

## Umberto Eco <sup>1</sup>

### Rasa and Taste: a difficult synonymy

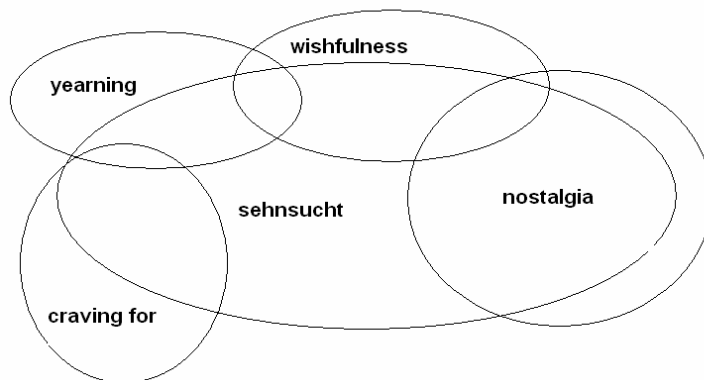
Every attempt to translate not only the words but the concepts of a given culture into the terms of another one depends on the same principles we use for translating from a given language into another.

We know that there are no synonymous terms and that before translating we must compare the different semantic structures of two languages, to ascertain identities and differences, and then to negotiate a prudent translation able to take into account similarities and diversities in meaning.

Consider the German word *Sensucht*. Its “semantic space” can be only partially covered by terms like *nostalgia*, *yearning*, *craving for* or *wishfulness* (while none of them can render it adequately).

The only way is to find what all these concepts have in common and what they do not have.

FIGURE 1



Only after having made such a comparison we can make a decision about the right (or the less wrong) term we can use in English, according to the context and to the situation in which the word is uttered.

Those who are familiar with the philosophy of Wittgenstein have probably recognized that I am dealing with a sort of language game defined as *family resemblances*.

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In his *Philosophical Investigations* (Aphorism 65-69) Wittgenstein's, speaking of language-games, writes:

*For someone might object against me: "You take the easy way out! You talk about all sorts of language-games, but have nowhere said what the essence of a language-game, and hence of language, is...."*

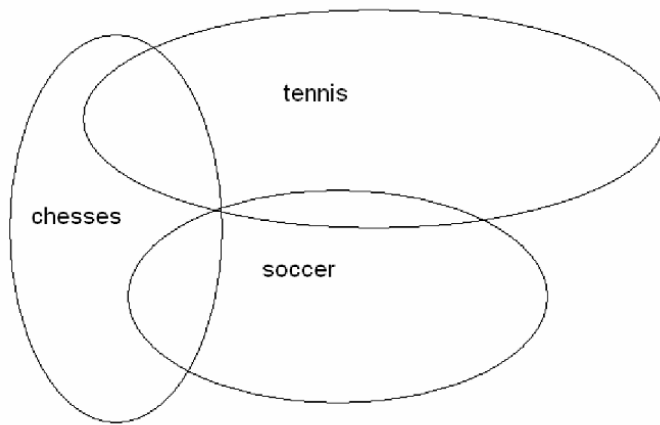
*And this is true.-Instead of producing something common to all that we call language, I am saying that these phenomena have no one thing in common which makes us use the same word for all - but that they are related to one another in many different ways. And it is because of this relationship, or these relationships, that we call them all "language". I will try to explain this.*

*Consider for example the proceedings that we call "games". I mean board-games, card-games, ball-games, Olympic games, and so on. What is common to them all? Don't say: "There must be something common, or they would not be called 'games' "- but look and see whether there is anything common to all. For if you look at them you will not see something that is common to all, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that. To repeat: don't think, but look! ... I can think of no better expression to characterize these similarities than 'family resemblances' ... And I shall say: games form a family.*

In fact. tennis and soccer have a ball in common, but in tennis people use arms and I soccer they use feet. One plays chesses and roulette in order to win, but in chesses ability is required, while in roulette one relies only on the vagaries of fortune. Moreover in roulette money plays a fundamental role, but this does not happen with chesses. In certain games there is competition, which lacks in others. Some games are solitary, some other require a team. And so on and so forth.

One could say that we must try to compare games in the same way in which we have compared the concept of *Sensucht* with similar but not identical concepts in English languages:

FIGURE 2

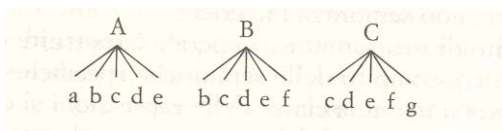


However it seems that there are no features in common between the activity of two girls skipping (a physical amusement, without competition, and which provides an innocent and peaceful joy) and a compulsive gambler betting at the roulette (when, if the gambler is betting his last money, there is not even pleasure but rage and stress).

In spite of this it has been remarked that, in order to detect a family resemblance between two given items, it is not indispensable that they have all their features in common.

