Introduction

A Forgotten Chapter in the History of Indian Aesthetics

While a larger history of medieval Indian theatre, comprehensively accounting for its different literary, theoretical, and performative strands, still needs to be written, the ambition of the present study is to explore the emergence of an original debate on the nature of dance and dramatic acting in the *Abhinavabhāratī*, Abhinavagupta's eleventh-century commentary on Bharata's *Nāṭyaśāstra*. We have nowadays gotten used to thinking and talking about traditional forms of performance in India as 'dance theatre', and to differentiating them in terms of styles, such as Bharatanatyam, Odissi, Kathakali, Kutiyattam, etc. To distinguish them further, these styles are sometimes linked with geographical labels, such as the 'dance of Tamil Nadu', 'dance of Orissa', 'Kerala dance drama', 'Kerala Sanskrit theatre', etc. This situation reflects artistic developments that can be observed in living traditions of performance today, and can be sometimes traced in premodern texts. It is rare, in India, to attend a theatrical performance that is devoid of on-stage musical accompaniment, or abstract forms of dance movement that are not combined with narrative gestures. The common denominator of such a variegated performance landscape is the combination of hand gestures, facial mimicry, and body movements, aimed at enacting a text that is either recited by the performer or rendered by a vocalist on stage, rhythmically marked by live instrumental music and enhanced with exuberant costumes. To describe these forms of spectacle, the Sanskrit language comes to our aid by adding, to the two terms consecrated for theatre and dance—*nāṭya* and *nṛtta*—a third term, *nṛtya*, that covers the grey area between the two.

Common and familiar as it is, this state of affairs is not reflected in the seminal treatise on theatre, the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, composed around the beginning of the Common Era and attributed to the sage Bharata. As its title indicates, the *Nāṭyaśāstra* is a treatise, or a work of specialist knowledge (*śāstra*), dealing with theatre (*nāṭya*), a composite object that accommodates within itself other artistic disciplines, most notably dance and music, to suit its own expressive ends. Despite its claims to comprehensiveness, the *Nāṭyaśāstra* does not deal with forms other than Sanskrit theatre, such as the genres of narrative dance known from later texts, nor does it allot a separate term to dance that does not consist of sheer abstract movement set to rhythm, but that uses gestures and facial expressions to mimetically render the lyrics of a song. While Bharata refers to the sole categories of theatre (*nāṭya*) and dance (*nṛtta*), authors from

the tenth century onwards began incorporating new labels, such as *nṛtya*, *geyarūpaka*, *uparūpaka*, etc., to speak about new forms of performance.

At the beginning of the eleventh century, up in the flourishing valley of Kashmir, the Śaiva philosopher Abhinavagupta commented, possibly for the last time, on the entirety of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*. His commentary is known as the *Abhinavabhāratī*, ‘Abhinava[gupta]’s Commentary on Bharata’s [*Nāṭyaśāstra*]’ or ‘The New Dramatic Art’. This exegetical work is best known for its very sophisticated aesthetic theory, centred on the *rasa* or the flavour of the poetic text and its awakening in the spectator through the staging of the play. Abhinavagupta’s ‘theory of *rasa*’, as it is known, was much acclaimed by later authors up to modern times, and became a standard in Indian aesthetics.¹ Despite an almost single-minded focus on the cognitive and linguistic aspects of *rasa* in modern scholarship on Indian aesthetics, the attention paid to the performative dimension of theatre in the *Abhinavabhāratī* is to no lesser extent worthy of consideration, and, as argued in this book, ought to be investigated as an integral part of Abhinavagupta’s aesthetics.

