴¹ On the third point both Hegel and Kant are in accord. For both “the loss of the symbolic, the loss of adequation of sign to meaning, is a necessary negative moment.”⁴² Politically, however, we are entering very dangerous territory here. Much of what Hegel says comes close to a racist reading of non-Western cultures. He uses the category of the sublime in effect to damn Hindu culture and to make a radical distinction between races with and without history (the Nazis used the same argument to defend their genocide of the Romany gypsies). Nevertheless, if we can set aside Hegel’s racism, his reading of Indian culture as an instance of an undertheorized sublime that does violence to history and to the imagination demands serious consideration. Space

does not allow us to examine Hegel's readings of India in great detail and so we will have to limit ourselves to only those aspects of his argument that have a bearing on this book.

For Hegel Hindu India is an object as well as a source text of a fantastic imagination that is marked by a collective dreaming about the Absolute Spirit. Working from German and English translations of Sanskrit texts (especially those of William Jones, Henry Thomas Colebrooke, Franz Bopp, and Friedrich von Schlegel) as well as studies of India by J. A. Dubois, James Mill, and W. von Humboldt (notably the latter's lectures on the *Bhagavadgītā*), Hegel read the "sign" of the Hindu Brahman (the Absolute Spirit) as a confirmation of the total mergence of Self and Other in a (Hindu) semantic universe from which the principle of understanding and morality had been removed. By "understanding" Hegel of course meant the faculty that makes the self both aware of its own individuality and conscious of its grounding in the external world.⁴³ As for the austere idea or the impossible ideal of the Absolute Spirit this noble concept, Hegel argued, gets troped, for the Hindu, through a pantheistic doctrine that transforms the Absolute (as pure thought) into a sensuous object. Hegel's real objection is to the way in which an avatic or reincarnation principle leads to the Absolute Spirit being "degraded to vulgarity and senselessness." The sensory world is not the world of the sublime, which is always a matter for the Spirit. It is here that Hegel senses something quite special in Hindu culture but he holds himself back because he is enslaved by his own refusal (which for Hegel is a matter of teleological necessity) to grant Indian history any legitimacy whatsoever. Whether Hegel misreads or misunderstands Indian culture is not the real issue, although the collapsing of two different concepts of the Absolute Spirit (Brahman neuter, the impersonal Parabrahman) and God-the-creator (Brahman masculine, the personal *īśvara*) into a single figure creates serious problems. These problems are, however, not peculiar to Hegel because the Indian imagination too has periodically confused the two categories. Nevertheless, the confusion or mix-up is capable of producing some startling observations. As a race that constructed its sublime object in terms of an Absolute Spirit, the Hindu becomes European, but as a race that confused (as Hegel seems to understand it) "the idea" with its manifold avatic manifestations (where the sublime object becomes presentable) the Hindu demonstrates all the weaknesses of a fanciful child. It is the latter reading that leads Hegel to make the jump from metaphysics to Hindu history, which is then read as a grand mythic narrative that cannot chronicle the growth of human consciousness in its interaction with historical events. Indian history is seen, to borrow Hayden White's Hegelian taxonomy, as only one act in a "Tragic Drama of four acts," which is how complete histories are always written.⁴⁴ History for the Hindu (because the category of the sublime is missing from the culture) is therefore altogether nonexistent.

It is because the Hindoos have no History in the form of annals (historia) that they have no History in the form of transactions (res gestae); that is, no growth expanding into a veritable political condition.⁴⁵

The past and the present, annals and transactions, in this Hindu rendition of “history” are never integrated into a dynamic whole where a given moment captures, crystallizes, and transcends a nation’s long history. This moment requires that the subject remain grounded in the “concrete particularity of the world”⁴⁶ and is capable of critically engaging with events. In Hegel’s *Aesthetics* (*The Philosophy of Fine Art*) the same argument is repeated as a severe and, dare one say, racist reprimand:

The Hindoo race has consequently proved itself unable to comprehend either persons or events as part of continuous history.⁴⁷