Let us to consider three concepts A, B, C analyzable in terms of common features. It is clear that every concept possesses some of the properties of the other two but not all of them. Thus, given the following situation

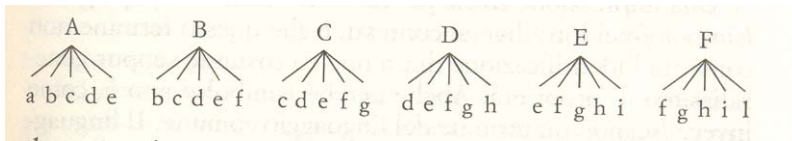
FIGURE 3



we can say that the three concepts have something in common. It looks as the situation of the various games.

But let us now broaden the series according to the same criterion, so to get the following result

FIGURE 4



At the end there is no common property between A and F, but one: they belong to the same network of family resemblances, and it can happen that in some context A and B will be designated by the same word just because they belong to the same network and by virtue of their proximity with such concepts as B, C, D and E.

The game of finding out family resemblances is a very risky one, but it is indispensable if we want to compare allegedly synonymous concepts in different culture.

Let now me try to tell a personal experience. During the fifties, more or less after my doctoral dissertation on Medieval aesthetics, I was stimulated by some English translation of Indian aestheticians of the same period, like Anandavardhana (the *Dhvanyaloka* of is from the IXth century) and Abhinavagupta, who lived at the beginning of the XIth century and was a contemporary of many Arab and Christian philosophers. I was also interested by Baratha who was indeed more ancient, but his *Natya Shastra* influenced the thought of both Anandavardhana and Abhinavagupta.

I was interested by the concept of *rasa*, in so far as I found it translated as *taste*, *relish*, *flavour* (but also as *sap* o *juice*). The discovery was exciting because the concept of taste was absolutely absent in the Western Medieval theory of art. As an ability to judge of beauty, it appears in a non technical sense in the Italian Renaissance (as *gusto*). Filarete wrote in 1464: “I also used to like the Moderns; but, as soon as I began *tasting* the Ancients, I came to hate the Moderns....” *Gusto* is used in connection with beauty by Michelangelo, by Ariosto in 1532, by Cellini and others. But it is only in the XVIIth century and then in the XVIIIth century that it becomes a dominant aesthetic category.

*Taste, gusto* or *gout* are words endowed with many senses in the European languages, so that we can speak of the good taste of a food, of our taste for good wines, of the taste of an art connoisseur, but also of the special flavour of a work of art. Thus I did not feel troubled when recently, surfing through Internet, I find advertised a *Rasa Malaysian & South Indian Restaurant* – in the same way I could find advertised a French restaurant called *Au bon gout*.

When in the fifties I started reading the great Indian aestheticians I found myself immediately in hot waters because every time I identified a possible definition of *rasa* I immediately came across a contrasting definition,

It must be clear that I did not read and I still not read Sanskrit and that I was obliged to rely on my Western translations. Thus I was in the same situation as Saint Agustin, who developed a critical attitude toward the various translations of the Bible but suffered of an embarrassing handicap: he did not know Hebrew and moreover had a poor knowledge of Greek. Without surrendering, he decided to discover the very sense of the Biblical texts by comparing different Latin translation.

Since Augustine did not follow the modern criteria of a scientific philological approach, I did not dare to imitate him and that is the reason why, except a short essay written under the form of a review in the late fifties,<sup>2</sup> I gave up with Indian aesthetics and I did not attempt to play the role of a scholar in such a discombobulating matter.

But I like to return to that experience because, except the rare cases of full fledged scholars, to kind of acquaintance we commonly have with the thoughts of an exotic culture is the same of Augustine with the Bible. I think that my experience means something because usually intercultural contacts take place through translations, and when dealing with translations one does not know what the original text really said.

In this sense I am not here to explain how *rasa* can be translated or defined, but to show how embarrassing can be any intercultural confrontation.

Naturally I could trust Indian scholars who, knowing perfectly their culture, and being pretty well versed with the Western one (since they wrote in English) did probably their best to explain to a Western reader what *rasa* is.

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<sup>2</sup> "Problemi di estetica indiana", *Rivista di estetica* 3,1 1957, pages 119-129. I was reviewing my Western sources, namely Raniero Gnoli, *The aesthetic experience according to Abhinavagupta* (Roma, Istituto italiano per il Medio e Estremo Oriente, 1956), Pravas Jivan Chaudury "Catharsis in the light of the Indian aesthetics" (*Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, December 1956). I also consulted Ananda Coomaraswamy *The Transformation of Nature in Art*, 1934 (New York, Dover 1934).

But when we approach a different culture, we travel bringing with us some "background books", and the influence of these "background books" is such that everything the traveller discovers and sees, will be interpreted and explained in the terms of them. It is not indispensable that we bring them with us physically; I mean that we travel having a previous notion of the world, received by our cultural tradition. We are tempted to travel as we already knew what we are on the verge of discovering, because some previous books told us what we were supposed to discover. The influence of these "background books" is such that, irrespectively of what the travellers discovers and sees, everything will be interpreted and explained in the terms of them.