This general neglect of the performative aspects of drama can partly be explained by the highly technical character of the many chapters of the *Abhinavabhāratī* dealing with the staging process, coupled with the corrupt state of the text in the available editions and manuscripts. The techniques to which these chapters refer are moreover intrinsically inaccessible to us today, given the ephemeral nature of the performing arts. Besides these external reasons, there are reasons internal to the tradition too. The *Abhinavabhāratī*, in fact, is the last extant commentary on the totality of Bharata’s work, but is at the same time the last Sanskrit work to deal with theatre in such a large variety of aspects as are included in the scope of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*. These not only treat topics as diverse as stagecraft, acting techniques, and non-verbal codes of communication—such as mimicry, dance, and music—but also architecture and ritual. Later treatises on dramatics tend to reduce their scope to a discussion of dramaturgy proper, focusing on the classification of dramatic genres and on aspects of play composition and aesthetics.² Parallel to this new orientation in dramatics, or *Nāṭyaśāstra*, treatises on the adjacent branch of poetics, or *Alaṃkāraśāstra*, started to devote subsections to the discussion of dramatic

1 Abhinavagupta’s *rasa* theory would remain valid in its basic tenets and for many of his epigones until the time of Viśvanātha (14th c.) or even later. As Pollock (2016: 315) explains, even Jagannātha’s (17th c.) ‘view of *rasa* is basically that of Abhinavagupta, but now inflected by Vedānta epistemology’.

2 This format was inaugurated with Dhanañjaya’s *Daśarūpaka* (10th c.). Another case is Śārada-tānaya’s (1175–1250) *Bhāvaṇaprakāśana*, on which see most recently Cox 2016: 56–90.

genres and plot construction, treating drama as a particular instance of poetic composition (*kāvya*), and to consecrate a central place to the theory of *rasa*.³

At the other end of the spectrum, in the process of compartmentalizing the theory of drama, ancillary arts such as dance and music were no longer considered part and parcel of dramaturgy. Their techniques, however, continued to be described along similar lines in treatises specifically devoted to the individual art forms and, starting from the thirteenth century, also in combination as a single spectacular object called *saṃgīta*, an inclusive term for dance and instrumental and vocal music.⁴ Some of these texts bear traces of familiarity with the *Abhinavabhāratī* chapters devoted to dance and music, and explicitly recognize Abhinavagupta as an authority in these matters. The discussion on aesthetics in these technical treatises is sometimes reduced to a simple restatement of Bharata's *rasasūtra* and the enumeration of the names of the *rasas* and the aesthetic factors. The uniqueness of the *Abhinavabhāratī* in the history of Sanskrit dramatics appears clearly when set against the backdrop of this varied textual corpus. In this work, the most abstract speculations are always backed by examples culled from the living traditions of performance, and the technical instruction are, in turn, subsumed under the framework of a mostly coherent and comprehensive theory of art, whose guiding principle is *rasa*. Among the topics that best illustrate such a close integration of theory and practice in the *Abhinavabhāratī* is an elaborate discussion of dance and its boundaries, touching on the development of new performance practices and genres, as well as upon aesthetics.

Defining dance in the eleventh century was no anodyne affair. On the one hand, dance continues to be considered an ancillary art of theatre, and as such it has to contribute to its overall purpose, namely arousing in the spectator one of the eight (or nine) aesthetic flavours—*rasas*—conveyed conjointly by the poetic text and its stage presentation. On the other hand, dance is now an independent art endowed with its own genres, in which a solo performer typic-

3 Even though Abhinavagupta's discussion of *rasa* became very influential in the field of poetics, it was Ānandavardhana who first combined poetic and dramatic theory, in his *Dhvaṇyāloka*. Before him, Vāmana had already started to use examples from both poetry and drama to explain his poetic principles. A critical outline of the development of Alamkāraśāstra can be found in McCrea 2008.

4 Treatises dealing exclusively with music are known to have been composed in the second part of the first millennium. Available examples are the *Dattilam* of Dattila (ca. 8th c.) (Te Nijenhuis 1970; Lath 1978, 1988) and the *Brhaddeśī* of Mataṅga (ca. 8th c.) (Sharma 1992). Treatises devoted to dance alone appear somewhat later, the *Nṛttaratnāvalī* of Jāyaseṇāpati (13th c.) probably being the first example. The first known text in the new discipline and textual category of *saṃgītaśāstra* is the thirteenth-century *saṃgītaratnākara* of Śārṅgadeva.

