

JAMES W. LAINE: *Visions of God: narratives of theophany in the Mahābhārata*. (Publications of the De Nobili Research Library, Vol. 16.) 304 pp. Vienna: De Nobili Research Library, 1989. (Commission Agents: E. J. Brill, Leiden; Gerold & Co., Vienna; Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi.)

The twelve passages of the *MBh.* which form the subject matter of this exemplary study have been chosen on the basis of what they have in common: they tell of encounters between the realms of the human and the divine. The study is exemplary because it does not submit to a temptation to concentrate on what the passages have in common; rather it interprets the texts with special attention to their differences, i.e. as documents of a variety which offers itself as evidence of historical development. 'I have hypothesized that certain identifiable traditions of religious thought can account for the variety of theophany narratives in the Mahābhārata, and have developed a model for the logic of interaction between four such traditions (heroic-bardic, ascetic, devotional and brahmanic)' (p. 9). This approach is presented, as an alternative to 'current *Mahābhārata* criticism' represented by the work of Georges Dumézil, Madeleine Biardeau, and Alf Hiltebeitel.

The twelve passages are classified into three groups, according to their epic context and according to who has the vision. (The index to *MBh.* texts, p. 285, is incomplete or mutilated.) The first group (ch. i) comprises the 'initiation visions of the Pāṇḍavas' (Arjuna and Indra, *MBh.* 3, 38–9, and Arjuna and Śiva, *MBh.* 3, 40–2; Bhīma and Hanuman, *MBh.* 3, 146–50; Yudhiṣṭhira and Dharma 3, 297–8). The second group of theophanies is entitled 'war-time visions' (Kṛṣṇa's divine form manifested in the Dhārtarāṣṭra court, *MBh.* 5, 129, and to Arjuna on the battle field, *MBh.* 6, 33, i.e. *BhG* 11;

Arjuna's vision of Śiva, *MBh.* 7, 57; Aśvatthāman's vision of Kṛṣṇa and of Śiva, *MBh.* 10, 6–7; Bhīṣma's vision of Kṛṣṇa, *MBh.* 12, 51). The third group is characterized by the fact that all the visions are granted to seers (Mārkaṇḍeya's vision at the time of dissolution, *MBh.* 3, 186–7; Nārada's vision of Nārāyaṇa, *MBh.* 12, 326; Upamanyu's and Kṛṣṇa's vision of Śiva, *MBh.* 13, 14–15; Uttanka's vision of Kṛṣṇa, *MBh.* 14, 52–4); these visions are not 'an heroic experience' in the context of the epic, but are an experience of revelation which is 'mythic and universal' (p. 161). More attention might have been given to the fact that what constitutes these theophanies is rather disparate; e.g. Nārada's 'vision' means that he is listening to doctrinal explications of Sāṃkhya (Pañcarātra) cosmology and theology; some visions are dreams; Mārkaṇḍeya's vision is a narrated event; Arjuna's vision of Kṛṣṇa's viśvarūpa (BhG 11) is told in the words of him who sees.

Each text is given in a complete and careful translation (according to the critical edition) in the appendix to the chapter in which it is interpreted. The annotations to the translation are clearly meant for the general reader; they avoid philological discussion of the text and one wishes these footnotes did not just reproduce the original Sanskrit (in case of difficult terminology) or explain basic concepts to the non-specialist. A more detailed discussion of text-critical points would have been welcome and might have helped to bridge the (methodological) gap between textual material and its historical versus its synchronic (mythological) interpretation(s). References to what is 'unusual' (e.g. p. 196, n. 50) or 'odd' (p. 194, n. 42) point out problems but do not add to a solution of such problems. The 'close attention to the texts' which the author professes is directed to the level of 'motifs' and their symbolic discussions.

Thus, almost more distinctive for the book than the interpretation of the three different dimensions of the text (the literary, the symbolic and the theological) is its argumentative front against the method and style of *MBh.* scholarship represented by Georges Dumézil, Madeleine Biardeau and Alf Hiltebeitel. Their exegesis of the texts (where available—the visions of the seers have not been treated by these authors) is discussed in detail and quoted at length. It is their exegesis which helps Laine to establish his method and interpretation in sharp outline. The differences of approach centre on whether the *MBh.* should be interpreted as expressive of one single structure, be it the 'transposition of Indo-European prototypes' (p. 29 on Dumézil), be it 'products of the same world, the "universe of bhakti"' (p. 167; Biardeau's key motif) or be it 'the mythic models behind the epic story' (p. 33) (Hiltebeitel's concern). Laine pleads for a plurality of structures. 'The long history of the epic's composition rules against the probability that any one structure or pattern can be found which will explain every aspect of every passage' (p. 29). He is weary of too much theory in the interpretations of his predecessors; the postulate for close attention to the text makes Laine ask: 'if the epic is to be read as an expression of the "universe of bhakti", why are the epic's authors so quick to insert long didactic passages

into their text, reticent about developing the ideas of the "univers de la bhakti" in an articulate way, i.e., why have they given us only pieces of this ideology and left it to Professor Biardeau to provide us with the complete worldview of "classical Hinduism"?' (p. 121).

Laine's alternative scheme of interpretation distinguishes four traditions and finds that 'one or another of them predominates in a given text, is central to the composition of that text, even while the text attests the influence of other traditions' (p. 225f). Fifteen 'general themes' and 'specific motifs' are listed (p. 227–9) and discussed. The list, however, unites disparate categories: motifs, relationships between motifs, redactional techniques, religious attitudes, theological strategies. Some of them seem dictated by the *MBh.* interpretation of Biardeau and/or Hiltebeitel rather than by textual analysis. One would like to see the hierarchy among these themes and motifs investigated (textually!); e.g., how does sacrificial terminology rate compared to Viṣṇu-Śiva complementarity.

The four traditions are called the ascetic tradition, the heroic tradition, the bhakti tradition and the brahmanic tradition. In spite of my whole-hearted support for the author's intention to extend Paul Hacker's method of a comparison of myths to a comparison of genres of text the four 'traditions' which Laine identifies are to my mind not very convincingly delineated, nor happily named. E.g. the 'ascetic tradition' is too non-distinct from the others and does not distinguish tapas and yoga (and renunciation); and 'brahmanic' as a social category applies to many representatives (texts) of the other 'traditions' as well (most ascetics, and many of those who handed down bardic texts, as well as most bhakti-theologians were probably Brahmins; all the textual sources belong to the (brahminical) Great Tradition—something which the author is of course aware of, p. 259f.). Rather than being overly cautious ('my hypothetical model', '... proffered here in no way as an historical account', p. 254) about his interpretation, Laine should have pursued the historical implications of his method in a direction of (textually identifiable) elements of positions and counter-positions.

The historical development which Laine outlines is that from an epic Hinduism to a Purāṇic Hinduism, and he has devoted a separate chapter (p. 255–72) to 'the triumph of the Purāṇic'. The concluding chapter reflects on the implications of a situation of 'religious pluralism' and of inclusivism (a category and term which would have deserved more explicit discussion in the light of the critical evaluations which it has provoked) and the increase of doctism as strategies of dealing with such pluralism, which put the historian of religions of today in a situation comparable to that of the Hindu whose religious history he is trying to understand.

That critical questions are provoked by this book should not distract from its merits as a valuable and solid contribution to *MBh.* scholarship along lines which deserve to be pursued and extended.

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