The Queen and the Avatar

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Preface

In traditional Christian art there is an image of a little naked boy playing with a shell on a beach beside the sea. It is Saint Augustine who is thus portrayed, because he recognised that he was as incapable of exhausting the mystery of the Holy Trinity in his commentaries as the child he had seen on the seashore was unable to bail out the sea in his tiny container. We would like this image to be applied to the present writer, if only because we have never sought to be exhaustive or even systematic. Although we do not abandon what is called 'academic rigour', it is not our goal to place a new stone in the edifice of Oriental scholarship. Rather, our intention is more personal. It arises from a fascination with the figure of Kṛṣṇa as it appears in the *Mahābhārata, Harivaṃśa* and *Bhāgavata-purāṇa*. What really is an avatar? What is the meaning of his often strange or disturbing behaviour? What does his being *incognito* mean, if even partially so? How can he be a joker, transgressor, cunning plotter or seducer? How does he become the founder of a new religion, or the reviver of an old one? These questions have guided our approach and, starting from this perspective, we feel that the speech of thanksgiving that Queen Kuntī addresses to her nephew Kṛṣṇa at the end of the war

provides an invaluable clue. Thus, following her speech verse by verse, as it is related in the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa*, we have sought the answers to our questions first in the Indian tradition and then in other religious or philosophical worlds, and finally in our own understanding. If the reader, in following our method, can glean some keys to enrich his own understanding, or simply to revive his interest in this fertile and remarkably homogeneous field of the Indian epic, we will consider ourselves amply rewarded for our efforts.

Introduction

A famous verse from the *Mahābhārata* declares: 'Regarding the goals of man, namely conformity to order (*dharma*), material wealth (*artha*), love (*kāma*) and deliverance (*mokṣa*), everything which is in this text can also be found elsewhere. What is not here cannot be found anywhere else' (1, 62, 53). The all-embracing dimension of the epic, connecting human experience to the unicity of being, seems to be a general feature of all works of this kind which have played a leading role in the genesis of the great civilizations. Their universal value, even if not always explicitly documented, has undoubtedly been a certainty for all their traditional commentators, as well as for the majority of those whose imagination they have fed over the course of time. Moreover, the strength of this fundamental belief can be attested to in the systematic use of these texts, first by philosophers (in the original meaning of the term 'lover of wisdom'), and, secondly, by the saints or traditional interpreters, who have consistently used them as a source and drawn countless illustrations from them in the course of their teachings. We are thinking here of both the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa* in India, as well as the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* or the *Aeneid* in Europe, and of course, above all,

of the Bible, for, to the extent it conveys a sacred history, it belongs to this genre. So it is no coincidence if all of the literary classics that we have just mentioned were used, at least at certain times and places, as the basis for the practice of a form of divination which consisted in opening the book at random at any page in order to find a binding response within it to a personal question that had been previously asked.[1] In other words, it was recognized that these synthetic accounts had an oracular value akin to a revelation of supra-human origin, notwithstanding the fact that it was considered that there were degrees in the level of inspiration of these texts. Vedic literature is qualified in India as *śruti* (literally: hearing), meaning that its authors, the *ṛṣi*, were directly responsive to the speech of God which they passed on without alteration. As for the *Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyaṇa*, they belong to the *smṛti* (literally: memory, reflection), a category of works considered as having a status lower than the previous one, without being considered devoid of inspiration nonetheless, or of a higher intuition.

In fact, the most obvious feature that all epics have in common is without doubt the number of characters of all shapes and sizes who are placed one way or another in many different, often conflicting or dramatic situations, which provide their audience, who can always refer to them analogically, with numerous examples of what behaviour to follow or not. We also know that these heroes, good or evil—but the reality often lies somewhere

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1 This universal practice extends from such works as the Sibylline books of ancient Rome, to the Qur'ān or again *mutatis mutandis*, to the *I Ching* in the Chinese tradition. But here we leave the domain of the epic properly so called.

