13

The *Mahābhārata* is in the Soul

In the christian world, the Church Fathers greatly emphasise the fact that the Scriptures contain multiple levels of meaning that are in some way juxtaposed. They have found in this juxtaposition an inexhaustible source of inspiration for their historical, mystical, symbolical and theological commentaries, which they have not ceased to imbibe from over the course of many centuries. They have described these levels of meaning in numerous ways, and beyond the consideration that it is useless to wish to artificially limit a theoretically indefinite number of possibilities, they have generally reduced their speculations to three, four or seven levels of meaning. A sort of 'theology of the four meanings', in Father de Lubac's words, has finally prevailed, with nevertheless several terminological variations and different orderings.[1] To be brief we will only cite here the list Dante uses

---

1 On this question we have mainly consulted Father Henri de Lubac's essay: *Medieval Exegesis, The Four Senses of Scripture* (2000). This book, which contains a veritable treasure-trove of traditional, symbolical interpretations, is fundamental, even though its exhaustive ambitions, its rather confusing presenta-

in the *Convivio* (2, 1), which takes account of the literal, allegorical, moral and anagogic meanings, and which is probably the most common. If we refer to the Florentine poet's scheme more than to that of a particular Father or Doctor of the Church, it is because it has the advantage of opening this interpretative method to domains other than Scripture in the strictest sense of the word. It can be applied to literature, as Dante himself did, as well as to all the arts, *mutatis mutandis*. In the field of architecture, for instance, a cathedral is thus a place of worship on the literal plane, but allegorically it represents the Church as the community of Christians, then morally,[2] by its cruciform layout, the Passion of Christ, and anagogically the inner man in his deiform dimension.

Like all myth, legend or epic, the *Mahābhārata* easily lends itself to interpretations of this kind. Particularly to an anagogic commentary, that is to say, a commentary that 'opens onto the higher', consisting in bringing all the events in stories back to the inward drama of the human soul. Such an exegesis, here as elsewhere, is a sort of touchstone for the truth and efficacy of traditional stories. Speaking of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, Schuon says, for example:

> The doctrine of *Rama* is contained in the *Ramayana*: the myth retraces the destiny of the soul (*Sita*)

---

tion and its profusion of long untranslated Latin quotations make it rather difficult to use. We long to read a more condensed and widely accessible version.

[2] We have seen that there are significant variations in the use of words designating the four meanings, and the moral plane is often qualified as tropological. Whatever the case may be, it is not here a question of morality in the usual sense of the term.

> ravished by passion and ignorance (*Ravana*) and exiled in matter at the confines of the cosmos (*Lanka*). Every soul given up to *Shri Rama* is identified with *Sita*, the heroine carried off and then delivered.

To which he adds in a note:

> the testing of *Sita—Rama* doubting her fidelity—refers to the discontinuity between the 'I' and the 'Self', to the hiatus in the incommensurable dialogue between the soul and the Lord; the repudiation of *Sita* and her return to her mother the Earth signifies that the ego as such remains always the ego. But the eternal *Sita* is none other than *Lakshmi*, spouse of *Rama-Vishnu*, and she it is who, *in divinis*, is the prototype of the soul (1961: 144).

Regarding the *Mahābhārata*, any anagogic approach must necessarily take as its starting point what Kṛṣṇa says in the *Bhagavad-gītā*: 'I am the Self (*ātman*), O Guḍākeśa [Arjuna], seated in the heart of all beings' (10, 20). What is more, the two Kṛṣṇa (*kṛṣṇau*: cf. ch. 3), Nara and Nārāyaṇa, represent the self and the Self, that is the two birds mentioned in the *Upaniṣad* (cf. ch. 9), present in each man, and the battlefield, Kurukṣetra, the field of Kuru, is none other than the body: 'O son of Kuntī, this body is called the field (*kṣetra*). He who knows this is called by the sages the knower of the field (*kṣetra-jña*)' (*ibid.*, 13, 1). We have also seen above (ch. 9) the application of this statement to the symbolism of the chariot. From this it can be seen that all the protagonists

of the great battle, of the epic psychomachy,[3] necessarily incarnate the different faculties of the soul struggling against itself within its earthly destiny. Hindu commentators, scholars, sages and spiritual masters continually have recourse to interpretations derived from this way of seeing things, and one can find examples of these scattered throughout traditional literature. The oldest attempt at a systematic anagogic approach to the epics is probably Madhva's, the founder of the dualist school, *Dvaitavāda* or *Dvaitavedānta* (thirteenth century). In his *Mahābhārata-tātparya-nirṇaya* (*Enquiry into the Mahābhārata*) he starts from the principle that the *Bhārata*, just like the *Rāmāyaṇa* which he also discusses at length, is in the soul, in the individual, in the microcosm (*adhyātmani stha*), which is difficult to imagine, he says, even for the gods (*sura*)!