The reference to a lack in the symbolic order of the Hindu arises out of Hegel’s understanding of the pseudosublime orientation of Hindu thinking. In the *Aesthetics* the (false) Indian sublime is treated negatively as an instance of the trope of “Fantastic Symbolism” in which each object is referred back to the Divine in a pantheistic economy that fails to distinguish between a monotheistic principle (that produces a “single field of unified knowledge”⁴⁸ and hence prefigures the true sublime) and a polytheistic principle of divine immanence in the totality of nature. In the Hindu pantheistic economy the objects are not representations of the Divine but are its very being: the symbol becomes the thing represented, “it has no differentiation either within or outside of itself.”⁴⁹ In this version of Hinduism the finite intermingles with the infinite or the Absolute. Since the subject, defined as the Atman, wishes to identify itself with the infinite Brahman, what is true of the external world becomes true of the self as well: the distinction between consciousness and self-consciousness totally disappears as we now “live and move amongst *simulacra*” (51). Against “Fantastic Symbolism” Hegel positions the trope of true symbolism, which is marked by a sense of difference between the sign and what it signifies and which lays the linguistic foundation of the sublime. Yet precisely because of the manner in which Hindu symbols are referred back to the Absolute, they are presented to the mind as if they were sublime representations. For the moment we sense that the return of multiplicity to oneness—Atman into Brahman—is indeed sublime. In an important passage Hegel seems to be saying as much:

In this melting down of all clear definition . . . we may rather seek for features analogous to the type of the *sublime* than

see any illustration of real symbolism. . . . For in the Sublime . . . the finite phenomenon only expresses the Absolute, which it would previsualize for conscious sense to the extent that in so doing it escapes from the world of appearance, which fails to comprehend its content. (55)

The avatic melting down of difference, the complete unity of the idea and its representation, leads to the construction of sublime objects (of religion). In short, Hindu representations of “gods,” as Hegel comments a few sentences later, strike “the opening notes of ‘the Sublime’ symphony.” However, even as Hegel makes this concession—that what we have here is an instance of sublime aesthetics—he undercuts this possibility through a critique that would suggest that since for the Hindu the Absolute is made presentable, instead of signifying the impossibility of the object to be a stand-in for the initial signifier (the Absolute), this very act designates that the impossible idea can in fact be presented. It is at this point that Hegel effectively uses the discourse of critical judgment on the sublime to “outwit” the Hindu position as he sees it. The difficulty here is in Hegel’s own prose (as translated), which I would like to quote in full:

The main difference, however, between it [the Indian Sublime] and the true Sublimity consists in this, that the Hindoo imagination does not in the wild exuberance of its images bring about the essential nothingness of the phenomena which it makes use of, but rather through just this very measurelessness and unlimited range of its visions believes that it has annihilated and made to vanish all difference and opposition between the Absolute and its mode of configuration. In this extreme type of exaggeration, then, there is ultimately little of real kinship with either true symbolism or Sublimity: it is equally remote from the true sphere of beauty. (56)

So here we have it, neither sublime nor beautiful; something almost pre-Symbolic (in the narrowly Lacanian sense) because far too sensuous, which in fact is what Hegel’s grounds for objection are. At the same time—and this point is often overlooked by recent post-Orientalist commentators—Hegel is deeply conscious of the quite extraordinary imaginative powers of the Hindu. In no other major civilization is there such breadth; nowhere else do we find a riot of divinities (from animal gods to human reincarnations) incongruously, but to the Hindu self-evidently, linked to an abstract principle of the Absolute. While the Absolute remains abstract, its avatic substantializations through a “rampant chaos of mythological and iconographic details”⁵⁰ contradict and cancel out its sublime possibilities.