ally performs abstract dance interspersed with the enactment of the contents of a poetic text embedded in a song, to the accompaniment of melodic and instrumental music. In both realisations, dance is so bound up with theatre, or with theatre's most peculiar feature, acting—*abhinaya* in Sanskrit—that it becomes difficult to set the two objects apart without their conceptual and semantic distinctiveness collapsing altogether. To put the question in a nutshell, echoing Abhinavagupta, are dance and theatre fundamentally different from one another or do they share the same nature, and if so, what would their defining characteristic and purpose be? A close analysis of the central portion of Abhinavagupta's commentary on the dance chapter of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, the fourth, reveals an unprecedented debate in which various opponents put forth arguments for and against the identity of theatre and dance, based on their individual mimetic purport and aesthetic impact. To establish whether dance can still be said to have an identity separate from theatre, and yet be performed in strict adherence, as it were, to the characters and emotional contents embedded in a text, requires a thorough examination of what makes theatre what it is, and what makes dance its 'other', the premise being that if an authoritative text such as the *Nāṭyaśāstra* uses two different words, *nāṭya* and *nṛtta*, then two different objects must equally exist.

If Bharata's main interest is to define Sanskrit theatre—and dance finds a place in his treatise as an element used in this complex multimedial art, on par with songs and musical instrumentation—Abhinavagupta, almost a millennium later, has to deal with a spectacular object that has grown to include new subgenres and forms, difficult to classify as either forms of theatre or dance. Abhinavagupta, in fact, has first-hand knowledge of the new genres of performance that feature a solo performer and variously combine abstract movements with singing, instrumental music, and acting, but purposefully opts to classify them as forms of dance (*nṛtta*), refraining from introducing the third category of *nṛtya*, as was already standard practice in Dhanañjaya's *Daśarūpaka* (10th c.). In order to do so, Abhinavagupta follows a dual strategy: on the one hand, he expands the category of dance so as to include, alongside abstract dance, aspects of mimetic or narrative dance used both within and without a dramatic performance; on the other hand, he proceeds to requalify the defining characteristic of theatre, i.e. dramatic acting (*abhinaya*), as a mimetic process that aims at producing, for the spectator, a quasi-direct visualisation of the contents of the dramatic text. In it, an actor in a costume indicative of his role delivers a speech with the appropriate tones and language, mimetic gestures and subtle expressions that convey his emotions. Narrative dance and other forms of storytelling do not meet all the characteristics of dramatic acting so defined, and consequently cannot count as theatrical forms, since they do not provide

the spectator with a vivid and lifelike cognition similar to a direct perception, which only can trigger an aesthetic experience. Following this logic, the new genres can only aspire to the status of 'dance' (*nṛtta*), as the process of dramatic mimesis is not complete in them.

As to forms of dance that participate in the staging of a Sanskrit play, be they abstract or mimetic, the discussion revolves around how to meaningfully integrate non-strictly linguistic elements within an aesthetic theory largely grounded in language and its operation—which can very well function without a spectacular dimension, as in the case of recited poetry. This matter does not exclusively interest dance and music, but it also concerns the various registers of acting that are the very hallmark of theatre. The latter include the voice (the text recited, but also non-discursive elements such as the different expressive pitches), the bodily language of gestures, the display of emotions through external symptoms such as tears, tremor, and the like, as well as the costume, which helps to identify the enacted role. This is what falls under the name of *abhinaya*, or dramatic acting, an art that the actor has to master if he wants to present a play on stage in a most effective way. More than an independent art—as *abhinaya* will never earn a place on the lists of the different arts of India—acting is the very activity of making theatre, of communicating things dramatically, a process that also includes aspects of dance and music. Concurrently, the use of acting—especially its bodily register (*āṅgikābhinaya*), which include gestures, facial expressions, and body movements—participates to some extent in the independent art of dance, especially in its mimetic or narrative aspect which, in present times, is the very hallmark of 'classical' Indian dance.

