

Text of talk at the Asian Writers Conference:
“Environment and Identity : Shores of Selfhood - II”

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I was asked to talk about “Identity and Environment – Shores of Selfhood.” But it’s a talk I’ve already delivered at the Vegas Valley Book Festival, so I wrote a sequel. That was about resistance to fixed identity. In this, I share a methodology for dismantling identity – with the help of aesthetics.

First, I propose that we write our selves. You are your author, and your reader. You play a part and then replay it as viewer, or you play and review simultaneously, tracking narrative, tensions, revelations, character development... and if the author in you wants to, assuming is able to, you revise the script, especially if the audience in you is not satisfied. Even if you have a philosophy of predetermination where you are not your author, you must at least be a stenographer, and your narrative – you – can not be written without your co-operation, surely.

If I write myself, I can take the help of aesthetics to do a better job. I draw from the *Natyashastra*, a treatise on poetics of Sanskrit drama attributed to Bharata. The ideal drama evokes a dispassionate delight in the audience who can see the entire spectrum of life by way of emotional responses called *rasas*. The eight main *rasas* – poorly translated – are love, pity, anger, disgust, heroism, awe, terror and comedy. I then ask why it is that I can include them all when I write text (literature), but feel inclined to censor and edit them in the writing of my self? I permit love, pity, heroism, awe, comedy, but hide anger, disgust, terror. And among the thirty three additional transitory *rasas*, I have difficulty with shame, envy, weakness, death, indolence, despair, weariness, inconstancy and fright.

Stylization is the next point I draw from the poetics of the *Natyashastra*. Anyone who has seen an Indian classical dance performance knows how stylization produces aesthetic distancing – a term I take from another time and place, Bertolt Brecht. If I can consider my speech and actions as stylized expressions, I may be able to arrive at a dispassionate, detached appreciation of my work-in-progress, an inclusive and expanding identity.

Let’s take the *rasa* disgust to think this through. Can it be all right to feel disgusted, just as it is all right to be pleased? If “disgusting” is not a pejorative word, and “pleasing” not a term of approval, they become responses which show *where* we stand in relation to the sources of these emotions. Do I become non-political, or unethical with this exercise? No, I let the *rasa* be expressed, let it be, keep it in its place, and maintain my role as audience of myself at the same time, without confusing my disgusted self with myself. I am not proposing lack of passion in the play, in the act. I am suggesting the continual or at least frequent presence of audience, so that there is reduced misidentification of my response with myself. As long as there is detachment, the unethical action can not occur.

Our writing, i.e., our writing of ourselves, happens in an impoverished environment. Advertising, television and movies present ideas about what is acceptable and what is not, and online communities reinforce who we think we are, or who we want to be. We want to cultivate depth and specialization, but we are too susceptible to being cornered. Preference and abhorrence, be it on GoodReads or Facebook or in interviews, becomes an identifier, and as one’s club of like-minded friends gets larger, one is pushed into a smaller idea of self, that we no longer have a liking for, and worse, a use for. I ask, why should anyone like themselves at all, is one so little? Can one not love oneself, give oneself a large repertoire, let any and every *rasa* express itself and never mistake it for identity?

I am inspired by the aesthetics of *rasa* in Sanskrit drama, but I do not see it as a non-western East, a GPS corrective to a lost-in-the-west Christopher Columbus! The “west” offers similar sources. Aristotle in *Poetics* discusses representation of men either as “better than in real life, or as worse, or *as they are*.” The audience in Greek drama emotes in sympathy as well as awe and reaches a catharsis while the use of masks helps maintain distance. In Dante’s *Divine Commedia*, hell’s gates declare it is a part of the plan of the “maker,” existing *because* of “justice” “wisdom” and “love.” (I see the hilarity in the revision the title went through later, from *Comedy* to *Divine Comedy* ... after all, it must be a comedy for God, it doesn’t seem a convincing comedy for those in hell or purgatory!)

In fact, my trigger for this talk comes from reading Ovid and feeling nauseated – the gory activities of gods, the hideous transformations of humans. Stuck in Book 1 of the *Metamorphosis* and unable to proceed, it struck me that my response was a *rasa*. I wondered if the intense revulsion was a form of exorcism, or – as per Buddhist teaching – a counterpart of desire, and I found myself suddenly willing to entertain Ovid, found myself settling into a new idiom for what I know via Hindu mythology – the terrible manifestations of divinity.

Applying the *rasa* theory gives me a practical tool with which to approach two other ideas I fancy, but have no handle on. One is Krishna’s recommendation in the *Gita* that one must rise above both good and evil. The other is Keats’ negative capability. How does one write this expansiveness, this exalted aesthetics into oneself? Determine the indeterminate? Receive the unrepresentable? Applying *rasa* theory to oneself seems to solve this problem, dealing with it in parts, allowing one to observe and get consciously involved in the act of writing oneself in a continually expanding space. It’s a good start to attempt this with natural encounters, and perhaps deliberate encounters can then work as a test. An example I can think of is when, a vegetarian tantric yogi partakes of meat – I imagine that would be a way to know whether one has overcome a habitual response or judgment.

I end with a quote by Robert Duncan (a quote which is not to be misrepresented or mistaken for the unethical) – “The poet’s role is not to oppose evil, but to imagine it: what if Shakespeare had opposed Iago, or Dostoyevsky opposed Raskalnikov – the vital thing is that they created Iago and Raskalnikov. And we begin to see betrayal and murder and theft in a new light.”(669) It does not mean we must try to be Iago or Raskalnikov? It means our choice in the matter must come not from hating Iago or Raskalnikov, but from understanding them, which we can only do if we allow them to live in the first place.

Works Cited: Duncan, Robert and Denise Levertov. The Letters of Robert Duncan and Denise Levertov. Eds. Robert J. Bertholf and Albert Gelpi. Stanford: Stanford U. Press, 2004

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