in between—are usually called by a number of names which sometimes bewilders the uninitiated on a first reading. The epic style may show in this a concern for not wanting to weary the reader with tedious repetition but, above all, this plurality is primarily a way of transmitting the complexity of a character, if not psychologically, then at least functionally and symbolically, in a context that extends far beyond that of an ordinary novel. Regarding the main figures of these texts, which in India are the *avatāra*,[2] the countless epithets which describe them fulfil a role which is both theological and initiatic. This is eminently the case with the lists of a thousand names given to Viṣṇu or to the goddess (Lalitā) that the devotee may recite one after the other in his spiritual practice,[3] unless he prefers, as is more common, to select one of these names to apply to the Divinity itself through His incarnation.[4]

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[2] The *avatāra* are literally descents (of the divinity amongst men). As Madeleine Biardeau has stressed (2002: 2,728), the occurrence of this word comes after the appearance of the *Mahābhārata* which only uses the verb *ava-TṚ*, to descend.

[3] In the same way Muslims recite the 99 divine names and some Christians recite litanies to the Virgin.

[4] Some Orientalists refuse to use the word 'incarnation' in this context, because of the meaning that it has taken on in Christianity, where it is given an exclusive value, related to the historicity of Christ. The latter case appears to be unique in the sacred history of the biblical world and Christians can scarcely admit that a mythological character can 'become flesh'. Theology therefore assigns specific characteristics to the Incarnation of Christ which we seek in vain to find the equivalent of in India. Having said this, however, we shall retain 'incarnation' for *avatāra*, like many other writers, with

Regarding the *Mahābhārata*, we will begin with this observation: as the full *avatāra* of the god Viṣṇu who, in the view of the devotional perspective which primarily interests us here, represents the supreme Principle, Kṛṣṇa stands out as the central figure of the epic. The Hindu who reads and meditates on the divine acts of this character will therefore make this fundamental identity of the hero with the omnipotent deity the master key to the whole work, and consequently any sociological or historical interpretation, for example, will become superficial, or even useless to him. However, other protagonists in the story appear to have quite different degrees of awareness of the avataric nature of Kṛṣṇa. Thus, 'Fools do not recognize me in this human body. They ignore my supreme essence as Lord of creatures,' says Kṛṣṇa to Arjuna. And: 'Only the wise (*mahātman*) attached to the divine nature (*daivī prakṛti*) worship me single-mindedly, recognizing me as the eternal principle of creatures' (*Bhagavadgītā*, 9, 11 and 13). Similarly, in the *Rāmāyaṇa*, only twelve people, it is said, are aware of the reality of Rāma's avataric nature (Herbert [1949] 1972: 344). This situation is in fact the same as in the Gospel which describes how the person of Christ is perceived by his contemporaries

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the idea that the analogy with Christianity is in this case more important than the difference. In fact, we are following on this point the Hindus themselves, who do not hesitate to describe Christ as an avatar in order to emphasize the doctrinal relationship. Thus Rāmakṛṣṇa says: 'The avatar is always the same. The one God immersed in the ocean of life incarnates, and is called Krishna. Another time, He plunges, and reemerges somewhere else among mankind and is called Jesus' (Herbert [1949] 1972: 340).

in very different ways. While some fiercely deny his divinity, or at least his authority, even so far as to seek his death at all costs, others do have a certain presentiment of it. The Apostles themselves only gradually discover the true greatness of their master. Thus Thomas has to put his finger in the wounds of the risen Christ in order to recognize Him for who He is. The Indian epic is just as rich in confrontations of this kind, if not more so, given the magnitude of the story. Kaṃsa, the king usurper, slayer of the six older brothers of Balarāma and Kṛṣṇa, does not realize that the latter is none other than the god Viṣṇu, until he ultimately receives from him the blow of the mace which causes his death. This perfect recognition, *in extremis*, besides granting him a complete remission of his sins, assures him instant deliverance. In this respect he is comparable to Pharaoh in the Muslim tradition, who is saved in a similar manner when the waters of the Red Sea close over him after the passage of the Hebrews: 'Pharaoh who was about to be engulfed said, "Yes, I believe: there is only one God in whom the sons of Israel believe, I am among those submitted to Him." God said … today we will save you in your body that thou mayest be a sign for those who come after you' (Qur'ān 10: 90–92, trans. Pickthall).[5] In the same order of ideas, mention may also be made of the good thief, who at the point of death obtained complete remission

