“Thinking” dance “literature”
from Bharata to Bharata Natyam

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In its broader sense, the term ‘literature’ can refer to any corpus of written texts through which meaning is culturally transmitted. In India literary practice has invested branches of knowledge which in other cultures have received a written form only at a later date, if ever at all. Such is the case of the visual and performing arts.

A conspicuous body of texts from an early period is concerned with artistic practices. However, if the evaluation of the relationship between texts and living practices can, in the case of visual arts, find support in the comparison with material data, i.e. the works of art, and thus establish at least a preliminary consonance or dissonance between the two, in the case of the performing arts no material evidence is available.

An inquiry about the performing arts in pre-modern India will necessary have to take into account its textual basis. Hence, the general question addressed by this paper will be: How can we evaluate the textual corpus about dance in India? How can we think dance literature?

Various instruments, put forward as candidates for this task, will be tested, according to the dichotomy proposed as a working hypothesis in this panel. In particular, the “European” textual criticism and the “Indian” traditional interpretation will be singled out and compared as the main categories of etic and emic instruments.

Some of the collateral questions raised through the application of textual criticism could be: Which are the texts on dance and in which period have they been written? Can we attempt to establish any historical periodization for classifying them? Should these texts be regarded as purely literary compositions or rather as manuals for the actors? Do they actually record living practices or do they reflect an ideal situation and act as normative texts?

On the other hand, some of the questions closely connected to these, but raised within the category called emic, are: do the texts themselves, or the traditional commentaries thereon, tell us something about their use with relation to the living practices? Can the contemporary tradition of classical Indian dance illuminate us on these matters? Do contemporary practitioners make use of texts in their training?

The investigation will be centred on the following triad:

- Nāṭyaśāstra: the first text on dance as part of Indian theatre, authored by Bharata and generally dated between 2nd c. BC and 2nd c. AD.
- Abhinavabhāratī: the only available commentary on the Nāṭyaśāstra, written by the Kashmiri thinker Abhinavagupta in the 11th century.
- Abhinayadarpaṇa: an independent medieval text on dance of uncertain date, linked to the contemporary tradition of classical Indian dance called Bharatanatyam.

As I will try to show, the multiplication of agents, time-perspectives, questions and interpretations will make the watertight division between etic and emic itself questionable.
In what follows I will provide some cultural and historical data which may be useful, especially for the non-indologists, in order to follow the discussion. I apologize for the oversimplifications and imprecision that this attempt has inevitably involved:

Bharata’s *Nāṭyaśāstra* [NŚ]:

*Nāṭya-śāstra*: “Scientific Treatise (śāstra) on Theatre (nāṭya)’.

The word *nāṭya*, ‘theatre’ is intended in its broader sense, encompassing the ensemble of actors and audience, the play in its literary form, and the spectacular object carried out through acting techniques, music and dance.

The term *śāstra*, “instrument for teaching” (from Sanskrit root śas, to teach), refers to a wide category of texts, usually appearing as a series of precepts and rules disciplining knowledge and human activities. There are *śāstras* on law (*Dharmaśāstra*), on love (*Kāmaśāstra*, better known as *Kāmasūtra*), on architecture (*Vāstuśāstra*), and even a manual on the art of stealing and horse breeding, to cite only some famous examples. It is difficult to evaluate the nature of these texts, whether they were records of actual states of things or ideal depictions of how things should be. In the case of the visual arts, for instance, an agreement between texts and art-works is seldom verified. What is quite sure is that these texts were composed by Brahmans, exponents of the priestly class which detained the use of Sanskrit language and the symbolic power. These texts, many of which have received commentaries in various epochs, exercised a normative influence, at least over literary practices.

In the case of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, it is possible to find correspondences between the dramatic works, (plays in their literary form) which have come down to us (roughly datable from the 2nd c. AD to the 11th c. AD) and the dictates laid down in the treatise on how to compose a play (including instruction about dramatic genres, plot construction, type of characters, etc.). However, as regards its spectacular character, we do not know if its rules were followed, or, in the case of dance, if it was practiced in the ways described in the fourth chapter of the NŚ, that is, though a series of dance movements strictly codified and known as *karaṇas*.

About the author, the historicity of Bharata and his single authorship are still matter of debate. His very name means ‘actor’ and he is referred to in the text as a Brahman. Bharata is considered an authority by all later writers on subjects such as dramatics, aesthetics, dance and music, as well as by the contemporary artistes.

Abhinavagupta’s *Abhinavabhāratī* [ABh]

Among the various commentaries written on the NŚ, the only extant is the *Abhinavabhāratī*. Its author, Abhinavagupta, was one of the most influential exponents of the non-dualistic tradition of Kashmir Shaivism. He commented on the whole of the NŚ about ten centuries after Bharata wrote it. Obviously enough, the artistic practice had changed, however Abhinavagupta superficially maintains Bharata’s categories, while providing the text with a new and comprehensive aesthetic orientation, in line with his philosophical tenets. In the case of dance, he maintains the categories of movement laid down in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* (the *karaṇas*), but provides detailed descriptions of them, and in some cases even records alternative
interpretations about the execution of specific movements. This fact would point to the presence of living traditions of dance which related their practices to the NŚ. However, the continuity of the tradition is itself highly questionable, since we know from historical sources that at the time when Abhinavagupta wrote (11th c.), Kashmir had witnessed a revival of theatre, started in the 8th c. under one of its rulers.

At about the same epoch, in South India, bas-reliefs depicting Bharata’s karaṇas and accompanied by inscriptions bearing the verses of the NŚ, are found in some of the major temples of Tamil Nadu, in South India. The massive presence of dance sculptures is sometimes accompanied by epigraphs attesting the existence of ritual dancers, called devadāsis (lit. ‘servants of god’), within the premises of the temples. These women were appointed to the temple at a very young age and accompanied the daily ritual service to the deity with dance and songs. They constituted a separate caste called icaī vellala and were allowed to study Sanskrit, along with the arts. In some cases, they even performed at royal courts and during religious festivals. It is a matter of debate whether their connection with prostitution should be considered a late phenomena related to the loss of court patronage, or the vestige of an ancient fertility cult.

Bharatanatyam and Abhinayadarpaṇa: the contemporary tradition of Indian classical dance

Despite its Sanskrit name, which could be translated as ‘the Theatrical Art of Bharata’ (Bharata-natyam), and its claim for antiquity and direct link with the Sanskritic tradition, this form of dance has its origin in Tamil Nadu in the 19th c. Its older name is Sadir, or Dasi Attam, which was changed into Bharatanatyam during the revival of dance in the 1930’s, following the stigma put upon dance by the British society as a consequence, among other causes, of its ties with prostitution. Many of the protagonists of the ‘re’construction, who brought dance from the temple to the theatre and provided it with new contents, were members of the Brahmanic class. The ‘revived classical tradition of dance’ found an ally in the editorial effort of Indian scholars, and a supporter in the social reformers animated by the nationalistic drive.

Nowadays, while the supposed direct link to the Sanskritic tradition continues to be nurtured through the use of Sanskrit text in dance training, in primis the Abhinayadarpaṇa (Mirror of Gestures), its formulation has been somehow revised by the new generations of performers.