The whole of the medieval tradition convinced Europeans that there existed unicorns, that is, animals that looked as gentle and slender white horses, with a horn on their nose. According to an old tradition unicorns were living in exotic countries, like the kingdom of Prester John which was placed in India – even though at that time India was a pretty vague geographical notion sometimes meaning Asia in general.

When Marco Polo travelled to China, he was obviously looking for unicorns. Marco Polo was a merchant, not an intellectual, and moreover he was too young, when he started travelling, to have read too many books. But he certainly knew all the legends that at his time were circulating about exotic countries, so that he was prepared to meet unicorns, and he looked for them. Thus, in his way back, probably in Java, he saw certain animals that *looked* as unicorns, because they had a single horn upon their nose. Since an entire tradition prepared him to see unicorns, he identified them with unicorns. But since he was honest, he could not refrain from telling the truth. And the truth was that the unicorns he saw were very different from those represented by a millenary tradition. They were not white, but black. They had the hair of a buffalo, and their hoof was as big as that of an elephant, their tongue was thorny, their head looked as that of a wild boar. As a matter of fact what Marco Polo saw were rhinoceroses.

We cannot say that Marco Polo lied. He told the bare truth, that is, that unicorns were not so gentle as people believed before. But he was unable to say that he had met new and uncommon animals: he tried instinctively to identify them with a well known image. In cognitive sciences we would say today that he was determined by a *cognitive model*. He was unable to speak about the Unknown without making references to what he already knew and expected to meet. He was a victim of his background books.

It is psychologically impossible to travel without background books. But what is culturally, methodologically possible, is to compare our reciprocal background books and

to see what they have in common and what cannot be exactly translated from book to book and requires some form of negotiation. Otherwise – and I speak of a typical Western misprision – we can commit the sin of exoticism, or Orientalism, by which a given culture invents an ideal image of a different culture by misinterpretation and aesthetic *bricolage*, such as it happened in the past with European *chinoiseries*, Gauguin's Polynesia – not to speak of the Siddhartha syndrome and of the Indian mysticism translated in terms of New Age.

I think that the same happen to Western scholars approaching the Indian wisdom but it also happens to Indian scholars trying to read the whole course of the Western aesthetics on the light of their Sanskrit background books.

Not to mention Ananda Coomaraswamy, who did his best to translate the Indian philosophy not only in terms of Christian mysticism but also in terms of Western occultism, in 1965 I came across a book by Krishna Chaitanya, *Sanskrit Poetics* (London: Asia Publishing House 1965) and I found that the concept of *rasa* is similar to the aesthetic conceptions of Diderot, Wordsworth, Keats, Baumgarten, Goethe, Tolstoj, Baudelaire, Poe, Lipp's theory of empathy, Valery, Rilke, Odilon Redon, Pierre Reverdy, T.S. Eliot, Suzanne Langer, Crowe Ransom, and some other that I don't remember. Recently I found on Internet that Pryadashi Patnaik has published a study on the application of Rasa Theory to Modern Western Literature, referring to Majakovskij, Kafka, Camus, Conrad, Hemingway, Faulkner, Marquez, Eliot, Ionesco, Beckett, Lorca, Neruda and so on.

Obviously, if all these people were saying the same thing or had the same idea of art, nobody in the West could write any longer a study in the history of aesthetics because there would be nothing more to say. Happily for those that must publish in order to get a professorship in aesthetics, the history of Western aesthetics is a continuous struggle between different theories of art and beauty, and frankly I cannot see any connection or even any family resemblance between the psychological theory of empathy and Eliot's theory of the objective correlative, no parenthood between the theories of art as feeling and emotion and Eliot's theory of poetry as an escape from emotion, no links between Diderot and Keats – if not some accidental use of similar words in order to designate different phenomena.

Raniero Gnoli, in his introduction to the Italian translation of Abhinavagupta's *Tantrashara* writes that "Those who want understand Indian philosophy on the light of Western philosophy risk to understand very little if not nothing".

One can say that even in the history of Indian aesthetics we can find a series of competing and different definition of *rasa* – and I think to have understood at least this point – but in such a case the duty of a scholar is to isolate the differences not to sell meat as vegetables or vice versa.

What does it mean to translate *rasa* as “taste” when in the history of Western aesthetics *taste* meant, for different authors or schools, and in different times, a different phenomenon? Let us try to make a short survey of this unfortunate category.

1. *Taste is relative to time and place.* Malebranche in *La Recherche de la vérité* (1674) regards taste as pertaining to sensory things (*beautez sensibles*), an inferior, sensitive kind of beauty, and holds it as relative. Ogier (XVIIIth century) said that "The taste of nations is different. Spaniards imagine and prefer a type of beauty quite different for that which we prize in France, so it must not be doubted that the minds of nations have preferences quite different from one another, and altogether dissimilar feelings for the beauty of intellectual things, such as poetry".