We ask a number of questions at this stage. Why has the category of the sublime been withdrawn from the Hindu? Why is it that the supreme sense of inadequation found in the negative representations of Brahman has not led to a commentarial tradition based on the category of the sublime by Orientalists and by Indians themselves? And why is it that Hegel in fact uses the contradictory rhetoric of the sublime itself (attraction and repulsion; the sublime as an indeterminate as well as a “rationalizing” contemplation) to mount this critique? The simple answer, from Hegel’s point of view, is that Hindus “contort the sensuous phenomenon into a plurality of Divinities” even as they construct the spiritual abstraction of God in terms of a protosublime aesthetics in which Brahman cannot be presented to consciousness. In short, the difficulty arises because of a cultural desire to offer manifestations of the divine in nature (the idea behind Hindu polytheism that allows the divine to be sensuously apprehended) even though in the process the purity of the concept itself is tainted. Of course, the confusion is both Hegel’s and the Hindus’: Hegel demands a concrete individual identity that is not simply part of an indeterminate “being-in-itself” (such as the Hindu Brahman); the Hindus opt for a sublime where the nature of the “being-in-itself” is always a “fusion” of Atman and Brahman. This distinction, and especially Hegel’s continued insistence on the concrete particularity of the self, means that in his reconceptualization of the Kantian sublime as the impossible idea (the Absolute) without any representation in the Real (“itself essentially without form and out of the reach of concrete external existence” [86]) still requires a separation of the Absolute from the subject. The Absolute must still be contained within system and history.

For Hegel, then, to arrive at the sublime there must be an “express separation of the essential substance from the sensuous present, that is from the empirical facts of external appearance” (85). This being the case, the sublime object cannot be compromised by its possible symbolic equivalents: no matter what images or icons we construct the two, the idea and its symbolic referent, are never identical. For the Hindu it is not a matter of never denying this proposition but of continually attempting to trope the infinite by grounding it in the phenomenal even as the canonical texts stress the impossibility of such a grounding. And this procedure does violence to the concept itself as it introduces a discontinuity between the two ways in which the Absolute is conceptualized. From a Hegelian point of view, sublime empowerment (for the Hindu subject) is therefore trivialized through a constant transformation of the Absolute into objects of sensuality. The Hindu procedure of objectifying the Absolute through a fantastic symbolization has the effect of grounding it in sensuous objects, in a subjective content known to the self. As we have noticed this procedure is unthinkable to Hegel since for him the sublime object is pure thought, “unaffected by every expression of the finite categories,” and “only present to thought in its purity” (87). The stage is then set for Hegel to redefine the Kantian sublime, in both its positive and negative aspects, through a

rethinking of this “one absolute substance.” For Kant the sublime was a moment of radical empowerment of a particular faculty of the mind under the interdiction of reason. During this fleeting moment there is a letting-go of the law of reason as the subject, “an epistemological entrepreneur” to use Terry Eagleton’s telling phrase,⁵¹ is engaged with ideas too large for comprehension. At the same time Kant links these absolutely great ideas to the formless and to “the loss of adequation of sign and meaning.”⁵² On this point—on the essential negativity of the sublime moment—Kant and Hegel are in agreement. However, when it comes to the one substance or the Absolute, the issue becomes somewhat more complex since for Hegel the one substance must always be “posited above the particular appearance” or substance “in which it is assumed to have found a representation.” At the same time this very representation has to be conceived as possessing no real validity because the ultimate essence is “out of reach of concrete external existence.” Yet the very fact that the one essence is represented as the positive sublime effectively destroys true sublimity, which Kant too had realized was always an absence or a negation. The negative representation of the absolute is to be found in Hebrew poetry where the “positive immanence of the Absolute is done away with.” And if the Divine is represented (as it has to be) this is done on the explicit understanding that the symbol is no substitute for the thing-in-itself because the Absolute can never be troped (through incarnations, for instance). Metaphorical language must disappear if the divine essence is to be grasped.

As we have already suggested, the subtext here is Hegel’s prioritization of Western history, the only history where the tragic drama of life in four acts is fully played out. It is this understanding of a teleology of history, intrinsic in a sense to Western historical consciousness alone, that leads him to discover true sublimity only in the figure of the Hebrew God who, after all, is at the heart of Hegel’s system and history. Where the Hindu God is measured either mathematically (as the supposedly sixty-four million gods) or quantitatively (as a grotesque reincarnation in the form of a man-lion), the Hebrew God stridently proclaims that there can be no image-substitute for him. His glory may be seen in the world around us but he cannot be symbolized. In spite of this, Hegel remains fascinated by the Hindu “God” as Brahman Absolute (in the neuter). The constant return to Hindu symbolism and Hindu pantheism in his aesthetic theory underlines both his fascination with and unease about the status granted to Hindu speculative thought. For the fact is, if Hegelian aesthetics is removed, for the moment, from its grand European narrative of history, and from the imperative of the detached concrete subject, Hegel’s negative sublimity finds its highest form not in the Hebrew God, whom he embraces as the exemplary instance of the sublime, but in Brahman. Hegel’s argument is based on the observation that the Hebrew God has no signifieds to which he can be linked. Yet this is clearly not so because the Hebrew tradition has always engaged in a kind of surreptitious semantic overcoding: the Hebrew God has been