The commentary on the beginning of the section dealing with acting in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, i.e. the eighth chapter, devoted to bodily acting through facial expressions and the minor limbs, is missing in all extant manuscripts of the *Abhinavabhāratī*, and possibly permanently irretrievable. Concurrently, later treatises on dance, such as the *Samgītaratnākara* or the *Nṛttaratnāvalī* (both 13th c.), rely heavily on the *Abhinavabhāratī* for the description of dance techniques and describe the new genres of dance theatre using the category of *nṛtya*. Their authors, however, chose not to reproduce most of Abhinavagupta's theoretical reflections on the nature and function of dance and dramatic acting within the aesthetic process typically theorized for theatre. Under these circumstances, the passage from the fourth chapter that is critically edited and translated in this book becomes particularly relevant in view of its partial recovery of Abhinavagupta's insights about *abhinaya*, in that it asserts the individuality of drama as enacted literature and distinguishes it from other non-representational forms, for instance poetry, storytelling, epic recitation, and

singing. I have therefore resolved to focus on this very discussion in the fourth chapter of Abhinavagupta's commentary, which has been almost totally omitted from scientific discourse on dance of the medieval period, and which has received little attention in modern studies on Indian aesthetics.⁵ The presentation of Abhinavagupta's full argument on the nature of dance—intended in turn as an independent art adopting some of the features peculiar to theatre, as an activity connected to theatre but pursuing independent aims, or as an ancillary art subsumed under theatre's larger aesthetic scheme—vis-à-vis theatre and dramatic acting is intended as the present work's original contribution to the existing scholarship on Indian drama, dance, and aesthetics, but also on literature more generally and on the construction of scientific discourse about the arts.

In the present work, the main arguments of this debate are analysed on the basis of an extended textual passage, namely *Abhinavabhāratī* ad *Nāṭyaśāstra* 4.261cd–269ab. Part 1 of the book opens with an overview of the textual history of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* and the *Abhinavabhāratī*, with a focus on the structure of the fourth chapter on dance and its reception in the twentieth century. This is followed by a study in two chapters that aims at contextualising the passage critically edited and translated in Part 2. First, the development of dance practices in the period separating the text from its commentary is addressed, with an eye towards Abhinavagupta's exegetical strategies to account for novelty in art without transgressing the boundaries of traditional lore. Secondly, the aesthetics of dance, entailing a reflection on the mimetic process and the different roles of non-verbal communication media—such as dance and music—and dramatic acting is analysed within the larger framework of Abhinavagupta's *rasa* theory. Part 2 of the book contains the critical edition and translation of *Abhinavabhāratī* ad *Nāṭyaśāstra* 4.261cd–269ab. The Sanskrit text has been critically edited through a complete perusal of all the available manuscript sources, printed editions, and external testimonia. It is hoped that the recension of the manuscripts of the *Abhinavabhāratī* presented in the 'Introduction to the edition' will provide an overview on the still available textual witnesses, on their mutual relations and on transmission, prompting further studies on other sections of this labyrinthine text. The notes to the translation attempt to clarify Abhinavagupta's exegetical choices according to three sometimes irreconcilable motivations: formal adherence to Bharata's text, an interpretation of performance and its elements conforming to his *rasa* aesthetics, and the

5 An exception is the studies of Bansat-Boudon, who devotes important sections in her works to the discussion of dance and aesthetics in the *Abhinavabhāratī*. See Bansat-Boudon 1992: 399–415, 2004: 177–218.

adequation of theoretical data in line with the stage practice current in the tenth century.

Recovering Dance through Texts: A Note on Method

As a performance art of the most immaterial character, dance has left no tangible evidence of itself. While in the present day, an overwhelming variety of 'classical'⁶ dance forms, originating in different regions of India and endowed with their own textual bases, suggests the existence of a long-standing tradition of performing arts, for recovering the history of dance in the classical and medieval periods we can resort only to the sheer testimony of the texts, accompanied by a vast array of visual materials of difficult interpretation, including a plethora of sculptural and pictorial representations of dance and musical scenes.⁷ The impossibility of direct access to such practices, common to all performance traditions belonging to the past (be it theatre, music, or dance) as well as to most other cultural practices, is typically balanced in India by a large corpus of textualized knowledge falling under the broad category of *śāstra*. Despite the richness of this textual corpus, encompassing branches of knowledge for which other cultures possess no written record, its interpretation and translation poses a number of methodological challenges that now have to be dealt with.⁸