2. *Taste has universal standards.* For other thinkers there were standards of taste which required precise and universal structures both of human minds and of the tasted objects, so that the same aesthetic appraisal can and must be shared by different persons in different circumstances, epochs and nations.

As such, taste at certain times was considered as depending on objective features displayed by the enjoyed objects and at other times it was considered as the power of evaluating the response of the mind to objects, so that beauty is no longer an objective characteristic of things in themselves, but consists in a relationship between the mind and its objects. Even Shaftesbury considers taste as the internal sense of a harmonic order perceived in certain objects and belonging to them and to the perceiving mind as well. It is inborn, but it needs refining; it depends on the character of a nation, but, stripped of accidental influences, it is universal.

Moreover, taste is a sort of irrational and emotional response or it requires reasoning?

3. *Taste is a matter of subjective feeling.* The first extensive use of taste as a mysterious, instinctive power enabling man to make the right choice in the different circumstances of life, as the foundation for a civilized behaviour, occurs in the works of the Balthazar Gracián, in the XVIIth century.

The Abbé Dubos (1719) defines taste as a matter of feeling, this feeling being a special faculty, defined as a “sixth sense”



For Montesquieu too taste is independent of reasoning and is the faculty enabling one to apply to individual cases the rules of art (*Encyclopédie*, 1757).

4. *Taste is based upon a conscious and cultivate intellectual ability.* For La Rochefoucauld, in his essay *Du goût*, even though taste is variable, depending on personal inclinations and circumstances, good taste (*bon goût*) is an instinctive power of correct evaluation based on judgment rather than on feeling.

The rationalist trend dominated in French aesthetics of the XVIIIth century. For the Abbé Batteux (1747), taste is knowledge of rules through a feeling which can be educated. Diderot conceives taste as a faculty, acquired through recurrent experiences, of grasping the true and the good, with whatever renders it beautiful, and of being instantly and vividly affected ("faculté acquise par des expériences réitérées, à saisir le vrai et le bon, avec la circonstance qui le rend beau, et d'en être promptement et vivement touché"). Vauvenargues (1746) and D'Alembert (*Encyclopédie*, 1757) seem to subordinate taste to reasoning. For Voltaire (*Encyclopédie*) taste comes close to reasoning, and may be corrected by reasoning. Good taste is universal, in spite of national and other differences of taste in general.

For Bouhours good taste is a sort of instinctive good judgment, "une espèce d'instinct de la droite raison". And La Bruyère writes that good taste is the effect of sound judgment: "Entre le bon sens et le bon goût il y a la différence de la cause à son effet" (*Les Caractères*, "Des Jugements," 1694).

One of the most complex arguments is the one of Hume. In some of his works he said that "Some species of beauty, on their first appearance, command our affection and approbation... But in many orders of beauty, particularly those of the finer arts, it is requisite to employ much reasoning, in order to feel the proper sentiment; and a false relish may be frequently corrected by argument and reflexion" (*Enquiries*)

In another essay he said on the contrary that beauty, properly speaking, lies not in the poem, but in the sentiment of taste of the reader. And where a man has not such delicacy of temper, as to make him feel this sentiment, he must be ignorant of beauty (*The sceptic*).

However in his essay "On the Standard of Taste" (1757) he tries solve this contradiction. He says again that taste is a subjective feeling, and that beauty does not belong to things in themselves but expresses the reaction of the mind to things, but then he continues this way:

It appears then, that, amidst all the variety and caprice of taste, there are certain general principles of approbation or blame, whose influence a careful eye may trace in all operations of the mind.

Some particular forms or qualities, from the original structure of the internal fabric, are calculated to please, and others to displease; and if they fail of their effect in any particular instance, it is from some apparent defect or imperfection in the organ.

(...) And not to draw our philosophy from too profound a source, we shall have recourse to a noted story in Don Quixote.

It is with good reason, says Sancho to the squire with the great nose, that I pretend to have a judgment in wine: this is a quality hereditary in our family. Two of my kinsmen were once called to give their opinion of a hogshead, which was supposed to be excellent, being old and of a good vintage.

(...) One of them tastes it; considers it; and after mature reflection pronounces the wine to be good, were it not for a small taste of leather, which he perceived in it. The other, after using the same precautions, gives also his verdict in favour of the wine; but with the reserve of a taste of iron, which he could easily distinguish. You cannot imagine how much they were both ridiculed for their judgment. But who laughed in the end? On emptying the hogshead, there was found at the bottom, an old key with a leathern thong tied to it.

The great resemblance between mental and bodily taste will easily teach us to apply this story. Though it be certain, that beauty and deformity, more than sweet and bitter, are not qualities in objects, but belong entirely to the sentiment, internal or external; it must be allowed, that there are certain qualities in objects, which are fitted by nature to produce those particular feelings.