represented as the just, the wrathful, the avenger, and so on. This God is also a lawgiver and prone to speaking to his subjects, or intervening in their histories. Against this, although one version of the Hindu God—as the masculinized Brahman—has acquired all the features of fantastic symbolization attributed to him by Hegel, in its pure abstract form as Brahman (neuter) it never speaks, is never spoken to, is without quality, and cannot be represented in any form whatsoever. As the *Bhagavadgītā* reminds us: “It is by a rare chance that a man sees him” (2.29). About this unmanifest being the tradition remains remarkably consistent. Whenever the Absolute is presented or given visual form in Hindu thought, the reference is to Brahma the Creator (a personalized *īśvara*) and not to Brahma(n) the Absolute (a non-relational Parabrahman), although admittedly the Krishna of the *Bhagavadgītā* does have a tendency to confuse the two. Nevertheless, the fact that the Hebrew God is capable of being spoken of as the just, the wrathful, the avenger and so on is certainly one way of linking him to the positive sublime. Against this, Brahman has no “descriptive semantics” at all; nor can it be represented to consciousness in anything other than in a negative fashion. It is clear, therefore, that for Hegel only those civilizations capable of grasping the world historical Spirit can in fact disengage the Absolute from its sensuous representation. The sublime then becomes for Hegel a term of value linked to a particular version of telos and not simply a mode of radical empowerment in the face of the interdiction of reason. History empowers some people with the capacity for the true sublime; those who lack history only have its lower form, pantheistic art, available to them. Hegel is absolutely correct in connecting Hindu art with the Hindu’s (self-conscious) misreading of the historical process. However, to understand the Indian sublime one has to disengage Hegel’s absolute identification of the true sublime with the Enlightenment conception of history. It is only when we can disengage the two—the sublime and history—and begin to rethink the Absolute as incapable of being the source of history, that we can understand how the two Brahman function in Hindu culture. In the Indian sublime, then, two principles are at work: the first is the principle of nondifferentiation and absolute nonrepresentation; the second is its very opposite, of excessive representation and differentiation. The latter principle makes its way into the myriad of reincarnations that invade the Hindu religious universe; the former into what is vulgarly referred to as the mystical tradition in which the relationship between the one and the many is kept intact through an essentially mystical logic. At the same time, for an austere Vedantin like Shankara, the purity of the idea of Brahman as the Absolute would sit quite comfortably with Hegel’s own rendition of the sublime.

The argument sketched thus far forces us to rethink the Indian sublime critically and creatively so that what to Hegel was an aberration can now be transformed into a statement about a sublime that would eschew the kind of value judgments that led Hegel to conceive of a Hindu dreaming race whose reading of the Absolute led to the perfect deadening of consciousness. The reli-

gious imaginary of the Hindu, in the Hegelian argument, is one that is troped through metaphors that reinforce animistic identifications and prevent the ego from entering into the symbolic order of difference. But where Hegel would interpret this state of affairs as a sign of the false sublime or of pantheistic/fantastic symbolism, the Indian would read the same category through metaphors of unrepresentability. In this Hindu reading the Indian sublime is boundless; the human mind aspires toward the infinite as it defies the parergon, the frame, and confronts that which cannot be presented in all its totality to the imagination. Sublime thought reaches its grand point in the civilization's engagement with Brahman.

