

ON PLAY AND AESTHETIC THEORY

T. R. MARTLAND

Although both ancient Greek and ancient Indian philosophical speculations insisted upon an underlying unity in the universe, it is frequently noted that by and large Indian speculation was concerned with the loss of that unity, and consequently focused upon ways to bring it back, whereas by and large Greek speculations took the loss more as a matter of fact, and consequently focused upon the results of the loss, upon the divisions of the unity, i.e., upon empirical studies.

The observation seems to be accurate. So far as India is concerned it is especially evident in the *Upanisads*, but if we press a little it is also evident in a different way in the *Rig Veda* where caste divisions first appear.

When they divided Purusha, how many portions did they make ?

What do they call his mouth, his arms ? What do they call his thighs and feet ?

The Brahman was his mouth, of both his arms was the Rajanya made.
His thighs became the Vaisya, from his feet the Sudra was produced.

(X. 90. 11-12)

Later, in the *Brahmanas*, the divisions appear in their more developed form and we even find talk of this now divided unity to be the ideal social community, an organic socio-religious structure functioning through the co-operation of all its divisions: the Brahmins as the head of the body, the Kshatriyas as the arms, the Vaisyas as the trunk, and the Sudras as the feet.

But notice, and this is my point, the priest is assigned the place of the mouth or head. As such, it is true, he represents society and we might say a kind of acceptance of the loss of unity, but as priest he also embodies the force for expressing dissatisfaction with the loss. Remember, it is he who is obligated to push into Nirvana.

Aristotle provides our classic example so far as Greece is concerned. It is he who is most responsible for the ensuing Western emphasis upon empirical studies. Living things in this world fascinated him. Not only do we have his *History of Animals*, the longest of all his writings, even after omitting the tenth book which may not be his, and incidentally in which he speaks of elephants and of Indians (Bk. IX, Ch. 1, 610a), but we have *On the Parts of Animals*, *On the Generation of Animals*, *On the Progenerations of Animals* and perhaps *On the Motion of Animals*. And to this list we should add *On the Soul* which Aristotle quickly tells us "contributes greatly to the advance of truth in general, and above all, to our understanding of nature, for the soul is in some sense the principle of animal life" (Bk. 1, 405a5).

And he is a witness to Western empiricism on a more profound level. His interest in the products stemming from the loss of universal unity is in harmony with his rejection of the Platonic emphasis on an ideal world existing apart from the phenomenal world which men experience everyday. He rejected the Platonic tendency toward an abstract *ousia*, that is, a tendency to separate that which is common to individuals from particular phenomenologically experienced individuals, and in its place he affirmed what I have elsewhere called a concrete *ousia*, an essence in which what is common to individuals exists in the individual species themselves.

This allowed him to effect a methodology using metaphors, and further, allow these metaphors and similes to develop into allegories. Thus with some philosophical justification he could look to the creatures of the world, and mingle observations about small birds crowding about the owl with folk stories about the enmity between the eagle and the serpent and the friendship between the fox and raven. He could focus upon what is unique about the things of this world and at the same time point to what they have in common, insisting they share a unity, for those who have eyes to see.

"In the great majority of animals there are traces of psychical qualities and attitudes, which qualities are more markedly differentiated in the case of human beings. For just as we pointed out resemblances in the physical organs, so in a number of animals we observe gentleness and fierceness, mildness or confidence, high spirits or low cunning, and, with regard to intelligence, something akin to sagacity." (*Historia Animalium*, 488a)

As a result we find talk of the salacious partridge, the chaste crow, the intelligent and timid stag and hare, the mean and treacherous snake, the noble and courageous lion, the crafty and mischievous fox, the cautious and watchful goose, the jealous and self-conceited peacock, and finally of man, who alone is capable of deliberation. (*Historia Animalium*, 488b)

I hope this does not suggest that Aristotle leaves behind his interest in empirical observations. It is only to point out that though he does focus upon the empirical world, upon the results of the loss of the underlying unity of nature, his methodological assumptions also allow him to generalise from these empirical observations. It is as if from the point of view of external presentation or empirical observation he thought the creatures of his world express their unique individuality and are important in themselves, and from the point of view of internal analysis he thought they express universal truths, a knowledge which transcends empirical observation.