Now as these qualities may be found in a smaller degree, or may be mixed and confounded with each other, it often happens, that the taste is not affected with such minute qualities, or is not able to distinguish all the particular flavours, amidst the disorder, in which they are presented. Where the organs are so fine, as to allow nothing to escape them; and at the same time so exact as to perceive every ingredient in the composition: This we call delicacy of taste (...)

Here then the general rules of beauty are of use... To produce these general rules or avowed patterns of composition is like finding the key with the leathern thong; which justified the verdict of Sancho's kinsmen..."

Thus it seems that with Hume we are dealing with two different but complementary notions of taste: (i) taste as *taste-for* (like in "he has a good taste for wines") which is a subjective attitude, and (ii) *taste-of* (as in "he is able to recognize the good taste of a wine") which implies the recognition of some objective qualities of the enjoyed objects, by virtue of an ability that must be educated and trained.

I do not dare to analyze today the attempt made by Kant in his *Critique of Judgement* (1.1.) in order to conciliate all these various notions of taste as the faculty of the aesthetic judgement.

For Kant the aesthetic judgement (i) involves a disinterested pleasure ("The delight which determines the judgement of taste is independent of all interest...), (ii) Universality without concept ("The beautiful is that which, apart from a concept, pleases universally" and the aesthetic judgement is not that which states that all flowers

are beautiful but the one which states that *this* flower is beautiful. The necessity that obliges us to agree on the beauty of this flower does not depend on an abstract reasoning, on the concept of a flower, on its purpose and on our personal desire but rather on our free feeling of this individual flower), (iii) regularity without rule and (iv) the sense of a purpose without any finality ("Beauty is the form of finality in an object, so far as perceived in it apart from the representation of an end."

As such, the beautiful is that which, apart from a concept, is cognized as object of a *necessary* delight and the aesthetic judgement requires a *free interplay of reason and imagination*.

Can these definitions of taste and beauty be identified with some Indian concepts? We have just seen that in Western Aesthetics usually the object of speculation is Beauty, which must be in some way defined and identified with some properties of the appreciated object. On the contrary it has been remarked that the aims of Indian Aesthetics are different. Max Muller said that the idea of Beautiful in Nature did not exist in Hindu mind. I know that Max Muller is (in this country) charged with racism, and it is possible that he misunderstood the Hindu mind. Thus I try to realize whether Indian aestheticians spoke of detectable properties of the object of aesthetic enjoyment or – on the contrary - of the feeling it produces.

Certainly in the most venerable and ancient among the theorists of *rasa*, that is, Bharata, the value of a theatrical action is praised first of all for the effect it produces on the mind of the spectator.

There are many studies on the analogies between Bharata's theory of *rasa* and Aristotle's theory of *catharsis*.

Bharata identifies eight Permanent States of Mind (like pleasure, rage, sorrow, laughter, terror, disgust, wonder, heroism) which are determined by some Causes and produce given Effects along with Mental States which accompany them.

When the Permanent States of Mind are represented in a drama, the Effects and the accompanying Mental States become Fundamental Determinant, Consequences (which are phenomena like fainting, sweating, crying and so on) and Transitory States of Mind (which are 33 and I cannot take into account today).

In this transformation of Permanent States of Mind into a dramatic representation, eight *rasa* are produced: Heroic, Comic, Pathetic, Fury, Heroic, Horrible, Disgusting, Marvellous and finally Peace and Tranquillity.

We realize that such an idea of *rasa* has nothing to do with the Western concept of taste. It has rather to do with the cathartic effect of the tragedy according to Aristotle. We know that the Aristotelian idea of catharsis comes from the medical Greek literature when speaking of the cure of an excess of enthusiasm by enthusiastic music. Likewise it seems that Bharata borrowed the idea and the very term of *rasa* from the Indian medical tradition – where it means the physical quality of the six tastes of sweet, acid, salt, bitter, astringent and insipid. And these six tastes stand for the bodily humours. Or, as the Ayurveda say, *rasa* was used to denote the vital juice that the digestive system extracts from food to be converted into blood, flesh, bones, marrow, fat, and sperm.

Now for Aristotle the tragedy is intended to produce in the spectator the feelings of pity and terror, and by virtue of these feelings the spectator undergoes the cathartic purification. However there are two ways of understanding catharsis in Aristotle's *Poetics*, for there is either a *homeopathic* or an *allopathic* interpretation of catharsis.

In the first case catharsis stems from the fact that the spectator of a tragedy is genuinely seized by pity and terror, even to the point of paroxysm, so much so that in suffering these two passions he is purged of them, and emerges liberated by the tragic experience. This interpretation seems more coherent with the medical origin of the term, and with the celebrations of Corybantism, the Eleusinian mysteries with their perfumes and drugs.

In the second case the tragic text places us at a distance from the passion that is represented, and we are liberated from passions not by experiencing them, but by appreciating the way in which they are represented.

Is Bharata's theory homeopathic or allopathic?

