

# I

## EXAMINATIONS OF THE PAST

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Purāṇas participate in a similar mythological universe to epic and *kāvya* (poetic) works. However, they are structured as exhaustive compendiums of the Epic lore seen through particular (one may say “sectarian”) perspectives. The word *purāṇa* means “ancient,” and a good deal of its oral lore may have been coexistent with the Veda itself, sharing the nebulous ground of a most extensive oral tradition.<sup>1</sup> Regardless of extrinsic chronological possibilities, Purāṇas see themselves as narrating events that have taken place in the “distant past.” Such narratives, of course, have little to do with measurable, historical continuity. Rather, “the past” becomes the paradigm for the present through the mythic shadows cast by its great characters—gods, kings, saints, and sages.

The Purāṇic past is highly structured. But the tradition’s classification of the Purāṇas by *pañca-lakṣaṇa*—the five qualities that define a Purāṇa—functions primarily as a “myth of composition” as E. W. Hopkins and others have noted. The *pañca-lakṣaṇas*, or “five characteristics,” have in fact never been strictly followed.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, the Bhāgavata speaks of possessing “ten characteristics,” *daśa-lakṣaṇa* as opposed to *pañca-lakṣaṇa*, prompting much commentarial speculation on the arrangement and purpose of the *lakṣaṇas* themselves.<sup>3</sup> What may be significant here is that the Purāṇic narrative constructs itself through categories, perhaps indicating a “past” that lends itself more easily to lateral, associative classification than to successive chronology.

The question of Purāṇa as being history or myth is not really an issue here, for—as Eliade has noted in his early work on ritual and as Sudhir Kakar has shown in particular case studies—history in India has tended to bleed into myth in a matter of two or three generations.<sup>4</sup> The Purāṇas do not claim to be history, in a contemporary sense, as much as they envision themselves as a collective memory, a memory that turns

around particular persons in particular situations. They do not offer a master narrative that states “what happened.” Rather, they are as situational as the ethics of Manu, and therefore welcome the coloration of subjectivity that contemporary readers would attribute to myth as they reconstruct the past. Thus, the Bhāgavata relates stories found in the Epics and in other Purāṇas, but it does so from its own unique perspective, and while its perspective is clearly a Vaiṣṇava one, and a Kṛṣṇaite one at that, the fact that its narrative turns around a conversation between a dying man and a sage, who has come to help him die, is unique in Indian literature.

What is really crucial to understanding the Bhāgavata’s “death narrative” is the Purāṇic sense of the past. For the mythical revisioning of the past is what Purāṇas essentially do, and this is what Parīkṣit is given to do in preparation for dying. Unlike the *Bar do thos grol* (the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*), the dying person is not given instruction on what she/he will encounter upon leaving the physical body. (The Bhāgavata does, however, have an “after-death section” in the third book, and like other Purāṇas does catalogue an impressive series of heavens and hells in the fifth *skandha*.) But more pointedly, Parīkṣit is led through a series of rich, diverse stories that combine variant theologies, narrative forms, and philosophies in a pastiche of Vedic, Āgamic, Epic, and other modes of discourse (a pastiche which led Friedhelm Hardy to marvel at the author, if indeed there is one, not becoming schizoid).<sup>5</sup> Rather than a weakness, however, this borrowing effect may be a strength of the Bhāgavata-Purāṇa. As in the case of the Bhagavadgītā, encompassing diversity has led to monumentality.

Moreover, this “collage-like” structure should be considered one of the principal psychologizing devices of the Purāṇa. It takes leave of literal history and authorship, as well as linear narrative, and enters into a liminal world of figures who represent the cultural *mythos* of the past, the world of Parīkṣit’s ancestors. The name “Parīkṣit” literally means “the examiner.” In the Mahābhārata he is the grandson of Arjuna, and is the last surviving heir of the Pāṇḍava line. In both the Epic and Bhāgavata versions of his story, Parīkṣit is saved by Viṣṇu, who incarnates in the womb of his mother and protects him from Aśvatthāmā’s irreversible *brahmāstra* weapon.<sup>6</sup> Having seen the form of Viṣṇu while still in the womb, Parīkṣit goes on searching for that likeness throughout his life.