In theorizing the Indian sublime we must, therefore, renegotiate Hegel's fantastic or pantheistic symbolism by considering the perennial Hindu engagement with questions of multiplicity (the ontology of plurality-with-unity already referred to) as a structural principle at the heart of Indian culture itself. How is it that the one (Brahman) and the many (Brahma) have maintained a peaceful coexistence over all these years? One way of addressing this question is to consider it purely as a philosophical problem and examine the innumerable commentaries written on texts that deal with the problematic of the one and the many. Attractive—and relatively straightforward—as this procedure is, examination of commentaries will not lead us to the thought processes of the culture itself. For an understanding of these in all their complexity, one of the richest archives is obviously the literary corpus of the culture. I would therefore want to shift the focus, as already foreshadowed, to the literary texts of the culture without in any way establishing an absolute demarcation between the aesthetic and the religious. Indeed, it could be argued that the religious, for the Hindu, is by and large a matter of aesthetics.

The literary genre in which the aesthetic and the religious intertwine in ways that make it impossible to disentangle the two is the poetry of devotion. This genre presents us with a powerful archive about questions relating to the representation of the Absolute. In devotional or bhakti poetry the sublime object of devotion is obviously Brahman in both its neuter and masculine forms. In a clear departure from Hegel, I would want to claim that bhakti or devotional poetry is superimposed upon a sublime narrative where the subject searches for an impossible ideal that is symbolized through a plethora of Gods and Goddesses. Although this impossible ideal is represented through the image or the icon, the Absolute Brahman as the ideal, however, remains the sublime object that, ultimately, defies all representation in time and space. The manner in which the one and the many (plurality-with-unity) gets articulated needs to be thought through the concept of an absent center in Hindu culture that is symbolized by the sign of Brahman as pure negation. To grasp the Indian sublime it is necessary, for the moment, to engage with the relationship between center and periphery in Indian culture. Without this narrative of (cultural) deferral, the special nature of the Indian sublime would continue to elude us.

THE CENTER CANNOT HOLD

Recent research on Hinduism undertaken by a group of largely post-structuralist Indologists has shifted our focus from the traditional Indological paradigms of comparative philology and self-contained pragmatic literary histories to a reading and analysis of the dynamics or “logic” of the culture itself. A key scholar in this regard is the French Sanskritist Madeleine Biardeau whose works show a particularly astute analysis of Indian culture. In her book on Hinduism, she explains the seemingly endless contradictions of Hinduism by examining the structural imperatives of the renouncer and the socialized individual through the way in which desire or *kāma* operates in the culture.⁵³ Since the narrative of desire is based on a wish to own or possess something else (though this something else may be introjected if the cultural ego has not advanced beyond the *imaginary*) and implies a lack (of something), the aim of life may be seen as a search for unity with an absent body that would lead to some form of self-empowerment or personal happiness. There is nothing specifically Indian about this definition of the object of desire. Indian informants, however, may point out that the Indian subject is motivated by a grand desire (a sublime desire in fact) aimed at union with Brahman. From what we have said so far the qualification that we need to make at this juncture is that the object of desire, Brahman, cannot be presented to consciousness as an “idea.” This success-in-failure, which Hegel saw as the basis of symbolic art (and which he felt was missing from Hindu fantastic art), can be seen as a theory of the Indian’s own primal narrative of desire in which desire has for its object the impossible ideal of Brahman. We can now see the entire history of Hindu speculative thought, reformulated in a markedly Kantian language, as an aesthetic of self-surrender through the momentary (because always under the interdiction of the law of reason) ascendancy of the imagination. What is the duration of this self-surrender? Can it be given a spatiotemporal permanence or must it be constantly deferred because reason will always impose a lid on it—the sublime, to invoke Freud, will get sublimated? Or is it that the momentary freedom granted by reason also signals reason’s own abdication of power? In the state of Brahmanhood, can the law of reason come into play anyway?