[5] Such at least is the opinion of Ibn ʿArabī, who declares in the *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*, 'the general belief in the damnation of Pharaoh is not based on any sacred text' (1975: 114). On this point he comes up against the majority of exegetes, who interpret another passage of the Qur'ān (11: 96–99) differently, and thus seem to condemn Pharaoh to the same fate of his people.

of his sins, on confessing the divinity of Jesus, crucified beside him (cf. Luke 23: 39–43).

But if the case of Kaṃsa, described as the earthly manifestation of a demon, seems to obey a certain logic, one can legitimately wonder at the doubts or bias of the main heroes who play a vital role in the epic. The *Mahābhārata*, indeed, tells us that they are the great gods of Vedic mythology, who are made to contribute in various ways to this universal drama. One realizes, therefore, quite early on in the story that, as is also the case in the *Iliad*, the gods are forced to take sides in the human conflict, sometimes apparently even 'against their better judgement'. Their obedience to the incarnation of the supreme god is neither automatic, since they are sometimes opposed to him in the war, nor are they always fully aware of who he is when they fight at his side. Among those who fight on the Kaurava rebel clan's side, and so against Kṛṣṇa, it should be noted, are principally Bhīṣma, Vidura and Droṇa, who represent respectively Dyu (Heaven), Dharma (the Cosmic Order) and Bṛhaspati (the Priest of the gods). Their irrevocable allegiance to king Dhṛtarāṣṭra forces them to take his side, despite their affection for their relatives and friends of the other clan. As for Karṇa, the son of Sūrya (the Sun), he represents a different possibility, since he assumes his bellicose commitment voluntarily out of loyalty to Duryodhana and in a spirit of revenge with regard to Arjuna.

But the most striking example of the hesitation of a hero to espouse the cause of the major avatar is given by Arjuna himself. This son of the god Indra has to wait for the episode of the *Bhagavad-gītā*, on the eve of battle,

before he really understands who Kṛṣṇa, his faithful companion who serves as his charioteer, is. At the point when Arjuna gives in to utter despair at the thought of having to fight against the members of his own family, the avatar, in a kind of transfiguration, suddenly appears to him in his cosmic form encompassing all the worlds, in order to remove his last doubts and urge him on to fight. Thus, on the side protected by Kṛṣṇa—the clan of the Pāṇḍava—, are, apart from Arjuna himself, Yudhiṣṭhira, the son of Dharma, Bhīma, the son of Vāyu (the Wind) and Dhṛṣṭadyumna, the son of Agni (Fire), to name only the most important.[6] The presence of a character that embodies *dharma* in both camps, namely Yudhiṣṭhira on the one side and Vidura on the other, shows that the conflict goes beyond a simple confrontation between 'good and evil' cousins, as some commentators have described the two parties. And when, after the war, Vidura dies, his soul leaves his body and miraculously enters that of his nephew Yudhiṣṭhira, as if to show that *dharma* transcends the conflict. Furthermore, the presence of multiple gods divided between the two clans shows that the avataric function cannot be reduced only to the person of Kṛṣṇa, but that it is shared somehow among all the main protagonists in the drama.

Before proceeding further in these analyses, we must make it clear that one encounters, above all in the writing of the *Mahābhārata*, the most explicit expression of a

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[6] In the first volume of *Mythe et épopée*, Dumézil (1986) treats all these equivalences in a very complete fashion. Despite his desire to bring everything back to the ideology of the three functions which is his hobby horse, his analysis is relevant and useful to the understanding of the epic.