In modern times, the Hindu scholar V. S. Sukthankar ([1942], 1957), inspired by this classical attempt, developed in part a similar interpretation on three of the levels of reading expounded in the Christian tradition—which he seems incidentally not to have known of—that is to say, the literal, moral and anagogic, which he calls the mundane, ethical and metaphysical planes.[4]

---

[3] Psychomachy is the struggle all men experience in their soul. It is also the title (*Psychomachia*) of a very famous poem of the middle ages by the Latin Christian writer Prudentius (end 4th, beginning 5th century) who portrays, with an epic verve inspired by Virgil, the fight between personified Virtues and Vices.

[4] If we had to add to this tripartition an allegorical key, we would immediately consider everything that had been said about the epic's heroes in relation to the gods they embody.

The ethical dimension of the epic is, for him, above all found in the passages where *dharma* is defined, in the countless rules of conduct that refer to or rely on it. Its natural framework is the opposition between *dharma* and *adharma*, or the antagonism between the *deva* and the *asura*. On the level which he calls metaphysical, Sukthankar suggests the following correspondences: Dhṛtarāṣṭra, 'He who has a firm kingdom' or, better still in the context, 'He who has seized the kingdom,' is the ego whose blindness is well known and which constantly refers everything back to itself. His one hundred sons, with Duryodhana at their head—a character who, for our part, can be easily associated with pride—represent the negative or asuric tendencies of the soul, its vices, if one will. The wise Vidura, Dhṛtarāṣṭra's half-brother, who is always at his side, incarnates *buddhi*, the intelligence or the conscience. The blind king wants to consult him all the time and has no difficulty recognising the truth of what he says, but he never follows his point of view, pandering as he does at the critical moment to the badgering of his oldest son, who takes advantage of the obvious weakness of his character. Old Bhīṣma, who has renounced the kingdom and marriage, and who has the power to choose the moment of his death, represents memory whose authority seems to skip the vagaries of time, and whom the combatants on the two sides consult at critical moments.

On the opposing side, Sukthankar concentrates predominantly on the two occupants of the chariot, Kṛṣṇa, the inward man, and Arjuna, the outward man, who is totally devoted to his master in the decisive engagement of the inner battle, which is the greater holy war. His

analysis tallies perfectly with what was said above on this symbolism (ch. 9). Unfortunately, in contrast, the Indian scholar says nothing about the Pāṇḍava brothers who, as certain Brahmins have explained to us, can be identified with the five senses, *indriya*, or faculties of Indra (cf. also ch. 9). Constantly listening out for teachings on *dharma*, as he does, Yudhiṣṭhira corresponds to hearing; Bhīma, the son of the wind, associated by birth with the air, personifies the sense of touch; Arjuna, the archer with an infallible eye, is sight; and the twins, Nakula and Sahadeva, connected to nourishing earth, are respectively taste and smell. The order of their birth is thus identical to the order given by the *Sāṃkhya* in its list of the senses and the elements associated with them, that is, ether, air, fire, water and earth. As for *manas*, the inner sense which Draupadī represents in this perspective, it is cited in the correct position at the end of this list. Jean Varenne says: 'The six senses of man are, in Brahmanical texts, constantly considered as divinities; they are in fact powers similar to cosmic forces. As such, they constitute one of the stakes in the rivalry between the Gods and the Asura' (1967: 182). And the *Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad* (1, 3) shows, for example, how the *deva* fight against the *asura* by means of a Vedic chant (*udgītha*) during a sacrifice in order to win back the senses stolen by them. Although the fight in question is applied to a different list of senses, since it concerns the voice, the breath, sight, hearing and *manas*—in that order—it nevertheless sheds light on the battle between the Pāṇḍava and the Kaurava.