Parīkṣit, cursed to die within seven days, then, is still examining. He will be asked to hear a recapitulation of the imaginative history of his lineage, he must return to the past, he must “psychologize” in order to make peace with his past. As an interesting aside here, Parīkṣit’s own son, Janamejaya, will not at all be at peace with his father’s death; instead, he will seek to exterminate the entire race of serpents in a

ghastly sacrifice (since a serpent-bird, Takṣaka, is the actual instrument of Parikṣit's death).

It is important to note that the recounted Purāṇic past—unlike a contemporary analytic session—is not composed of Parikṣit's personal history, but rather of the history of his lineage which is significant. This position is in marked contrast to normative depth psychology's notion of a personal mytho-history, or a “myth of individuation,” to use C. G. Jung's terminology (which was arguably coined in conscious contradistinction to non-Western metaphors of “absorption” into an undifferentiated Absolute). As Alan Roland, and more recently Stanley N. Kurtz, have pointed out, Indian psychology in general offers a model of health focused somewhat differently from that of post-Enlightenment humanistic psychology: the healthy ego is not the “individuated” one, but is one which has successfully integrated into its significant group—the “we-self”- versus the “I-self.” Thus, personal history defers to collective history, and personal values to collective values. One's very existence is conceived of as part of the collective matrix, not apart from it.<sup>7</sup>

In its reconsideration of the past, then, the Bhāgavata does not focus on personal events but evokes as best it can the sense of a monumental collective identity. Through archaic language and sanskritization of regional themes, and through its narrative constructed from a mosaic of common lore, the Bhāgavata seeks the universal, hoping to appeal to as broad a base as possible. Thus, commentators from varieties of different schools claim the work as their own.

Moreover, Purāṇic stories do not exist within the covers of a book, nor even within the genre labeled “Purāṇa.” They are chronicles of the collective imagination, confluences of ongoing discourse, and will be continually revised and retold through varieties of dramatic and performance traditions. The intertextual echo of the Purāṇas always resonates strongly, for the Purāṇas are dialoging with the Epics by retelling their stories and with the *Vedas* by trying to emulate them (as in the case of the Bhāgavata's *gāyatrī*-like verse), refer to them, or align with them.<sup>8</sup> In the Bhāgavata's own words, it, itself, is the *nigama-kalpa-taror galitamphalam*, “the delicately ripened fruit from the *kalpa* (wish-fulfilling) tree of the Vedic tradition.”<sup>9</sup>

Another important aspect of the Purāṇic narrative is its sacral nature. These are not just collections of stories as in the *Kathāsaritsāgara*, or *Daśakumāracarita*. The original narrative is attributed to the Supreme Being, Nārāyaṇa, and the immediate author, Vyāsa, is also said to be an aspect of the Supreme.<sup>10</sup> Jīva Gosvāmī, in this regard, cites a verse from the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* stating that the *Vedas*, *Itihāsas*, and *Purāṇas* have all emanated from the breath of the “Great Being.” And the Bhāgavata, itself, refers to the *itihāsa-purāṇa*

as the fifth Veda.<sup>11</sup> By wrapping itself in the mantle of the Veda, the Purāṇa supports its claim to divine status and attempts to elevate its narrative to the level of Vedic orthodoxy.<sup>12</sup> In this sense, the Bhāgavata-Purāṇa corresponds to scholarly definitions of myth as “a story that is sacred.”<sup>13</sup> And this sense of its own sacredness characterizes the Bhāgavata’s narrative along with its aesthetic and narrative sensibility.

The Purāṇa thus aims at more than an extrinsic synthesis of variant subjects and perspectives, for it resists presenting itself as an uncentered text promoting a singular theological position.<sup>14</sup> For the Bhāgavata is mytho-poetic narrative in its most anagogical sense. It sees itself as the very incarnation of the Godhead, the “ripened fruit” from the tree of the Vedic tradition whose *arka*, a Vedic word for “ray,” will bring light to the dark Kali age.<sup>15</sup> Beyond both its efforts to present itself as a Vedic evolute and its philosophical predilections and historical reconstructions, however, the narrative/aesthetic focus of the Bhāgavata stands as predominant. Taking its lead from a phrase of the *Taittirīya Upaniṣad*, “*raso vai saḥ*”—“He is *rasa*”—the Purāṇa continually refers to its own narrative as “ambrosial,” as it seeks to embody both the Vedic idea of *rasa* as blissful liquid essence and the Ālankārika tradition’s notion of *rasa* as aesthetic mood.<sup>16</sup> In this regard, the text frequently employs classical (*kāvya*) instead of Epic śloka meters and moves its narrative toward the figurative dimension whenever possible.