In the context of the foregoing general remarks, the place of devotional literature in Indian culture (and perhaps in all cultures) is in need of some very serious critical rethinking. In the immediate context of Indian devotional literature, the core of my argument may be formulated as follows: devotional poetry is a figurative means by which the subject’s search in the phenomenal world of a transcendental personalization of Atman and Brahman gets articulated. In this transcendental personalization the identity of the self with the cosmic principle of creation itself is symbolically established. The self participates in an essentially apocalyptic act of dissolution (Schopenhauer’s oceanic sublime) that leads to the self’s absorption in a larger principle of being. The

structure in which this works is, however, not stable since, as David Shulman has boldly observed, the culture itself is characterized by a tendency toward deferral and decenteredness. In terms of such a characterization of the culture Brahman alone becomes the idea that could give meaning to a world that presents itself as one that is decentered and continually displaces meaning.⁵⁴ It must be said displacement or deferral is not related to either a Hindu dreaming “race” or a Hindu nation without a sense of history—both propositions that have had their day with the Orientalists—rather it is a consequence of a pervasive brahminical ideology that “elevated linguistic, social, political, moral, and religious conventions to the level of absolute realities, permanent and eternal.”⁵⁵ We can think through all this in a slightly different, and I suspect much more original, fashion if we consider the process of decentering of meaning and deferral of self as signs of a very mature culture’s awareness of the impossibility of any referential certainties in language. The desire toward Brahmanhood can only be deflected because Brahman cannot, finally, be represented. Brahman is not Logos or the Word, but its negation, which is then transformed into an ontology of “neither this nor that.” Like the Lacanian Real, Brahman as the sublime is an “embodiment of pure negativity, emptiness.”⁵⁶ The logic of devotional poetry, as we shall see later, arises out of this: at the heart of devotional poetry is a black hole, an all-pervasive emptiness, as language searches for signifiers that would reflect the extinction of Self and Other in Brahman. Devotional poetry resists closure because Brahman cannot be signified except as a hole, a gap, a void, an emptiness around which revolves the Hindu symbolic order. Everything else that we might say about Hindu devotional texts is a variation on this fundamentally sublime theme of the construction of meaning around a void, an emptiness.

If the referent is missing because emptiness displaces itself, silence begets silence, then in Hindu culture symbolic systems and overarching structural invariants are especially important. The center of a text—because the center is missing—must be found elsewhere, in ritual (as acts) or in those transindividual and absolute frames of references or “limit situations” (as metaphysics) such as karma and dharma that function as Hindu metatexts. This point is clear in Madeleine Biardeau’s definition of dharma as “the socio-cosmic order which organizes the empirical world.”⁵⁷ But dharma as well as karma are also one with Brahman in their sublimity. They are not the fantastic symbolism of a juvenile race (Hegel’s reading), but Real in the strict Lacanian sense—“that is, it is impossible to occupy [their] position . . . one cannot attain [them], but one cannot escape [them].” The qualification is Žižek’s, who goes on to write, “This is why the only way to avoid the Real is to produce an utterance of pure metalanguage which, by its patent absurdity, materializes its own impossibility.”⁵⁸ So many definitions of Brahman in the canon are utterances of pure metalanguage.

It is not surprising that the culture’s dominant hermeneutic of reading is

also metalinguistic based as it is on an abstract precognitive reading practice that collapses both hermeneutics and poetics. Behind this reading practice stands an audience “that did not think of itself as an audience but as a community of believers.”⁵⁹ The culture calls this reading practice “rasa,” which may be read as an early version of the Rezeptionsästhetik of the Konstanz School.⁶⁰ But where European reception theory begins with the idea of individual acts of consciousness and the constructed worlds through these acts, rasa theory is a formal pattern of possible aesthetic moments superimposed upon a grid based on a taxonomy of emotional states. Rasa has little of the intersubjective dynamism of European reception theory and does not, on the whole, take into account those shifting horizons of expectations that could lead to a more socially complex and ideologically self-aware literary response. The agent of this response is an ideal spectator who is “a *sahṛdaya*, a man ‘whose heart is at one with the author’s.’”⁶¹ Nevertheless rasa theoreticians do seek to find a way out of the crude domain of subjective responses by developing sets of aesthetic categories of taste understood by the “*sahṛdaya* or connoisseur”⁶² that would correspond to the eight or nine known basic emotions of the subject. In its emphasis on emotional response, rasa theory predates Edmund Burke’s sensationist readings of the sublime and the beautiful, which too were based on identifying through psychosomatic categories emotions such as pain and pleasure. One final question remains: How does rasa theory relate to theories of absence we have outlined above?