The name *nṛttaśāstra* ('Science of Dance') is seldom attested as an independent branch of knowledge,⁹ but treatises dealing partly or exclusively with the topic of dance were composed over a long time span, starting around the first

6 By 'classical' I intend here those forms of dance which, at the beginning of the twentieth century, came to be considered as 'essentially' sacred, and as having a special and continuous relationship with a high cultural past' (Chatterjee, quoted in Peterson & Soneji 2008: 6). The question of the classicization of the arts (ibid.: 1–40) will be dealt with briefly, and solely in connection with the instrumental and political uses of Sanskrit texts on dance, in §1.2.

7 For a survey of sculptural representations of dancers and dance scenes in India, see Vatsyayan 1977: 262–332. These pages offer a variety of visual depictions from different periods and regions, however their analysis focuses mainly on the identification of various poses and gestures in accordance with the descriptions of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, while no attempt is made to deal with their narrative, ritual, or social significance.

8 Beside *śāstras* for different art forms, i.e. theatre (*nāṭya-śāstra*), music (*saṃgīta-*° including vocal and instrumental music and dancing), architecture (*vastu-*°), and sculpture (*śilpa-*°), there also exist *śāstras* on elephant training (*gaja-*°), thievery (*caura-*°), etc. For an extended catalogue of attested *śāstras*, see Pollock 1989a: 25.

9 The term *nṛttaśāstra* is attested in the long section on the arts (*citrāsūtra*) of the *Viṣṇudharmottarapurāṇa*, a text which has been dated to the seventh or eighth century and assigned

centuries of the Common Era with the *Nāṭyaśāstra* and stretching across more than 1,500 years.¹⁰ Around thirty texts in Sanskrit are now available in print, and more titles are attested in manuscript form.¹¹ Such a large amount of sources dealing with the topic of dance is an indicator of the cultural importance that this art form assumed in classical and medieval India.¹² This textual corpus has been a privileged ground of enquiry for scholars attempting to reconstruct a history of Indian dance.¹³

While English translations of the major texts on dance are available today,¹⁴ no complete translation of the fourth chapter of the *Abhinavabhāratī* into any European language has been attempted so far.¹⁵ This is partly due to the corrupt nature of the text of the *Abhinavabhāratī*, which needs to be reconstructed at every step with the help of the available manuscripts and parallel sources. This type of material limitation makes any attempt at producing a viable translation painfully slow and often conjectural. But it is also the technical nature of this chapter that has prevented scholars from approaching the chapter on dance as a whole.¹⁶ Thus, internal limitations go hand in hand with external

to Kashmir (Inden 2000). It occurs in 3.2.4–5, and then with reference to the whole section devoted to this art form (chs. 3.20–34). On the recognition of *ṛtta* as a topic of specialist knowledge in Sanskrit literature, see Ganser 2011: 146–147.

- 10 The tradition might be even earlier, if one considers Pāṇini's evidence of lost *Naṭasūtras* in the fourth-fifth century BC. Moreover, taking into account the vernacular tradition, especially rich in Tamil and Telugu, technical literature on dance can be seen to extend even into the twentieth century.
- 11 The most complete and up-to-date survey of available texts on dance and their contents is Bose 2007. For a catalogue of manuscripts on the performing arts in Sanskrit, see Gupta 2016.
- 12 According to Vatsyayan 1977, references to dance and dancers are found as early as the Ṛg-Veda, although no codification is attested at this early stage. On dance as a motif in selected Vedic sources, see Bansat-Boudon 2004: 207–209.
- 13 See especially Bose 2007, and §1.2 below for a note of caution.
- 14 On the editions and translations of dance literature, see again Bose 2007.
- 15 Two translations of the fourth chapter of the *Abhinavabhāratī* into Hindi are available in the editions by Madhusudan Shastri (= E₂) and Parasanatha Dvivedi (= E₄). Both scholars, however, translate Abhinavagupta almost literally, leaving many of the textual problems unsolved in the translation, and fail to substantiate their sometimes apparently free interpretations of specific points. Fragments of the chapter on dance have found translation in various works. See Varma 1957, Bansat-Boudon 1992 and 2004, and Ramanathan 1999. Anna Tosato has been working on the chapter on dance in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* and on its commentary from an art-historical perspective, hence with concerns very different from those of the present author. In her work, she attempts to find new strategies for interpreting sculptural evidence containing dance depictions in the light of the Sanskrit treatises, preliminary results of which can be found in Tosato 2017.
- 16 Among the available studies dealing with aspects of the chapter on dance in the *Abhi-*