According to some authors (for instance Richard Schechner, "Rasa aesthetics", *The Drama Review* 45, 3, 2001) the tragic effect is linked to a physical experience. Schechner quotes passages where Bharata insists too much on the analogy between *rasa* and sensuous experiences like mixing different condiments and sauces, and some other modern interpreters seem to identify the techniques of the actor described by Bharata with Stanislavsky's method – so presupposing a sort of complete emotional identification between actor and character and spectator and actor.

If on the contrary I trust *The aesthetic experience according to Abhinavagupta* by Raniero Gnoli and Pravas Jivan Chaudury's "The concept of catharsis in Indian aesthetics", I feel tempted to find in Bharata (or in Bharata's interpretation provided by

Abhinavagupta) something very similar to the effect of estrangement or *Verfremdung* such as it appears in Bertolt Brecht's theory of drama.

Abhinavagupta quotes two previous commentators of Bharata, Batta Lollata and Sankuka. Batta Lollata assumed that art is an imitation of reality and that the effect of a drama is a spiritual state of particular intensity (and it seems that his interpretation is a homeopathic one), but Sankuka said that the *rasa* is not an intensified spiritual state because art cannot be an imitation. He said that when one sees a horse painted one doesn't mistake it for the original horse but one sees it as the representation of the original horse and thus derives the aesthetic pleasure through this identification. Since art cannot imitate all the qualities of the original subject hence it is just an inference and not an imitation. He used also the analogy with the fire in a forest: as we can infer fire from the smoke raising from above the top of a cluster of trees, in the same way the basic mental state can be inferred by the situation presented by the actor. In this sense certainly Sankuka's reading is an allopathic one.

According to Chaudury the *rasa* is clearly an allopathic experience in Abhinavagupta. It is not by chance that Abhinavagupta added to the eight *rasas* of Bharata a ninth one that can be translated as Peace and Tranquillity: this ninth *rasa* has not the same nature of the previous ones but is the final poetic effect which coincides with a state of complete detachment from the represented passions. This ultimate *rasa* is at once an emotional exaltation and a state of serenity because the represented emotions have a different flavour from them aroused in everyday life. The ordinary emotion is poetically transformed into a generic emotion, a universal idea, an ideal content. A given lady on the stage shedding tears only represents a universal "Ladywood" of the type in grief, and her tears mean the ideal content "tearfulness". Another author quoted by Abhinavagupta, Bhatta Nayaka (IXth century) had said that the spectators or the readers do not feel sorrow or happiness because they acquire a sort of "aesthetic distance" due to the poetic power of generalisation: on stage Rama's love for Sita, though particular, becomes the universalized experience of love in general.

That is why such a representation produces peace and tranquillity, because ordinary emotions are passively suffered while the generic emotions are enjoyed in a contemplative mood. Even though there is no reason for translating *rasa* with taste – at least not in the Western sense – in such a theory of the aesthetic detachment there is something similar to the Kantian theory by which the aesthetic pleasure is devoid of any interest. One could also find in Abhinavagupta's theory the Kantian idea that the

aesthetic judgement, though not conceptual, is in some way universal, or at least common to all the spectators of a drama.

Gnoli says that for Abhinavagupta "artistic creation is the direct or unconventional expression of a feeling or passion 'generalized', that is, free from all distinction in time and space, and therefore from all individual relationships and practical interest by an inner force within the poet himself, the creative or artistic intuition". This state of consciousness expressed in the poem is transferred to the actor and to the spectator. "All three - poet, actor and spectator - in the serene contemplation of the work of art, form in reality a single knowing subject, merged together by the same sensation and the same purification joy". But is this a genuine Indian reading, or the interpretation of the Indian thought by a Western scholar already familiar with the Kantian aesthetics?

In any case Abhinavagupta is not Kant. He was a mystical thinker and for him that disinterested pleasure was similar to the joy experienced when realizing the Brahman, the identification with the Divine. Both in *Locana* and *Abhinavabharati* he says that the aesthetic enjoyment is akin to the joy of tasting the supreme Brahman and that *rasa* is "the delectable savouring of the Self by the Self".

So far it seems that in any case the *rasa* is concerned only with the effect of the work of art, and not with its objective properties.

But we cannot forget two things: one is that in Bharata and in all his commentators a great attention is devoted to the special techniques that the author of a drama implements in order to produce the *rasa*, namely actors' gestures, speech, tears and many other theatrical strategies – to such an extent that even Abhinavagupta insists (as many Western philosophers of taste did) on the necessity to acquire, in order to feel the *rasa*, a good literary competences, and to educate one's taste (in the Western sense of the word) by the constant study of poetry. The language of feelings is not a private language but a set of rules that can be understood only by those who have learned the proper literary conventions. In this sense the *rasa* ought to be the enjoyment of some objective property of the enjoyed object. In this sense it seems that *rasa* is not only the taste-for but also a taste-of.