II

Now I would like to suggest that this trip back to universal truths, harbingers of the underlying unity which so interested Indian philosophers, is interesting to readers of the *Journal of Comparative Literature and Aesthetics* because its applied method, with all of its dangers, is the means by which the West moved forward to a theory of art very much in keeping with what I see to be the full implications of Nataraja, of playful (*lila*) creativity. But I must add, these are implications which Indian speculation, because of its continued focus upon a primordial unity, hesitated, and I dare say still hesitates, to defend.

In order to explicate this suggestion I will trace a pathway to that theory of art from Aristotle's empirical observations of the honey bee. Aristotle is rather accurate in what he says about bees. Although he continues to speak of "kings", all the while suspecting they may in fact be "mothers", from an idea that they bear or generate the bees," (*Historia Animalium*, 553a), to his credit he hesitates to compromise his observations by forcing on them a too easy parallel of the bee society with human society or in fact even to make moral analogies.¹ But this reserve quickly dissipates with later writers. For example, consider Virgil's impressions in the *Georgics*, written around 34 B.C.E.

I shall portray for you a marvelous scene;
A perfect, model state;...

... ..

Under majestic laws, This species, solely,
Has a homeland, is sure of its household gods.
They work in summer, planning for the cold,
And store their gatherings in a common place.
Some organize for food and consent
Are put to work in fields: inside the fort,
Still others lay foundations for the combs,
Formed of narcissus-tear and resin glue,
And hang on these the walls of clinging wax;
Others rear the young, their nation's hope;
And others press the pure transparent honey,

.....

Some by lot are posted at the gates,

.....

Or shoulder loads brought in, or close their ranks
Against the drones, to keep those idlers off,

....

And though their narrow life is quickly spanned
(They never last beyond the seventh year),
The race lives on, the household's fortune stands
Through many years and many generations.
They serve their king more slavishly than Persians,
Than Parthia's people, Lydia's or Egypt's;
(Bk. IV, 3-518)

A little more than hundred years later Pliny carries on in a like manner, 'What men, I protest, can we rank in rationality with these insects, which unquestionably excel mankind in this, that they recognize only the common interest?'² As did Aristotle, he too notes that the "kings" may in truth be concerned with procreation, but his proclivity for making parallels with human society allows him only to think of them as possibly husbands and fathers, never as mothers. An example of his style is as follows:

The commons surround him (the king) with marvellous obedience. When he goes in procession, the whole swarm accompanies him and is massed around him to encircle and protect him, not allowing him to be seen. During the rest of the time, while the people are engaged in labour, he himself goes the circuit of the works inside, with the appearance of urging them on, while he alone is free of duty. He is surrounded by certain retainers and lictors as the constant guardians of his authority³....

Later Christian observers follow this line of discourse and are no less inclined to generalize. Basil of Cappadocia in approximately 370 C.E. is quick to assert "the cock is proud; the peacock is vain...; doves fowls ate amorous.... The Partridge is deceitful and jealous, lending perfidious help to the huntsmen to seize their prey."⁴ As for bees:

Listen, Christians take the bee for your model The book of Proverbs has given the bee the most honourable and the best praise by calling her wise and industrious. How much activity she exerts in gathering this precious nourishment, by which both kings and men of low degree are brought to health! How great is the art and cunning she displays in the construction of the store houses which are destined to receive the honey!⁵

What he says about the "kings" is no less forceful and moralistic.

It is not election that gives him this authority; ignorance on the part of the people often puts the worst man in power; it is not fate; the blind decisions of fate often give authority to the most unworthy. It is not heredity that places him on the throne; it is only too common to see flattery, living in ignorance of all virtue. It is nature which makes the king of bees, for nature gives him superior size, beauty, and sweetness of character.⁶

Seventeen years later, Ambrose, Bishop of Millan continue in the same vein. "Do you hear what Prophet says? He enjoins on you to follow the example of that tiny bee and to imitate her work The bee, though weak in body, manifests her strength in the vigor of her wisdom and in her high regard for virtuous deeds,"⁷ As for their "kings", he very much follows Basil.