The Bhāgavata, of course, will assert that its own “devotional mood,” or *bhakti-rasa*, is the apotheosis of these traditions. Just how far and in what way it lays claim to the Vedic and classical aesthetic traditions will be discussed in the third chapter of this volume. What I want to investigate here is the Bhāgavata’s sense of “narrative as aesthetics” as opposed to “narrative as representation.” “Narrative as representation” places one in the realm of *itihāsa*—the recounting of said events. But the series of interwoven stories that make up the Purāṇa exist in such a seemingly oblique (versus literal) relationship to one another that one can hardly account for them as necessary components of the Purāṇic genre. Moreover, the idea of the Purāṇa as *kathā*—in the Epic sense of a descriptive or historical narrative—cannot account for its multiplicity, visions of the future, and sustained heights of poetic rapture.

The Purāṇic form can be understood, perhaps, through the conventional theories of Sanskrit poetics as they are interpreted by the Vaiṣṇava commentaries of Jīva Gosvāmī, Vallabha, Viśvanātha Cakravartī, and others.<sup>17</sup> In such commentaries the narrative itself is envisioned as the chief aesthetic element, and the various *skandhas* (or chapters of the Purāṇa) are seen as containing “complementary” *līlās*, or “divine plays,” each exhibiting their own particular flavor or *rasas*. The appropriate mixing of aesthetic flavors sets the stage for the climactic tenth

*skandha* in which *mādhurya-bhāva* (the mood of conjugal love) eclipses all the others. While *mādhurya* is often referred to by commentators as “*ādi-rasa*,” or the “original mood,” the text itself moves on and winds back down to a harmonious, more worldly conclusion, much like an Indian *rāga* recapitulates its original themes after a climactic movement.<sup>18</sup> This “narrative as aesthetic” becomes the Purāṇa’s primary and ongoing response to Parīkṣit’s existential situation.

The question is why, and the answer is offered here in hypothetical form. Could it be that the Bhāgavata-Purāṇa recognizes an inherently “aesthetic” nature of the world? Could it be that the Purāṇa understands interior processes to be akin to narrative itself—not Epic, or dramatic, narrative as a description of psychic processes, but a pluralistic narrative that bends, dips, and doubles back on itself? What Hardy speculates to be schizophrenia, and what others may deplore as relativism, may be a deeper, more accurate, and even more therapeutic image of the cultural, mythic terrain than the non-aesthetic models commenting upon it could have imagined. The multivalent story lines, flashbacks and flash-forwards, and repetitions of similar themes in innumerable forms may be a more accurate map of the imagination than can be captured in any singular design.

James Hillman, for the last three decades, has boldly asserted the human psyche to be decentered and polytheistic, taking the Greek mythological imagination as his model.<sup>19</sup> The Bhāgavata’s vision, on the other hand, is neither that of a fragmented multiplicity (as the rhetoric of deconstruction would see it), nor even that of an uneasy, extended family (as in Hillman’s vision of the Greek Gods), but rather is a multiplicity of unity held together by “narrative as aesthetics.” In fact, the aesthetics of classical Indian dance, while drawing on both *kāvya* and *nāṭya* establishes a technique that disrupts the linear narrative by injecting diverse elements from a wide range of cultural forms in an improvisational manner. And, while I would not go so far as to say that the Purāṇic narrative is modeled after *nṛtya* (dance), it seems to share a good deal of its sensibility. Is it any wonder, then, that the ultimate figure of reality that the Purāṇa has to offer is that of a dance? The dance, or *rāsa-līlā*, appears in the tenth *skandha* and is simultaneously a narrative event, a performance (with the denizens of the upper worlds as the audience), and an emblem of the sublime to be contemplated upon by devotees. This “emblem” is discussed in terms of “unity and difference being inconceivably and simultaneously united” (*acintya-bhedābheda-tattva—Jīva*) as well as it being “a resting place of contradictory characteristics” (*viruddhadharmāśrayatā—Vallabha*). I will explore the *rāsa-līlā* in detail in the sixth chapter of this volume. For the moment, I want to examine the power and centrality of the Bhāgavata’s narrative patterning.