Between Baharata and Abhinavagupta there was Anandavardhana, and his *Dhvanyaloka* was commented by Abhinavagupta. In the *Dhvanyaloka* the theory of *rasa* moved from the theatrical experience to the poetical experience in general. First of

all, since in reading a poem we are less emotionally - I would say, less physically involved, than when watching a drama - the non-homeopathic but contemplative sense of *rasa* was thus reinforced.

But in the *Dhvanyaloka* the *rasa* appears also to be a *rhetorical* and *semantic* phenomenon. Anandavardhana develops the theory of *dhvani*, which is usually translated as *sound*. This metaphor encouraged many mystical interpretations, but on the contrary Anandavardhana says that language can convey a literal meaning, a metaphorical meaning and a sort of suggested and implicit meaning. Literal and metaphorical meanings are intended more or less in the Western sense – since there are many points in common between Indian linguistics and rhetoric and the corresponding Western theories. The implicit meaning can be understood without disregarding the literal one. For instance Anandavardhana quotes a verse from Kalidasa, that I try to translate into English from an Italian translation: “While the divine poet was speaking, Parvati, near her father, with her face reclined, was counting, as if she was playing, the petals of a lotus”. Anandavardhana says that the literal action of counting the petals suggests as implicit the joy of Parvati for her weddings and her modesty.

It is interesting to remark that a psychoanalyst like Jacques Lacan (in *Ecrits*, Paris, Seuil, 1966) speaks of *dhvani* as the revealing word of the analyst which discloses and reveals what the patient does not say and which remains implicit (or absent) in his or her discourse.

Anandavardhana lists and examines different levels of implicitness but only the kind of implicit meaning that he calls *dhvani* is the one communicated by a poetic work. It is something which shines upon all the linguistic elements and that can be felt as it happens with the charm of a beautiful woman, which is something more of the mere sum of her evident beautiful properties.

Anandavardhana's *dhvani* is what the poetic discourse leaves as implicit (he says, like an echo) and that cannot be easily translated by words, even though Anandavardhana says that it is not completely ineffable and can always be expressed or interpreted in some way.

As a matter of fact, Anandavardhana insists on conventional rhetorical manoeuvres that can elicit, with the *dhvani*, the feeling of *rasa*. Thus, I understand, the *rasa* can be in some way expressed or explained by analyzing its grammatical and rhetorical strategies.

Moreover in the *Dhvanyaloka* there are few cases in which Anandavardhana seems to speak of something similar to the notion of taste such as it was intended in the European XVIIth and XVIIIth centuries. In I.4. and in I.6. he speaks of various possible interpretations of the *dhvani*, and mentions certain authors that considered it something that cannot be expressed – so, it says, that “it can be recognized only by the aesthetic taste of the very sensitive persons”. I think that he was saying that the *dhvani* is something like the flavour of a wine, that cannot be defined by words, but can be appreciated only by refined connoisseurs who have a special ability in detecting it. Unfortunately I read the *Dhvanyaloka* in Italian and I do not know if the translator rendered with “gusto”, that is, “taste”, an occurrence of the word *rasa* or of some other word. However I feel encouraged to read that passage this way since it seems that, according to Visvanatha (in *Sahitya Darpana*, 1450 A.D.) the tasting of *rasa* - the vision of beauty - is enjoyed "only by those who are competent thereto".

If that “aesthetic taste” was a *rasa*, so for Anandavardhana we would have a double meaning of *rasa*, that is, the *rasa* as a subjective ability to perceive the poetic flavour (taste-for) , and *rasa* as the objective poetic sense of the poem (taste-of).

Anandavardhana does not define *rasa* but he links *rasa* with *dhvani*. The implicit meaning of poetry that cannot be expressed by other words is a *rasa*. In this sense the *dhvani*, which is still a rhetorical strategy, is the vehicle of a *rasa*. This point is not so clear in the *Dhvanyaloka* because Anandavardhana never defines *rasa*.

Interpreting Anandavardhana, Abhinavagupta will say that the *rasa* is the very soul of the *dhvani*. It seems that we have here a definition of *rasa* as a sort of ineffable poetic effect, which is still a sort of semantic phenomenon that vanishes, so to speak, into a more or less non rational feeling. In this sense the *rasa* is, metaphorically speaking, a taste in the sense of a poetic flavour. Thus many contemporary interpreters identify Abhinavagupta's *rasa* only with a sort of poetic intuition which eliminates every intellectual operation, in the sense of many idealistic Western aesthetics (such as the one of Benedetto Croce).