ones, to which must be added the previously mentioned lack of material evidence for interpreting the instructions on dance. In this connection, it is also worth raising the question of whether it makes sense at all to translate the technical portions and for whom. To the scholar, unacquainted with the technical vocabulary and possibly also with today's living practices of Indian dance, the technical portions of the *Abhinavabhāratī* appear quite obscure and inaccessible, while to the dancer, who draws his/her practical knowledge from the direct instruction of a teacher, the technical details contained in a text of the eleventh century end up looking more like the vestiges of a defunct past.

Another limit to presenting the translation of a technical treatise on dance to a scholarly public is posed by the prescriptive trappings of such texts. They present us, in fact, with fairly accurate descriptions of dance and its techniques, with classifications and categorizations of movements, procedures of performance, and hints to the aesthetic principles underlying the practices. Yet they do not provide any picture of the social, religious, or political contexts in which dance was performed. The study of the technical texts has to be therefore supplemented with the descriptions of dance performances embedded in other kinds of texts as well as their visual depictions.¹⁷ Conversely, the technical texts have been used to corroborate the descriptions found in other literary genres, especially in view of the correspondences in the technical vocabulary.¹⁸ Glossaries of technical terms replete with references to the existing literature have also proven useful to the study of this corpus of technical literature.¹⁹ In the exceptional case of geographically and historically situated texts, attempts have

navabhāratī, Bansat-Boudon (1992: 399–415, 2004: 177–218) has mainly dealt with the more speculative portion on the aesthetics of dance, here translated for the first time in full. Padma Subrahmanyam (2006) has analysed some of the concepts related to dance analysis. V. Raghavan (1965 = NR) prepared a useful concordance between the *Abhinavabhāratī* and the *Nṛttaratnāvalī*, although the passages borrowed by Jāyasenāpati mainly concern the parts on body movement, and nothing of the discussion on aesthetics is retained.

- 17 Such a broad study of the context of the performing arts in classical and medieval literature is beyond the scope of the present work, but is currently being carried out in a separate study.
- 18 This is the case, for instance, of Kālidāsa's description of the competition between the theatre masters Gaṇadāsa and Haradatta and their pupils in *Mālavikāgnimitra* (acts 1 and 2), whose technical terminology has been analyzed in Bansat-Boudon 1992: 271ff. in the light of Bharata's *Nāṭyaśāstra*. Another striking example is the description of the representation of the first act of Harṣa's *Ratnāvalī* in Dāmodaragupta's *Kuṭṭanīmata*, a Kashmirian text of the eighth century. For a translation, see Dezső & Goodall 2012.
- 19 See Bose 1995.

been made to link them to historically attested kingdoms and kingly patrons and to contemporaneous evidence such as that found in the sculptural material.²⁰

One of the advantages of working with the *Abhinavabhāratī* is that the text and its author are well established both historically and geographically. Moreover, Abhinavagupta provides a lot of details about the context of performance in his time, proving to be an exceptionally attentive spectator of Sanskrit drama and dance performances. To be sure, the cultural context to which the *Abhinavabhāratī* belongs is very different from that in which the *Nāṭyaśāstra* was composed. Being the object of several commentaries between the date of its composition and the eleventh century, the *Nāṭyaśāstra* has not been exempt from multiple interpretations and contextual shifts, our almost exclusive access to which is, at present, the *Abhinavabhāratī*.