There are notable and natural characteristics in the king as he appears among the bees. He must be, for example, outstanding in size and beauty. Besides that, he must possess what is conspicuous trait in a king -- gentleness in character.⁸

And he seems to be aware of Virgil as well. For example he too reports that supposedly the bee custom of self sacrifice far not obeying the laws of "king" "is observed today by the Persians. They inflict death on themselves in punishment for a transgression. But people—neither the Persians whose subjects live under the severest laws nor the Indians or Sarmatians—hold their kings in such high esteem as do the bees."⁹

III

It should be obvious that Aristotle's interest in directly observing the living things in this world has ceased to be of interest to these later commentators. What now dominates in explication is what the world's creatures are alleged to have in common. Gleaned from texts further removed from direct observation, the parallels they draw are always presented to extract a lesson. For example, following a suggestion from Virgil and Pliny, Ambrose declares

The act of generation is common to all. Their bodies are uncontaminated in the common act of parturition, since they have no part in conjugal embraces. They do not unnerve their bodies in love nor are they torn by the travail of childbirth. A mighty swarm of young suddenly appears. They gather their offspring in their mouths from the surface of leaves and from sweet herbs.¹⁰

As might be expected this theme proves to be useful for preaching celibacy and for the next thousand years we find references to the industrious and obedient virgin bee as model for monks.

And so it goes on through these centuries, with little variety. Consider the following passage from the 13th century text *De proprietatibus rerum*:

Bees make among them a king. and though they be put and set under a king, yet they are free and their king that they make, by kind love, and defend him with full great defence, and hold it honour and worship to perish and be split for their king And bees choose to their king him that is most worthy and noble in highness and fairness, and most clear in mildness, for that is the chief virtue in a king.¹¹

and these lines from Shakespeare's *The Life of Henry the Fifth*

Therefore doth heaven divide
The state of man in divers functions,
To which is fixed as an aim or butt
Obedience. For so work the honeybees,
Creatures that by a rule in nature teach
The act of order to a peopled kingdom.
They have a king, and officers of sorts,
Where some like magistrate correct at home,
Others like merchants venter trade abroad,
Others like soldiers armed in their stings
Make boot upon the summer's velvet buds,
Which pillage they with merry march bring home

To the tent royal of their emperor;
Who, busied in his majesty, surveys
The singing masons building roofs of gold,
The civil citizens kneading up the honey,
The poor mechanic porters crowding in
Their heavy burthens at his narrow gate,
The sad-ey'd justice with his surly hum,
Delivering o'er to executors pale
The lazy yawning drone.

(1: 5, 134-204)

But at last a major change does occur. It will put us in grasp of our suggested thesis. In the fourteenth century Petrarch, the first great representative of Renaissance humanism, attempted once again to rectify the Aristotelian balance between the almost lost empirical observation of unique individual things in this world and the dominant tendency up until now allegorize and find in these things of the world only universal truths which transcend in value whatever might be found by empirical observation. He did it on two levels, the practical and the theoretical. Practically he did it with his famous ascent of Mont Ventoux, of which he writes, "I was moved by no other purpose than a desire to see what the great height was like." Interestingly, he also tells of "an old shepherd, who tried to discourage us from the ascent with much talk".