However, Abhinavagupta turned his attention away from the linguistic procedures which interested Anandavardhana, focusing his attention on our mental and emotional response to that linguistic strategy. Thus for him *rasa* should to be conceived in psychological terms, and the reader becomes the central focus of literary criticism. Abhinavagupta did not speak of the *rasa* as a pure unspeakable intuition devoid of any intellectual content. Without taking seriously recent interpretations that read



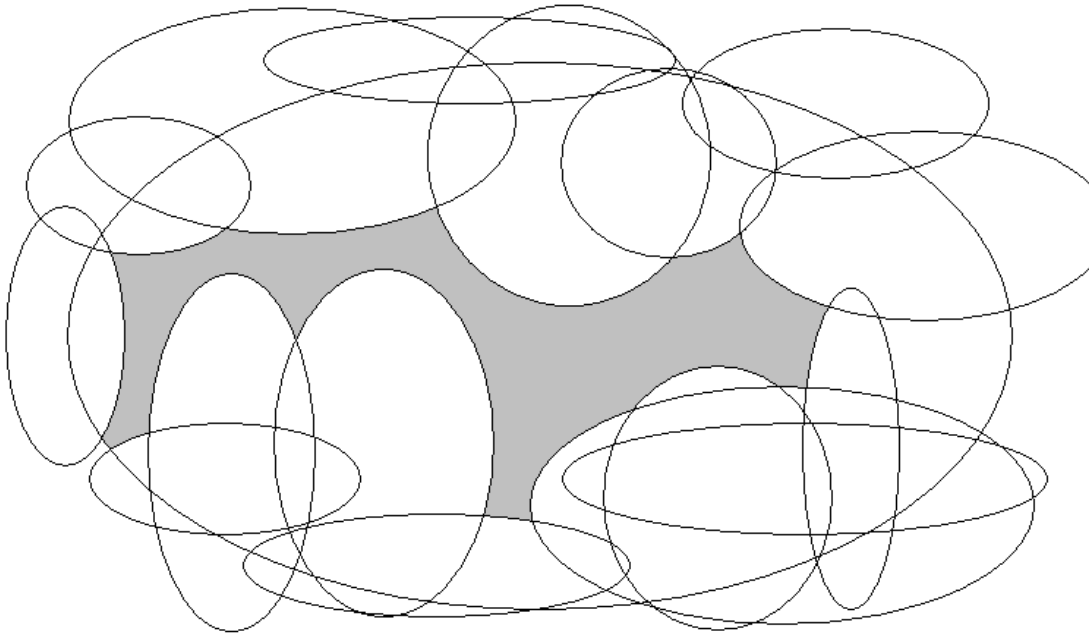
Abhinavagupta as a precursor of today's cognitive sciences, his *rasa* seems to be a sort of feeling mixed with intelligence.

In his theory there are many interesting psychological elements. For instance he speaks of the drama as something able to elicit in our mind the removed and still unconscious memories of our past experiences, so that by recollecting them we reconsider them in a more detached and perceptive way. It is just in transforming them in something more universal that we feel our identification with the Divine. Thus the poetic enjoyment represents a sort of higher intellectual knowledge

So far, I think we have identified at least 15 different aesthetic phenomena that I list by translating them in terms of Western aesthetics. *Rasa* can thus be translated as Homeopathic Catharsis, Allopathic Catharsis, Pleasure for the Imitation of a Passion, Pleasure due to the Inference from a Represented Passion, Perception of the Universal, Disinterested Pleasure, Pleasure for an Objective Linguistic and Rhetoric Strategy, Mystical Identification with the Divine, Competence to be acquired by cultural training, Perception of the Implicit, Taste-for, Taste-of, Psychological Phenomenon, Unspeakable Poetic Emotion, High Intellectual Knowledge. All of them cover in some way an aspect of the notion of *rasa*, without exhausting its whole semantic space. Not only, can't they be accepted all together because if the *rasa* is to be identified with one of them, then it cannot be identified with the others.

If I had to summarize this inextricable network of family resemblances, my diagram would become very complicated – something as the one in Figure 5:

FIGURE 5



At most, the only Western expressions that could translate *rasa* would be either the Sense of Beauty or the Aesthetic Response. But they do not are definitions at all; on the contrary, they are exactly what an aesthetic enquiry should define.

It seems to me that the same happens to *rasa*, It is not a definition but a phenomenon to be defined and as such in the course of the centuries and from author to author it underwent many and something conflicting definitions.

This suggests (on one side) that it is not easy to decide how many theories of *rasa* existed and to what an extent they are mutually compatible – and I think that a comparison with Western concepts can help not so much to find identities at any cost but rather to describe discrepancies.

On the other side, we should be convinced that all the Western attempts to find an analogy between the various *rasa* theories and Western theories are prone to failure. If there are many Western aesthetic theories, there are also many Indian aesthetic theories.

In any case it seems very difficult to identify the *rasa* with XVII and XVIII century European *taste*, which was either a subjective attitude or the subjective response, determined by some objective qualities of the aesthetic object – and in many case a detectable interaction between these two phenomena. Therefore the current translations of *rasa* with *taste* are misleading.

Maybe I am wrong, but I wanted exactly to stage the perplexities of a member of a given culture when facing concepts and words of another one. My perplexity is an invitation to implement more comparisons and closer mutual confrontations in order to better define family resemblances, and, when it is indispensable, to recognize unfamiliar diversities.

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