

Wednesday 5 October,  
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Auckland.

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What if we begin on the wrong foot, with a  
misreading of the terms?

In another language, *rasa* is sap. Like the  
gunk from a tree that makes resin, *rasa*  
refers to the inside juices of things—“the  
sap or juice of plants, juice of fruit, any  
liquid or fluid, the best or finest or prime  
part of anything, essence, marrow.”<sup>1</sup>

Sap or taste serves as a metaphor in  
Indian aesthetics. It offers a way into the  
question: What distinguishes an aesthetic  
from a non-aesthetic object or event?  
It is sometimes said that *rasa* makes an  
artwork, an artwork.

Let us set aside *tabula rasa* in its Latin  
sense—the idea that we’re at birth a “blank  
slate” awaiting sensory experience to  
make sense of things. Instead, let’s pursue  
a disobedient link to recast the concept  
based on a mis-taking of the term: *rasa*,  
resin. Not “blank slate,” but tables of sap.

I.

*Rasa* connotes taste. It is sometimes said  
that each artist has her own *rasa*—her own  
style, or funk. This is Anandavardhana’s  
idea from the 9th century. Recalling  
Valmiki’s tragic verse—“the grief of the  
first poet ... transformed into verse”<sup>2</sup>  
—Anandavardhana argues for an  
expressionist theory of *rasa*: “If the poet is  
filled with passion, the whole world of his  
poem will consist of *rasa*, if not, it will be  
completely devoid of it.”<sup>3</sup> On his account,  
an artwork is a vessel—a cup, perhaps—for  
the transmission of the artist’s *rasa*.

II.

In formalist theories of *rasa*, the poets  
and their passions are jettisoned from the  
discussions. It is sometimes said that *rasa*  
is the artwork’s sensibility, or the sentiment  
prevailing in it. It’s the sap of a work. And  
like resin—now cast as a cup, now as a  
candle—*rasa* may manifest now as a play,  
as a narrative poem, a painting.

*Rasa* was classically discussed in reference  
to drama and narrative poetry, then applied  
to music and painting and other crafts. One  
of the foundational texts in the discipline of  
Indian aesthetics is the *Treatise on Drama*  
(*Natya Shastra*) attributed to Bharata  
from the early centuries C.E. The *Treatise*  
is written in part as an artist’s manual. It  
enumerates the formal properties of *rasa*  
for performers who are concerned to know  
how to touch upon the lives of their audience.  
It subjects *rasa* to analysis and breaks the  
concept down into its constituent parts. It  
sets aside the poet’s passions and instead  
presents a *tabula* of sorts—a table of the  
emotional and psycho-physical structures  
that combine to produce *rasa* in the play:

8 stable states: romantic love, mirth,  
compassion, fury, heroism, terror, disgust  
and wonderment (later commentators add  
peacefulness and fondness to this list)

33 transitory states: torpor, sickness,  
possession, forgetfulness, etc.

8 involuntary states: paralysis, fainting,  
horripilation, sweating, change of colour,  
trembling, weeping, change of voice

There are unnumbered lists too of reactions  
and stimulants: seductive glances amidst  
moonlit nights and pleasure gardens. Add  
to this a performer’s eagerness and change  
of voice and they’ll combine to produce  
romantic love. The *rasa* of such a scene,  
in the words of contemporary Sanskritist  
Sheldon Pollock, “may be likened to the  
flavour of a drink of multiple ingredients,  
complex but unified.”<sup>4</sup>

As with drama, so with narrative poetry,  
except that *rasa* is here not seen in the  
performance but heard through the literary  
text. Rudrata’s instruction from the 9th  
century is that writers ought to “take all  
possible care to endow a literary text ...  
with *rasa*”<sup>5</sup> lest they risk writing dry moral  
treatises. What is foremostly required of  
the poet to produce *rasa* is facility with  
ornamentation, indirection, rhetoric, figures,  
phonemic textures, etc.

1 — Monier Monier-Williams, ‘Rasa,’ in *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1899) 869.  
2 — *Light on Implicature (Dhvanyaloka)* of Anandavardhana (875 C.E.) in Sheldon I. Pollock, ed., *A Rasa Reader: Classical Indian Aesthetics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016) 5.  
3 — Ibid.  
4 — Pollock, *A Rasa Reader*, 8.  
5 — *Ornament of Poetry (Kavyalankara)* of Rudrata (850 C.E.) in Pollock, *A Rasa Reader*, 10.



Hany Armanious  
*Tabula Rasa*  
2022  
(Cast resin, aluminium,  
suede, marble and brass,  
1740 x 330 x 480 mm)

### III.

Bhatta Nayaka's series of arguments from the 10th century compels many to conclude that *rasa* belongs to the viewer or reader. Where is *rasa*? Since the metaphor of taste presupposes a taster, it is sometimes said that the *rasika* distinguishes an aesthetic from a non-aesthetic object or event.

The formalists may disagree: If *rasa* is located in the viewer or reader, then it's actualised in them by the artwork. Bhatta Nayaka's conception of *rasa*, however, is a state of total absorption. It doesn't matter how and where *rasa* originates, whether it is inferred or manifested, because the point is the viewer or reader's experience. Even Bharata admits this: "Just as discerning people relish tastes ... discerning viewers relish the stable emotions ... and they feel joy."<sup>6</sup> If *rasa* refers to an actual experience, then how can it be said to belong to properties of the narrative poem, painting or play?

### IV.

Is it sometimes said that the many forms—cups and candles, mirth and wonderment—are modifications of the one substance, *rasa* or resin. We might trace such an argument to Bhoja from the 11th century: "Authorities traditionally reckon ten *rasas* .... We, however, admit only one *rasa*, passion, insofar as it alone is what is really tasted."<sup>7</sup>

Bhoja's view of *rasa* requires us to de-link the concept from emotional and psycho-physical states. On his account, *rasa* is singular and common to all the states. It is a perceptual structure or slate underneath such experiences.

6 — *Treatise on Drama (Natya Shastra)* of Bharata (early centuries C.E.) in Pollock, *A Rasa Reader*, 9.  
7 — *Light on Passion (Shringara Prakasha)* of Bhoja (1050 C.E.) in Pollock, *A Rasa Reader*, 119.



Hany Armanious  
*Sleeping Saint*  
2022  
(Cast polyurethane resin,  
140 x 570 x 300 mm)

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