He said that fifty years before, with an ardent youthful purpose like ours, he had climbed to the very summit and that he had got nothing from it but toil and repentance and torn clothes and scratches from the rocks and briars. Never, he said, had he heard that anyone else either before or after had ventured to do the same.¹²

As I say, Petrarch was no less eager to rectify the balance between empirical observations and speculative generalizations in theory. For example in a letter to Boccaccio, dated 28 October, 1366, he draws the analogy with a writer who should

take care that what he writes resemble the original without reproducing it. The resemblance should not be that of a portrait to the sitter—in that case the closer the likeness is the better—but it should be the resemblance of a son to his father. Therein is often a great divergence in particular features, but there is a certain suggestion, what our painters call an 'air', most noticeable in the face and eyes, which makes the resemblance. As soon as we see the son, he recalls the father to us, although if we should measure every feature we should find them all different.¹³

He thus concludes, "we writers must look to it that with a basis of similarity there should be many dissimilarities". Herein lies the change. That to which we shall henceforth look, he tells us, is not to the dissimilarities in order to lose them to a theory of similarities, but to recognize that out of a basis of similarity there is glory in the dissimilarities. And lo and behold, he garners support for his about-face by creatively changing the direction of the centuries-old allegory of the honey bee. "We should write as the bees make sweetness, not storing up the flowers but turning them into honey, thus making one thing of many various ones, but different and better."

This became the new analogy for the future. Approximately two hundred and fifty years latter Francis Bacon, the father of modern science, spells it out.

Those who have handled sciences have been either men of experiment or men of dogmas. The men of experiment are like the ant; they only collect and use; the reasoners resemble spiders, who make cobwebs out of their own substance. But the bee takes a middle course: it gathers its material from the flowers of the garden and of the field, but transforms and digests it by a power of its own. Not unlike this is the true business of philosophy; for it neither relies solely or chiefly on the powers of the mind, nor does it take the matter which it gathers from natural history and mechanical experiments, and lays it up in the memory whole, as it finds it, but lays it up in the understanding altered and digested. Therefore, from closer and purer league between these two faculties, the experimental and the rational (such as has never yet been made), much may be hoped.

(The New Organon, Aphorism XCVI, Bk. I)

We are put in mind of Nietzsche's three metamorphoses; the camel, the lion and the child, who like Zarathustra, in innocence says yes to the not yet.¹⁴ No longer does the West think of emulating the bee as if it were the ant, or talk of emulating spider in order to achieve similarities, in effect to weave webs of analogies out of its own mind sets. Since Petrarch the lesson learned by watching the bee is not one of hard work and obedience to the already known, but rather a lesson of creative and forceful innocence which makes things "altered and digested", different and better". In terms of an analogy once used by the American poet Robert Frost, the artist is now like the person who goes into the field to pull carrots. Although he is sensitive to the form which each carrot already suggests, he refuses to leave them as they are, and keeps

on pulling them patiently enough until he finds a carrot that suggests something else to him. It is not shaped like other carrots. He takes out

his knife and notches it here and there, until the prolonged roots become legs and the carrot takes on somethings of the semblance of a man.¹⁵

Here a kind of evolution takes place, not toward a formal explication of latent tendencies but as a succession of steps away from them. The contemporary art historian James Ackerman uses almost these same words. He insists, "evolution in the arts should not be described as a succession of steps toward solution to a given problem, but as a succession of steps away from one or more original statements of a problem", and then adds "what actually motivates the process is a constant incidence of probings into the unknown, not a sequence of steps toward the perfect solution".¹⁶

IV

My suggestion now is that this artistic "probing into the unknown", this "altering and digesting", making things "different and better", constitutes the full impact of playful *lila* creativity, Nataraja, the Lord of dancers, King of Actors. In the West it was Karl Groos who was one of the first to teach us to see that "artistic enjoyment", which he also insisted was something which widens and deepens human perception and emotion, was related to the "highest and most valuable form of adult play",¹⁷ and since Piaget there has been general recognition that although in play there is an "accomodation of activity to objects" (a kind of imitation) present, what actually dominates play is a move in the other direction' a creativity or what Piaget calls "an assimilating activity", which incorporates the external objects to *its* schemes.¹⁸ Thus, though in play the ego takes charge, it lets go of what is, altering and making everything different, including itself. This is why children play more easily than adults, they can more easily let go of themselves and of their old world.¹⁹