What is woven through this Purāṇic form, then, is a sustained focus on a narrative which will, according to its connotations and audience, produce an emotional response of deep feeling (*bhāva*), maturing into *bhakti-rasa*.<sup>20</sup> This is crucial to the project of preparation for dying because it supports the idea of listening as an end in itself, an end which is discussed in the first *skandha* as being superior to liberation from birth and death!

*ātmārāmās ca munayo nirgranthā apy urukrame  
kurvanty ahaitukīm bhaktim ittham-bhūta-guṇo hariḥ*

Even sages and those who delight in the *self*, who are freed from all ties, perform unalloyed devotion unto the Supreme Lord, Urukrama, being attracted by his wonderful qualities.

(BhP. I.7.10)

In the above verse, *bhakti* (loving devotion) is spoken of as desirable even for those who are liberated (literally “delighted in themselves”—*ātmārāma*), and even for those who have “gone beyond texts” (since the word *nirgrantha* can literally mean “without books” as well as “without ties”). The implication of this word *nirgrantha* is crucial to the narrative’s sense of itself because even those who are beyond language, as *jīvanmuktas* are said to be, willingly participate in the language of devotion. The Bhāgavata repeatedly associates *bhakti* with the act of *śravaṇa-kīrtana*—the hearing and singing narrative process—as its own reward. Thus, the Purāṇa promotes neither an absolutist cognition that frees one from the phenomenon of dying and its consequences, nor a relative conclusion that will abandon the “dying enterprise” as hopelessly unresolvable.

While the *bhakti-rasa* is the undeniable thread that strings the various Purāṇic narratives together, the Purāṇic narrative itself is inseparable from this thread. The polemical conclusions, innuendos, and didactic assertions of the Purāṇa are all delivered through the medium of story, not in the sense of an easily graspable tale, or even necessarily an allegory for the fallen minds of the Kali age, but in the sense of a rambling, episodic collage that incarnates patterns of meaning and cultural value while incorporating religious, moral, historical, and aesthetic dimensions of experience.

### A Note on the Mytho-Poetic Tradition

Let me return to what I have been referring to as either the “mytho-poetic” or “depth psychological tradition.” By these terms, I do not

mean the one school of Jung and his followers, but also the work of James Hillman, Northrop Frye, Wendy Doniger, and others who point to story as a most authentic model of the mythological process; not myth seen as reflecting a semidynamic structured psyche of *ego*, *id*, and *super-ego* (Freud), or even *persona*, *anima*, and *self* (Jung), but an open-ended mythic field of variance, filled with assorted characters, plot lines, and few clear-cut resolutions.

If *mythos*, seen as plot, is in some way analogous to the structure or patterning of the psyche, then the narrative process is itself the significant event; the telling of the story, which is what a Purāṇa does, has its own logic. Focusing on such “narrative logic” would be described by Frye as an “intrinsic” or “literary” method: one which does not subordinate narrative and its nonconclusive, anthropomorphizing, and even sometimes pathological tendencies to either historical grids or philosophical considerations.<sup>21</sup> I would further add that what Frye labels as “literary,” and what Hillman labels as “psychological” or “psychologizing” are one and the same thing: the focusing on the imaginative, either interiorized or projected outward, as the primary movement of narrative.<sup>22</sup> In this sense, as Frye has noted, literature, Purāṇic or otherwise, may serve in the same way as the structured visualizations of *maṇḍalas*, *ḍākinīs*, and *yi dams* do in Tibetan Buddhist traditions—as psychic constructs (often personified) that are evolved and dissolved through the imagination. In this sense, literature does not try to represent the external world but rather to transform the relationship between the imaginary and the real (as Lacan might put it), or between the inner and outer worlds.

Another important aspect of the mytho-poetic narrative process is variance. And, as one explores the narratives of the Bhāgavata, one cannot help but be impressed by their multivalence. The Purāṇa, for example, does not privilege a young male hero struggling for independence from a mother (although heroines are few and far between), nor does it focus on an old king, nor on a young maiden, nor even on a great paradigmatic war as the Epics do. Instead, demons such as Bali and Prahlāda become exalted; virtuous heroes such as Mucukunda succumb to the ravages of time; children die at birth; Viṣṇu, the “main character” of the Purāṇa (if there is one), appears in a multitude of forms—human, animal, male, female, young, and old; and the same stories, such as the *Varāha-līlā*, of Viṣṇu, rescuing the earth in the form of a boar, are told differently in separate sections of the Purāṇa.<sup>23</sup>