fundamental shift that had taken place in the Indian tradition in the centuries before the Christian era.[7] The *sanātana-dharma* (perennial religion, or perennial order) as the Hindus refer to their own tradition, underwent at that time a considerable change in orientation within the spiritual cosmos of India. The disruption of values that accompanied this shift seems to have been 'in tune with the times', to the extent that it marked a sharp reaction against Buddhism and aimed to correct a Brahmanism grown too elitist. Thus it led to what first the Muslims, and then the West, would call Hinduism. But in the Indian consciousness it responded primarily to the passage from the third to the fourth age in the history of humanity, from the *dvāpara-yuga* to the *kali-yuga*, with all the constraints imposed by such a cyclic shift. We are now in the Vaishnavite climate with the emergence of *bhakti* (sharing, love, devotion) that characterizes it. Therefore the path of devotion, *bhakti-yoga*, as defined by Kṛṣṇa in the *Bhagavad-gītā*, is, in this new perspective, placed above the spiritual ways that were predominant in the Vedic period, namely that of

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[7] Despite their incongruity in the dating of Indian events, the references to the Christian calendar are unavoidable: on the one hand they are convenient for Western readers, and on the other hand they are necessary because of the absence of any uniform Indian calendar. Concerning the date of the writing of the *Mahābhārata*, the least one can say is that the issue is fluid and complex. For example, the *Encyclopedia Universalis* places it between 4 BC and 4 AD! Another problem to resolve is knowing if the writing was by one person (which Madeleine Biardeau, amongst others, believes), or if it was a question of being a work in progress over centuries. While these questions are not without interest, they are outside the scope of the present work.

karman (sacrifice) and *jñāna* (knowledge), without going so far as to invalidate them. The path of *bhakti* is more favourable, however, for the majority, because, as the avatar explains, it is clearly easier than the others. This is the reason why it is better suited to the formidable conditions that would henceforth subjugate mankind, victims of the malice of time, plunged deep in the age of darkness. We will have further opportunity to consider these ideas, but will note in passing that it is in the *Mahābhārata* where the term *bhakti* first appears, if not also the particular spiritual path it designates.

The Vedic pantheon is, therefore, presented in a new perspective, with the presence of a Supreme God to whom all the other ancient deities are subordinate, which some have termed henotheism (*heno* = one), a term that has the advantage of reserving monotheism to the Abrahamic religions. However the Vedic heritage is not denied either. In the *Bhagavad-gītā*, Kṛṣṇa states in this regard: 'It is I who should be known through all the *Veda*. I am the author of the *Vedānta* and the knower of the *Veda*' (15, 15). One can certainly see a parallel here to Christ when he says that he came not to abolish the Scriptures, but to fulfil them (Matthew 5: 17–18). Thus, in the Indian context, the *Veda* continue to enjoy an unequalled prestige. But while they were once largely confined to the Brahmin caste and therefore relatively inaccessible to other members of society, they now fade into the background in contrast to a belief which is open to all, with its spirit of redefining the *dharma* by explicitly responding to the emergence of a new need, a new human requirement. The *Veda* appear then as the testimony of a bygone spiritual world upon which we can

always draw and that are perpetuated in certain rituals and among certain circles, but in the consciousness and practice of the majority of the faithful they are overshadowed by the more recent religion, which sets aside certain gods and redefines the function of others.

The birth of a prolific and varied mythology, which we are already familiar with in Greece, thus emerges in India as both the cause and consequence of the popularisation of the Brahmanic religion, without it seeming necessary to solve this variant of the paradox of the chicken and the egg. There took place, in a relatively short time, an opening up of the priestly tradition to all kinds of popular currents, together with *ādivāsī*, Dravidian, and even foreign, notably Greek, influences.[8] To understand this evolution fully, it has to be appreciated that originally the Vedic gods had only a theological dimension, in that although they had a clearly defined function, they had a vague personality, 'without any history'. Certainly, as Ananda Coomaraswamy has shown in his well-known *Hinduism and Buddhism*, the *Ṛg-veda* depicts some basic myths such as the killing of the dragon Vṛtra by Indra or the voluntary dismemberment of Puruṣa, the Cosmic Man, in the creation of the world and the establishing of the sacrifice. But we cannot yet speak of a mythology in the usual sense, i.e. a collection of myths describing in narrative mode the actions and deeds of a given pan-