This type of interpretation, which is quite clear as to the generalities, has nevertheless a certain fluidity[5] which

[5] Witness the equivalences provided (without source) by

can lead, if too systematically applied, to forced readings. Perhaps it is for this reason that it is practically never mentioned in Orientalist scholarly literature. At any rate, few seem to be interested in drawing spiritual lessons from the texts they examine. Yet this form of interpretation cannot be done away with, as its relevance is obvious. It is necessary to take into account the microcosmic or inward dimension of the universal combat, not only because of the teachings of the *Bhagavad-gītā* and other didactic passages from the epic, but also because of the nature of things and the universality of symbolism. As Martin Lings says, in a work already quoted (cf. ch. 8): 'Civil war is a most adequate symbol of the fallen soul, which is by definition at war with itself' (1996: 17). One wonders, moreover, how a narrative of such universal stature, whatever its degree of inspiration might be, could otherwise gain such a perennial and efficacious standing. The half-hearted opinion of Hiltebeitel, who quotes Sukhtankar in passing, is all the more curious:

> After all, such a psychology becomes intelligible in a religious tradition which places such regular emphasis on the belief that the divine is found in every man, the center to which all else relates.

Rivière (1979: 54–55). If this writer agrees *grosso modo* with Sukhtankar regarding Dhṛtarāṣṭra, Duryodhana and the Kaurava, and if he mentions the link between the Pāṇḍava and *tattva*, the principles of *Sāṃkhya*, he makes Bhīṣma into 'blind faith and the ancestral fear which religions inculcate'! Other more or less happy equivalences given by him are the following: he sees in Sañjaya intuition, in Drupada intuitive knowledge and in Subhadrā goodness.

> One would hardly expect a psychology like this from Homer (1990: 43).

The *Iliad* has however been the subject of more than one anagogic reading, and echoes of it can even be found in the alchemical tradition.[6] In pitting the Greek side, supported by Juno (marriage, duty), against the Trojans guided by Venus (love), Virgil portrayed a real psychomachy. In the drama of Aeneas, he inaugurated what is called in Shakespeare the conflict between passion and reason, and what the French refer to as *le dilemme cornélien*.

We cannot conclude this chapter without mentioning once more a text which we also referred to in *The Queen and the Avatar* (p. 112), the *Kṛṣṇopaniṣad*, which, although quite a late text, explodes like the finale at a fireworks display, rich in its infinitude of novel symbolic meanings:

> The personified Vedas and personified Upanisads became 16,108 women whose forms were perfectly spiritual. Personified hatred became the wrestler Canura. Personified envy became Mustika. Personified arrogance became Kuvalayapida. Personified pride became the demonic bird Baka. Personified mercy became Mother Rohini. The earth goddess became Satyabhama. Personified disease became Aghasura. Personified quarrel became King Kamsa. Personified peacefulness became the Lord's friend Sudama. Personified truthfulness became Akrura. Personified self-

[6] For example, Dom Joseph Pernety in *Les Fables égyptiennes et grecques évoilées et réduites au même principe, avec une explication des hiéroglyphes et de la guerre de Troye* (see Bibliography).

> control became Uddhava. Lord Visnu Himself became Krishna's conch shell, which made a roar like thunder and which, also born from the milk-ocean, was the goddess of fortune's kinsman. Breaking a pot to steal yogurt, Lord Krishna created an ocean of milk. In this way the Lord became a child and enjoyed pastimes as He had before in the great ocean (of milk). Lord Krishna appeared to remove His enemies and protect (His devotees) (*Kṛṣṇopaniṣad*, 1, 13–18).

This shower of correspondences shows the extent to which the tradition remains completely free in its use of symbols, beyond any systematic organisation. Included in this *Upaniṣad* can be found more than one theme discussed in the preceding pages: Rohinī embodies Mercy; Akrura, Truthfulness; Uddhava, Self-control, etc, as in the anagogic interpetations we have referred to. In breaking the butter jars to get at the contents, the child Kṛṣṇa evokes Viṣṇu, the All-penetrating, the master of all the latent possibilities of manifestation symbolised by the ocean of milk. His divine play upsets the peace of society: he has to 'pay' for this transgression on the human level, being tied by a rope to a heavy mortar by his adoptive mother, Yaśodā, who is forced to punish him.[7] His 16,108 lovers are the verses of the Scripture, and too bad for those who are shocked by such erotic extravagance! The symbol is a matter of transparency and one only needs eyes to see it. True tradition is not

---

[7] In receiving on his bed the visit of Arjuna and Duryodhana, Kṛṣṇa evokes Nārāyaṇa sleeping and dreaming on the same ocean of milk.

and cannot be, on pain of drying up, anything other than a living reality, quick to renew itself in order to maintain men's faith and satisfy their appetite for beauty and wonder. Its survival through the centuries is at this price.