What kind of story, then, does the Purāṇa tell? Not an original story, not even a uni-authored one, for the narrative is depicted as a collaborative effort. The ripened fruit of the Purāṇa is said to be passed down literally from reciter to reciter as ambrosial liquid from the mouth of

Śuka, the parrot-narrator whose touching of the narrative, the commentators tell us, makes it even sweeter.<sup>24</sup> The commentarial tradition here affirms the psychology of the collective rather than that of the individual. As it is passed down, the story is embellished. Unlike the Veda, it is not expected to be passed down verbatim. At one point, Śuka speaks of the Purāṇa as originally having been spoken by Nārāyaṇa in the form of four *ślokas*. And Sūta, the bard who has heard the narrative of Śuka and who is said to be “bathed” in the discourse of the tradition (*viṣaye vācāṃsnātam*),<sup>25</sup> is asked to narrate to others what he has heard. And so the narrative technique of “someone always talking to someone else about something” (J. L. Mehta), a technique which Tzvetan Todorov called “embedding” in *A Thousand and One Nights* and which David Shulman has referred to as “emboxing,” goes on.<sup>26</sup> If one looked at this narrative through the eyes of a psychoanalyst, one would see it as a practice of collective free association. And this, I think, would be quite acceptable from the Purāṇic viewpoint. The Purāṇa is, after all, an admittedly collaborative re-telling, a re-visioning of the Epic-past with new additions, differing perspectives, and variant conclusions.

There are some fascinating family dynamics present in the text. The principal narrator, Śuka, is the son of the principal narrator of the Mahābhārata, Vyāsa, and so the Bhāgavata, as J. L. Mehta notes, represents itself as the offspring of the Epic for a new age.<sup>27</sup> In this regard, we may remember that the death of the Pāṇḍava brothers is one of the thorniest Epic conundrums, which, like the Epic itself, is never clearly resolved.<sup>28</sup> Therefore the children, Śuka and Parīkṣit, must take up the task, by trying “a different way of dying,” so to speak.

Let us return again to “The Examiner” and his preparation for death. Is this the Bhāgavata’s principal point of focus? Not really. The Bhāgavata does not have a singular focus or not a literal one anyway. One could thematically say that *bhakti* is its focus, yes, but I would argue that *bhakti* is more of its polemic or its underlying mood, than its focus. Beneath the various family and dynastic dramas, prescriptive behavioral guides, and geographical descriptions of the world, there is the ongoing narrative practice of telling the tale of “what happened in days of old” (*purāṇa*). So the “death-drama” of Parīkṣit does not remain on center stage, and this too is central to the mytho-poetic stance of the Purāṇa. If the narrative kept returning to the existential situation of Parīkṣit in Sartre-like fashion, we would have a psychology of singular focus, a dualistic tension between *eros* and *thanatos*. We do not. Rather, the Bhāgavata frames the Śuka/Parīkṣit narrative by scores of other narratives. Are there thematic relationships? Yes, but the focus never becomes fixed or static. The Purāṇa eschews the psychology of an “integrated personality.” Even the Absolute Truth, when discussed philo-



sophically, is said to reveal itself in three different aspects, *brahma*, *paramātmā*, and *bhagavān*,<sup>29</sup> while *Bhagavān*, the Absolute personified, plays—and this is a literal translation—through twenty-one different forms or *avatāras*.<sup>30</sup> What this begins to resemble is Hillman’s description of the Greek polytheistic terrain, and that might be attractive. But the Bhāgavata, as I mentioned, does not uphold a universe of loosely related familial powers. Rather, there is inconceivable oneness in difference, and this is what I would call the “multivalent psychological stance” of the Purāṇa.

Part of this position is reflected in the Bhāgavata’s uncompromising attitude toward death and dying. It rewrites, for example, the Mahābhārata version of the Parīkṣit story, expunging any effort on the monarch’s part to escape from death. In the Epic narrative (followed by the *Skandha Purāṇa* and the *Devī Bhāgavata*), Parīkṣit tries to circumvent his fate with the aid of his ministers and *brāhmaṇas* by having an impregnable palace constructed on a huge pillar and surrounding the structure with physicians, healing herbs, and ritual adepts. Takṣaka, the snake bird, however, takes the form of a small worm and hides inside a fruit that his Nāga allies (disguised as ascetics) offer to the unsuspecting king. When Parīkṣit sees the small copper colored worm, he imagines that he has found a way out: if this worm would bite him, the curse of death would be figuratively enacted, and his real death would be averted. As the king places the worm to his mouth, however, it transforms into Takṣaka, who leaps out hissing, coils around the monarch, bites him, and sends him on his way.<sup>31</sup>