[8] The *ādivāsī* are the aborigines of India. The English in their censuses called them the scheduled tribes. They make up about 8 per cent of the population of present day India and are not Hindus at all. As for what the Greeks brought, this dates back to the arrival of Alexander in 4 BC. Some scholars see an influence of the works of Homer in the plot of the *Mahābhārata*.

theon. At the Vedic stage, this figurative language was just beginning. It is important to understand here the multiple consequences of such a shift. The gods represented in the epic met the need for wonderment of the majority, dissatisfied as they were by the dryness of the Vedic rites and the elliptical nature of the hymns that accompanied them, whatever their extraordinary poetic value. In addition, the colourful unfolding of their actions, which made the gods more concrete and even strangely human in their incarnations by representing them through an explicit iconography, giving them attributes, and depicting them with all their alliances and conflicts, went hand in hand with a considerable flourishing of the arts that were nourished by this manna. First came literature, then theatre, sculpture, dance, painting and many more, and lastly, let us not forget, architecture; for the gods had come down to earth and made it sacred in a new way. They lived their adventures in specific locations that pilgrims still hasten to visit and, as they took on a visible form, the arts were legitimately able to represent them in a thousand different ways. Finally, the statues, which represented them and were considered 'living' after their rite of consecration, needed a home to inhabit, and this gave rise to the art of temple building. While the Vedic sacrifice was performed outdoors in a sacred space, specifically in nature itself, which was like a sanctuary, it was Hinduism, that is *bhakti*, that created the temple. Thus the great religious architectural achievements of India appeared almost immediately after the dissemination of the epic, from the fourth century AD, and therefore the rite of *pūjā* (devotional worship) replaced *yajña* (sacrifice itself). This impact of religion on

the various art forms was not without importance in its social consequences, as it presented the craftsmen with great challenges, and gave them, *de facto*, an undisputedly important status, inspiring the development of a multitude of skills formerly reserved for castes which had certainly been less valued. The flowering of the arts, crafts and techniques[9] which followed was a sign of the times. It offered *homo faber* new initiatory ways, new supports for meditation, linked to the archetypes inherent in the processing and fashioning of the material, which would remain spiritually effective as long as this symbolic dimension persisted in the minds of men and the industrial world did not come to ruin everything with its immoderate thirst for productivity. Chapter 35 of Exodus describes at length a comparable cyclical phenomenon, when Moses invites all those qualified among his people to mobilize to build the Tabernacle, the dwelling of Yahweh: 'Them hath He filled with wisdom of heart, to work all manner of work, of the engraver, and of the cunning workman, and of the embroiderer, in blue, and in purple, in scarlet, and in fine linen, and of the weaver, even of them that do any work, and of those that devise cunning work. Then wrought Bezaleel and Aholiab, and every wise hearted man, in whom the Lord put wisdom and understanding, to know how to work all manner of work for the service of the Sanctuary, according to all that the Lord had commanded' (Exodus 35:35–36:1, KJV).

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[9] The words *ars* in Latin and *technē* in Greek cover the three meanings in one word. It is worth remembering also the primary meaning of *sophia*, wisdom, which means technical skill.

In the West it may be supposed that Greek mythology was born of a similar movement, but we lack sufficient evidence from pre-Homeric times to document such a development, in the way we can in India. With Rome, in contrast, it was only relatively late, under Greek influence, that a mythology was imported in the second century BC. Consequently, the ancient Roman religion preserved more than one trait in common with the Vedic religion, a fact that has been eloquently attested to by Georges Dumézil. Be that as it may, it is still important to note this: the development of mythology is ultimately perceived by the Hindus as being both a sign of progress and degeneration. It was a form of progress in the sense that, in breaking, at least to some extent, the barriers of caste, which were too sclerotic, the *dharma* found a new vitality that it had lost.[10] With the epic, India settled old scores, first with a Brahmanism that was too elitist, and, secondly with Buddhism, not by denying the latter outright, but by including it, so to speak, in a broader context. This kind of *Reconquista* would be the prelude to the almost total disappearance of this religion in India. Finally, the birth of the epic marks, in the Hindu collective imagination at least, a degeneration in that it appears as a sign of decadence inherent in the course of time, as described by the doctrine of the four ages, since it inaugurated the troubled times in which we now live. The man of the Vedic period, who belonged to the *dvāpara-yuga*, the Indian equivalent of the Bronze Age of the Greek tradition, had a perception of the sacred which