Since the coherence of the Hindu imaginative world arises out of transcendental Hindu laws which, for the Hindu, are grounded in a self-evident ontology, a given literary text is viewed not in terms of its inner dynamism (of design, of character, etc.) but as a carrier of a multiplicity of rasas where response, the starting point of the aesthetic process, takes priority over structure. Read through rasa theory such well-known texts as Kalidasa’s *Śakuntalā*, a thoroughly dramatic work, and Jayadeva’s *Gītagovinda*, a “stilled drama” or *citrakāvya*, are unified aesthetic objects because both are dominated by the erotic rasa *śṛṅgāra*. It is this rasa—*śṛṅgāra*—that gives these texts their coherence, even though this rasa, which exists only as an abstraction, has little to do with the real, lived experience of the audience. The theory in fact closes the literary text off from those principles that lead to actual, historical identifications. Rasa theory thus reinforces *imaginary* identifications by insinuating in effect a radical incommensurability between emotion and text. The implied distanciation between noncontingent stable emotions and their abstraction (between *bhāva* and rasa) is linked to the general theory of Sanskrit poetics. We have to be clear on one point though. It doesn’t follow that Indian texts are therefore incoherent and lack, as suggested by S. H. Butcher, “unity . . . spiritual freedom.”⁶³ Rasa in fact imposes both a “reading coherence” and psychological variety as well as individual introspection in spite of van Buitenen’s contrary views on the subject.⁶⁴

The way in which we should address rasa theory is not in terms of objective harmonies in the texts themselves but rather in terms of a number of cultural imperatives as such. At the level of generality, rasa is the state of *ānanda*, a word that carries with it the senses of both blissful joy and union with Brahman⁶⁵ as well as “orgasmic rapture.”⁶⁶ At the more specific level, individual rasas may reflect other tendencies in the culture. One especially productive rasa is *śṛṅgāra* or the erotic, a rasa that indicates rather well the element of deferral that is at the heart of the culture itself. It is not unusual for poets to represent the narrative of lovers through two interdependent aspects of *śṛṅgāra* rasa: love in union (*sambhoga*) and love in separation (*vipralambha*). What Friedhelm Hardy calls “bridal mysticism”⁶⁷—or the poetics of *viraha*—breaks the formal limits of the abstract category of *śṛṅgāra* by destabilizing that aesthetic response through an uncanny narrative in which love becomes both union and separation. Love has to be displaced or deferred, its unity destabilized: desire becomes its own lack. We get here echoes of the perennial metaphysics of the negative way in Hinduism: “*neti, neti*, not thus, not thus,” exclaim the gurus of the Upanishads when attempting to represent in words the ineffable mystery of Brahman. Thus in Jayadeva’s treatment of the theme of Radha-Krishna eroticism in the *Gītagovinda* and indeed in many other bhakti appropriations of precisely this theme, what is emphasized is the flux itself, the alternation between union and separation, between desire and its fulfilment, between attraction and rejection, between bliss and despondency. The subject situated between *sambhoga* and *vipralambha*, union and its absence, experiences moments of uncertainty that cannot be grounded in any single reality. Yet far from signifying a cultural uncertainty, a lack of spiritual unity or freedom, the move here is totally structural and part of a system that is linked to our conception of an absent center in Indian culture. The insistence upon flux, upon alternation, is also summed up in other key (metaphysical) dualities such as *pravṛtti/nivṛtti* (activity and repose) and *surati/nirati* (enjoyment and salvation) where a congealed desire toward instability is situated in the space of the slash that divides the two terms. The alternation that I speak of here is not to be explained away as a matter of a failure to think through the domains of reason, ethics and aesthetics. Rather the stress on flux, on negation, on difference and otherness arise out of theories of language and culture that predate de Saussure and Durkheim by a couple of millennia.

THE SELF AND THE OCEANIC SUBLIME

We began at the difficult end of the Self-Other nexus by examining Brahman as the misunderstood sublime object of Hegel. We must now look at the cultural economy of the “Self” itself in classical Hindu thought.⁶⁸ It goes without saying that no comparable civilization has argued over definitions of