In trying to pin down contextual shifts in the texts, one of the major challenges is the fact that *śāstras* are neither mirrors of reality, nor blueprints for practice. The texts are part of a literary tradition and deal with conceptual representations and ideals of practice. This is not to say that *śāstras* are purely theoretical texts divorced from the outer world. They are indeed the carrier of practical as well as theoretical lore, but while they exhibit a tendency towards comprehensiveness and universality, they do not aim at providing a precise depiction of present-day reality. As Katz has put it with regard to treatises on music:

When we attempt to form an idea of the real nature of music in ancient and classical India we cannot reasonably confine ourselves to the *śāstric* texts alone. The distinction between the history of music and that of Sanskrit musical treatises has not always been adequately drawn. [...] Even when we can be fairly certain that the treatises are giving us an exact understanding of some characteristics of musical practice, we should remain aware that there are aspects of the art which are not mentioned because they are of little interest to the *śāstric* writers.

KATZ 1983: 60

The same distinction can be posited between the history of dance and the history of Sanskrit treatises on dance. Attempts to test the dictates of the texts against the actual practices were pursued in those domains where such com-

20 See Raghavan's Introduction to Jāyasenāpati's *Nṛttaratnāvalī* and Kunhan Raja 1945 on Śārṅgadeva's *Samgītaratnākara*.

parison is possible, showing various dynamics at play.²¹ In the domain of dramatic production, for instance, scholars started quite early to compare the rules of composition laid down in Bharata's text and the available specimens of Sanskrit plays. As early as 1890, Sylvain Lévi noticed that Sanskrit dramatists exhibit a considerable reliance on śāstric rules in composing their works.²² This concordance can partly be explained by the intrinsic normative power exercised by the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, which is presented as a 'Fifth Veda', issued by a divine being, but also, perhaps more crucially, by the dramatists' belonging to the same literate and literary milieu that was involved in the production of *śāstras*.²³

Although the existence of an important corpus of dramatic texts invites comparison between the technical treatises and the plays, the problem of interpreting śāstric textual production vis-à-vis artistic practices in India can by no means be reduced to testing the prescriptions embedded in the technical treatises against the material data, i.e. the plays produced by dramatists. It is indeed quite predictable and unsurprising that playwrights should be acquainted with the theoretical treatises in Sanskrit, but what about other kinds of artists, such as actors, dancers, and musicians? Did they play any active role in the making of *śāstras*? Or were they just following the rules laid down by others? Were they literate at all or did they rely on a parallel *śāstra* made of oral and practical instructions drawing their authority from a master? As Katz has argued, in order to contextualize artistic practices on the basis of the textual records, it is essential to take into account the social and cultural gap that existed between theoreticians and practitioners. With regard to theatre, it is reasonable to assume that no watertight division existed between the domain of the theory and that of practice, but rather a kind of cross-fertilization of the two.²⁴ Nevertheless, it is a fact that the very mode in which the practical

21 The most comprehensive collection of studies in the domain of the different arts is still Dallapiccola 1989.

22 'L'étude de la technique appelle, comme une contre-épreuve indispensable, l'examen des oeuvres. La théorie et la pratique s'opposent d'ordinaire comme deux termes inconciliables: les lois absolues des théoriciens, établies sur des spéculations et des raisonnements abstraits, ne s'accordent guère avec les nécessités contingentes, les combinaisons les plus savantes s'écroulent lorsqu'il s'agit de les réaliser. Le théâtre indien présente le spectacle, unique peut être, d'une théorie acceptée sans contestation et mise en oeuvre avec un respect servile pendant une durée de quinze siècles' (Lévi 1963: 153).

23 For the case of *Alaṃkāraśāstra*, with its different claims to authority, and attitudes towards innovation, see Bronner 2002 and McCrea 2011. A recent work, Bronner et al. 2014, builds a history of *kāvya* by drawing on the innovations and turning points detected in the works of poets.