[10] Inversely, with the coming of the Muslims to India in the 12–13th centuries, the caste system became rigid as a sort of identity reflex.

was more immediate, more intuitive, and more intimate. Performing sacrifices outdoors in a consecrated space, without the need for any divine representations, he had the entire cosmos as his temple and so communicated more directly with heaven.[11] Now, in the *kali-yuga*, the Iron Age of the Greek tradition, the devotee cannot live without tangible supports; he needs images to express his faith and a more explicit spiritual guidance.

Any new law, be it divine or human, necessarily corrects a fall by offering ways to mitigate its effects, but this is justifiable only because the excesses, which were accidental, have now become the norm. In this sense, each redrawing of the *dharma* inevitably confirms a more degraded state,[12] although for humanity it appears, *a priori*, that suddenly valuable opportunities have opened up. However, the balance is actually more fragile. In the first age *dharma* is compared to a bull that stands firmly on four legs. But with each passage from one age to another he loses a leg, until in the present age, he teeters very precariously on one. This understanding of the changing world is certainly at the very antipodes of

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11 The word *templum* in archaic Latin describes precisely a part of the sky where the diviner can particularly observe the flight of birds. It was only later that it came to be applied to a solid construction. In the Imperial era, Tacitus noticed with admiration that the Germans, who did not have temples, thought it sacrilegious to enclose the gods between four walls.

12 Unlike the Hindus who are deeply attached to their mythic past, Christians do not cherish a particular nostalgia for the time before Christ's coming and the ensuing era of Grace. The Muslims in contrast see Islam as the restoration of the religion of Abraham, the *ḥanīf*, whose practice was pure and orthodox.

the beliefs of those who see in the systematic recognition of various rights or in the enactment of new laws the supposed progress of humanity.

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The Heroes of the *Mahābhārata*

We said earlier that the central figure of the *Mahābhārata* was Kṛṣṇa, which is certainly the case.[1] But given the fact that he only appears late in the events of the story, a number of other protagonists in the narrative can be taken as playing the lead role each in their turn. From a strictly literary perspective, this Indian epic is remarkable in that the different characters summarize within themselves, according to the point of view one adopts, the essential meaning of the entire plot. We are

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1 We have provided in an appendix a brief summary of the main episodes of the epic which are necessary to the understanding of our analysis. The reader unfamiliar with the *Mahābhārata* is encouraged to read these few pages before going further. See abridged versions in English by Kamala Subramanian, Ramesh Menon, William Buck, R. K. Narayan, Romesh C. Dutt, John D. Smith, and a complete version by Ganguli Kisari Mohan and Gupta Neteesh. Also we will take advantage of this note to say that when we speak of the (Krishnaite) epic we also include in this term, in addition to the *Mahābhārata*, the other two works that are essential to it, that is the *Harivaṃśa* and the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa*. More explicit reference to the latter will be made further below.

dealing with a kind of jigsaw puzzle in which no part is superfluous. Thus Vyāsa, who passes for the traditional author of this enormous work, shows the demiurgic grip he has on it by giving himself the role of 'biological' father to the two brothers who are the source of the dynastic struggle, namely the blind Dhṛtarāṣṭra and the bloodless Pāṇḍu, as well as their wise younger brother Vidura. He therefore is not merely a privileged witness of the events who narrates what he has seen, but far more than that he manifests in a unique way the fact that he eminently carries within himself the contents of the story that he transmits to posterity. World literature offers few examples so successful as this close identification between the author of a work and one of its key actors.