When this playful assimilating, creating activity is recognized or interpreted as the dominance or the enjoyment of the playful assimilating activity itself, its affinity with Indian theory is marked. We are often told the Lord Isvara's creative activity is a kind of sport or play done for its own sake, perhaps because of the simple enjoyment he derives from exercising his body, which ofcourse is only to say because 'he wants to', which is no acceptable 'reason' at all. In fact, in the *Bhagavatgita* we are told that we all must so act, because we must, without motive or ends to be attained, simply for the sport of it. But alas, and here is my caveat, it seems to me that Indian aesthetic speculation hesitates to hold onto play's and art's creativity, the assimilation of the world to their schemes. It hesitates to affirm play's and art's creative

fragmentation of the primordial unity. In Indian literature one seems to find always an appreciation of the arts "exhibiting *inner* relations of things" (italics mine), the calling for the arts being appreciated because it expresses not simply emotions, but emotions of a special kind, i.e., *deeply* felt emotions. I mean to say the eye or the mind is, as a consequence, always directed to something else other than the art work itself. If we think of William Gass's example of the striding statue which points, it seems Indian aesthetic theory all too often directs the eye to move beyond the finger's end whereas the sculptured figure really bids us stay and to journey slowly back along the tension of its arm.²⁰ For example I am thinking of when Shiva expounds the technique of drama to Bharata. Shiva quickly tells him that human arts must be subject to law and that herein lies its validity. In effect he is telling Bharata and all of us to put our outer expressions in harmony with our inner primordial unity. It seems he is telling us that his destruction of the past is effective for man in one direction only, to release him from individuality, to lead him to an inner wisdom deeper and older than any grasped through his individuality.

But from what we know of Shiva this is not at all the meaning of Shiva's playful dance as Shiva understands it *for himself*. And at this point Western speculation lends him its support. For Shiva himself and for the West, the playful dance spins out its force in the other direction by affecting an innocent playful probing into something different and some say, better, toward the destruction of primordial structures and laws and toward the creation of a new world.

Notes and References

1. His generally accurate and unvarnished accounts are continued in *Historia Animalium*, IX, Ch. 40, 625a.
2. Pliny's *Natural History*, Book XI, IV, 12.
3. *Ibid.*, Book XI, XVII, 53.
4. Basil, *The Hexameron*, Homily VIII,
5. *Ibid.*, Homily VIII, Chapter 4. Chapter 3.
6. *Ibid.*
7. Ambrose, *Six Days of Creation*, Eighth Homily, Chapter 21, Section 70.
8. *Ibid.*, Chapter 21, Section 68.
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Ibid.*, Chapter 21, Section 67.
11. Bartholomaeus Anglicus, *Medieval Lore*, ed. Robert Steele (London, 1907) p. 122.

12. *Letters From Petrarch, To Dionigi da Borgo San Sepolcro*, 26 April 1336. Book IV, 1, trans. Morris Bishop (Bloomington, Indiana, 1966), p. 46.
13. *Ibid.*, Book XXIII, 19, p. 198.
14. Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* First part, Zarathustra's Speeches, on the Three Metamorphoses.
15. Marguerite Wilkinson, *The Way of the Makers* (New York, NY, 1925), p. 207.
16. James S. Ackerman, "Style," *Art and Archaeology*, ed. James S. Ackerman and Rhys Carpenter (Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1965), pp. 174- 175,
17. Karl Groos, *The Play of Man*, trans. Elizabeth L. Baldwin (New York, 1901), p. 378.
18. Jean Piaget, *Play, Dreams and Imitation in Childhood*, trans. C. Gattegno and F. M. Hodgson (New York, 1962), pp. 84- 87.
19. "Every genius is already a big child since he looks out into something strange and foreign, a drama, and thus with purely objective interest: Accordingly, just like the child, he does not have the dull gravity and earnestness of ordinary men, who, being capable of nothing but subjective interests, always see in things merely motives for their actions". Schopenhauer, *The World As Will and Idea*, Supplements to the Third Book, Chapter XXXI "On Genius", Vol. II.
20. William H. Gass, *Fiction and the Figures of Life* (New York, 1970), p. 49

Professor of Philosophy,
 State University of New York,
 Albany, New York, U.S.A.