24 Expert figures are invoked throughout the *Nāṭyaśāstra* as recipients of the text or, in the

instructions are presented in the theoretical texts tends to conceal historical development altogether.²⁵

This raises a related question about the functions that authors of *śāstras* assigned to their works, and how they evaluated the relationship between theory (*śāstra*) and practice (*prayoga*). In his broad study of the idea of *śāstra* and rule-bound activity, Pollock (1985) argued that some of the earliest forms of *śāstra*, the *vedāṅgas* ('Ancillaries of the Veda'), were initially endowed with a descriptive character. Soon enough, the *śāstra* came to be conceptualized as ahistorical knowledge that always pre-exists practical applications and that is given once and for all (sometimes by a deity) to a worthy recipient entrusted to hand it down faithfully. This self-declared transcendence, often joined with a professed link to the Veda, earned the *śāstra* its axiomatic authority.²⁶ Although the *Nāṭyaśāstra* falls under those disciplines that display an openly conservative attitude, this does not mean that its rules became an absolutely binding force in artistic practice, something immobilizing creativity itself. Nor did the authors of *Nāṭyaśāstra*, like those of other *śāstras*, necessarily conceive of the theory as something static. On the contrary, writers in different knowledge systems have always strived to devise strategies for allowing change and innovation to take place without stepping out of the tradition, be it a long-standing or a newly invented one. This attitude provides for what Halbfass (1991: 4) describes as a 'dynamic sense of tradition' against a 'static and archival one'. By exercising a critical attitude towards the texts, a lot can be deduced about attitudes towards tradition. At the outset of his book on semantic analysis—itsself a powerful exegetical tool for creating 'new' meaning out of 'old' words—Eivind Kahrs stated:

Abhinavabhārati, as promoters of certain teachings and interpretations. The role of the theatre master or of especially gifted actors in enriching the text of the plays for its stage rendering has been emphasized by Bansat-Boudon, both on the basis of Abhinavagupta's commentary, and on the existence of enlarged 'stage' versions of famous plays circulating in manuscript form. See Bansat-Boudon 1989–1990 and 1992: 341–387 on the complex acting protocol in six phases (*sāmānyābhinaya*), by which the performer becomes an exegete of the text, and Bansat-Boudon 1992 205–215 on the addition of *dhruvā* songs and *ibid.*: 281–340 on that of *lāsyaṅgas*. On the stage versions of Kālidāsa's *Abhijñānaśākuntala* and the fourth act of the *Vikramorvaśīya*, see Bansat-Boudon 1994a and 1998b.

25 On the ideal dimension of *śāstra*, see Pollock 1985, 1989a and 1989b.

26 Pollock (1985: 502) notes that the word *śāstra*, consisting of the Sanskrit root *śās*, 'to teach' plus the secondary suffix *-tra*, originally has the double meaning of 'rule', or 'book of rules', and 'revelation', thus coinciding with the Veda.

Traditional societies exploit flexibility while pretending permanence. This is because belief systems are not legitimated once and for all and therefore require means to cope with conflict and change without facing the challenge of admitting that these have taken place.

KAHRS 1998: 1

Within Indian textual culture, not only texts aimed at reproducing and propagating belief systems, but also texts dealing with artistic traditions have a tendency to conceal change, or to confine it within the reassuring boundaries of tradition. These boundaries are at times displaced in order to include or exclude features issuing from the practical reality. It is by looking at these shifts, that it is possible to detect patterns of change. In matters of meaning-negotiation, commentaries are indeed of special interest, as they necessarily deal with the diachronic dimension of the *śāstra* and its uninterrupted authority in the face of the evolving practices. Being one of the few commentaries we have on an ancient *śāstra* on the arts, the *Abhinavabhāratī* is therefore a very precious document.

The introduction of novelty takes various forms in the *Abhinavabhāratī*: it can happen through a shift in the meaning of already proposed taxonomies; through the interpretation of particles in Bharata's verses as suggestive of further senses; or, with regard to categories that have become obsolete and incomprehensible even to a connoisseur like Abhinavagupta, through the instillation of new and unexpected senses. Needless to say, these kinds of exegetical procedures pose a number of challenges for the translator, whose task is to keep the different temporal layers of interpretation separate, while explaining the complexity of the ongoing debates in their historical context. In dealing with the chapter on dance and its technical instructions, I have attempted to look at the ways in which the framework of traditional lore is twisted and bent, enlarged, and shrunk under the pen of Abhinavagupta so as to introduce major shifts, both in theory and in practice, within that very same framework—provided, in the case at hand, by Bharata's text, now rendered flexible by the act of commenting.