To the extent that it is Yudhiṣṭhira, the eldest Pāṇḍava, who is called upon to be the king of Bhārata, it is then he who plays the central role in this drama. The importance of his function in the warrior world of the *kṣatriya* emerges, above all, from the fact that most of the teachings given by the various sages which occur in the course of the story are directly addressed to him. His slow psychological and spiritual development, as well as the authority he exerts over his brothers, consequently greatly determines the general unfolding of events in the epic.

Arjuna, for his part, can also claim the limelight as the flawless and invincible hero with whom the reader instinctively identifies. From the perspective of *bhakti*, he embodies the perfect devotee, as shown, among other things, by the representation on his banner of Hanumān, the general of the army of monkeys, who with unfailing dedication served Rāma, the previous incarnation of

Viṣṇu at the end of the second age.[2] The importance of Arjuna is also apparent from the fact that it is to him that Kṛṣṇa explicitly addresses his teaching in the famous episode of the *Bhagavad-gītā*, whose relatively short text is found in full in Book 6 of the *Mahābhārata*. Even if most indologists believe that this philosophical dialogue is a later addition, the doctrinal coherence of this passage with respect to the whole work is so perfect, that it is no exaggeration to say that it expresses its quintessence.

Draupadī, the wife in common of the five Pāṇḍava brothers, in turn occupies a central role as she herself embodies the cause of the war, when after Duryodhana has just won her at dice, he asks his brother Duḥśāsana to strip her in the middle of the assembly in order to humiliate his cousins. Although born of the sacrificial Fire, she personifies, in this case, rather the Earth, which Duryodhana wants to possess in order to exercise his despotic power. This passage is undoubtedly the most dramatic episode in the entire epic. It lies at the climax of the plot development and, like the crucifixion in the Gospel, it marks the extreme low point in the tragedy of the Pāṇḍava, when all seems lost, when *dharma* seems to have been completely rejected in this lower world. Then, at this critical moment, Draupadī has the presence of mind to invoke Kṛṣṇa inwardly, although he is not

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[2] Although the *Rāmāyaṇa* tells a story situated in a period mythologically previous to the *Mahābhārata*, it is not certain if it was written earlier than the latter. In fact, the *Mahābhārata* tells incidentally, in brief outline, the whole plot of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. Does this mean that it summarizes an existing work, or that this second epic constitutes a development of that episode? The question remains open for indologists to solve.

physically present at this terrible scene. By the power of his *māyā*, in answer to her prayer, he makes his protégé's sari limitless, thus ridiculing Duḥśāsana who is unable to unravel it to its end. In this way he preserves the purity of the young woman and allows the Pāṇḍava to obtain, at the same time, a reprieve for a while.[3] In the traditional approach that consists of understanding the epic as an inward drama in which the five husbands and their wife are seen as an allegory of the five senses and the *manas*, the inner faculty which receives the perceptions, it is man as such that the avatar saves in the end from the extreme pride of the ego, represented by Duryodhana. This reprieve, however, is only temporary or virtual, since it requires from the Pāṇḍava a further series of purificatory and initiatory tests.

We could also see in this vain attempt to strip the heroine, who is entirely abandoned to the grace of Kṛṣṇa, an image of modern science which greedily attempts to penetrate the secrets of nature, but is constantly confronted by a new layer, a new veil. The nakedness of Nature is thus reserved for her legitimate husbands, who then represent the traditional sciences. This interpretation is also supported by the god Brahmā who, in addressing Kṛṣṇa, says: 'The scholars can count over time the grains of dust of the earth, the water droplets of fog and the stars of heaven. But who can measure your qualities, you who came to earth for the good of all, and are the very es-

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[3] One finds the same expression of an immediate deliverance from evil attacks thanks to the invocation of the divinity in several episodes of Christian hagiography. For example, Saint Agnes, on being undressed by her executioners, sees, in answer to her prayer, her hair suddenly grow to hide her nakedness.

sence (*ātman*) of these qualities?' (*Bhāgavata-purāṇa*, 10, 14, 7). Finally, let us note that, as with Helen in the Trojan War, it is also a woman in the Indian epic that ultimately the warring parties fight over. We will return later to this key episode of the epic.

The arrogant and ambitious Duryodhana can also be considered a major character; without his endless thirst for power, without his relentless determination to destroy the Pāṇḍava, the *Mahābhārata* would lose all dramatic effect and the war would never have happened. But 'it must needs be that scandals come,' and we learn in the course of the story that he actually embodies the *kali-yuga*, the age of the lowest throw of the dice, when you can only score a one (*kali*).[4] It little signifies whether we count the beginning of the dark period from the day of Duryodhana's birth, or as some do, eager to place the entire life of Kṛṣṇa in the third age, from the year of Kṛṣṇa's death, thirty-six years after the end of the war. This second opinion seems less pertinent, though, if one considers that the avatar explicitly addresses his message to men already affected by this change in cyclical conditions.

If the *Mahābhārata*, as a universal conflict which throws the world into chaos by redistributing the cards (to use another image), contains strange analogies to the Second World War, then we cannot fail to compare the insatiable Duryodhana, who is full of hatred, to Hitler,

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[4] Dice in India have a rectangular shape with only four numbered sides. These numbers correspond to the mythological ages, the *yuga*, which have a decreasing length in the ratio of: 4, 3, 2, 1, the 1 having in this context the lowest value, corresponding to the final period of the cycle.

who in historical fashion concentrated in himself all the horror of the conflict.[5] It may be noted with regard to this that the mythographer and the historian have at least one goal in common, that of 'keeping memories (*smṛti*) alive for posterity' in order to try to teach men a lesson. The difference is that the first mentioned role is situated in a sort of ontological verticality, whereas the second is situated in a chronological horizontality. In any case, in the Western tradition history has occupied, since the time of Herodotus, an especially prestigious role that has profoundly influenced Christianity; for indeed, many Christians regard Jesus as a divine manifestation infinitely greater than any that the ancient pantheons were able to produce by the very fact that he is a historical figure, and this notwithstanding that the Christ they worship obviously transcends history.[6] This divergence

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[5] A global—that is to say universal—conflict, cannot be interpreted in the Hindu context except as the passage in a downward direction to a new cyclical era. The world could not be the same before and after such an upheaval. In addition, despite the principle of self-defence, one cannot claim that between the warring 'cousins' there is just one good clan and one evil one, as we have said above. They are caught, despite themselves, in a storm that exceeds them. Moreover, the author of the epic shows a singular intuition when he speaks of the disastrous effects of the Kurukṣetra war on nature in general. The heroes have at their disposition weapons of 'mass destruction' which they are reluctant to use for this reason. 'Even the grass trembles' at the possible implementation of such a means of annihilation. This environmental awareness is the more remarkable when one considers that at the time of writing of these texts, men fought with bows and swords, and no one could imagine, for example, the devastating results of an atomic bomb.

[6] On the Indian concept of history, see below the commentary

of views is linked to the differences inherent in the conceptions of time that varying civilizations develop. We will return later to this important point.

The list of the most significant players in this story of Vyāsa's could easily be extended, as the epic contains other characters who play, at one time or another, a key role in the unfolding of the myth. This construction highlights the complexity of an exceptionally ingenious 'scenario', which, as we have seen, gives the renaissance of the *sanātana-dharma* a new organic coherence on the basis of a structural rereading, a kind of *aggiornamento* or updating of the Vedic religion.[7] But it is time now to introduce the character who is the subject of this book, namely Queen Kuntī.

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on verse 11. Having said this, a specialist on the question of the historic Jesus informed us that today researchers who deny the concrete existence of Jesus have become extremely rare. Five things seem accepted according to his own words: that he lived in Palestine under Pontius Pilate, that he was baptised, that he had disciples, that he talked of the Kingdom of Heaven and that he was condemned to death. A little, no doubt, but it is also a great deal.

[7] It is also interesting to note that if Vaishnavism was constructed *a priori* on the basis of the literary genre of the epic (*itihāsa*), the Śaivite and Śaktic mythologies, in contrast, were developed in the corpus of the *Purāṇa* (cf. ch. 3), and thus later.