In the Bhāgavata version, on the other hand, Parīkṣit immediately accepts his fate, abandons his kingdom and possessions, and makes his way to the Ganges to fast until death. When Parīkṣit pointedly asks what one should do to prepare to die, however, he is met with a discourse of multiplicity, a panoramic story of what happened in days of yore, all the way back to primary and secondary creations of the universe. What does it mean to rehash the old here? Might this be a larger and earlier version of the therapeutic method, the “talking cure?” Not exactly, because the Bhāgavata would better be described as a “listening cure”: chanting (*kīrtana*) follows hearing (*śravaṇa*) in the Bhāgavata’s “therapeutic” process. Both of these processes, however, privilege the imaginative, or more precisely, privilege narrative. The Bhāgavata does not see itself as “imaginary” or as “fantasy,” but as “history.” Freud, and those who followed him, it could be argued, believed that fantasy could have a greater impact and interior accuracy than history, or to take it a step further, that there may only be Purāṇa, the recorded cultural fantasy analogous to the fantasy of the individual. Whatever the case, in this regard, one cannot help but be struck by Purāṇic images, such as the one of *Mahā-Viṣṇu* dreaming

the world and then reabsorbing it back into his body. This is a micro-macrocosmic image of the world as *māyā*, as the dream-like emanation of the divine, in which the past and future are woven together, rising and falling on the billowy breaths of the inconceivable and the unknowable. Such an image literally identifies myth with history because the reality of the world emerges from a dream.

As unknowable as the world may be, however, the all-too-human phenomenon, the “cognitive imperative” tends to assert itself: the drive to organize unexplained stimuli into some coherent cognitive matrix.<sup>32</sup> The imaginative-explanatory need is envisioned by a number of scholars as a primary human need. In this vein, one might better understand the repeated reminders from the Epic oral tradition that story is at the heart of life. Without stories the collective body cannot maintain its *mythos* which is its cognitive matrix, especially when the social order shatters, as in a war—be it the Bhārata war or Viet Nam. Indeed, this is what happens to Parīkṣit: when his world shatters, he hears the stories of his predecessors and ancestors, leading up to sublime stories in the tenth *skandha* for the initiated alone. He hears the knowledge of the collective which allows him to take his place in mytho-history.

### The Story of Parīkṣit

Why tell a story, or more pointedly, hear a story at the end of your life, the moment that presumably represents the height of ultimate concern? Unlike Scheherazade’s *Thousand and One Nights*, this story is not told to procrastinate, to put off one’s inevitable demise, nor to change fate in any way. And unlike some literature found in the pseudepigraphic *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*, there is no balancing of accounts in terms of an individual’s life, no sustained emphasis on ethical or eschatological instruction.<sup>33</sup> Hillman, in *Revisioning Psychology*, discusses Plato’s death narrative as a type of “soul-making,” Keats’ poetic phrase signifying the development of depth-psychological awareness.<sup>34</sup> The story of one’s death, or the story told at one’s death, is seen as an important activity, one that can lead toward a deeper, more reconciled modality of being, a “healing fiction,” to use Hillman’s own words.

One might expect death dialogues, therefore, to melt things down to their so-called essentials, but this is not necessarily the case. Socrates, in the *Phaedo*, accepts his fate and discusses the pleasure of freeing the soul from the body. He also, in Bhāgavata-Purāṇa fashion one could argue, discourses on a wide variety of subjects including the geography of the universe, absolute beauty, and the good life, before insuring the settling of his final debts (the cock to Aesculapius) and accepting the adminis-

tered poison.<sup>35</sup> Don Quixote, on perceiving the warning signs of death, recants his past illusions, receives confession, and pragmatically prepares his will.<sup>36</sup> According to Philip Aries, there were specific formulae for dying in preindustrial Europe, “the same words passed on from age to age,” specific ritual confessions, testaments, and customs that good Christians would follow before dying; such as lying quietly upon the ground or sickbed, spreading one’s arms out to form a cross, and turning one’s head east toward Jerusalem.<sup>37</sup> One knew exactly what to do in these public ceremonies. But, unlike Aries’ examples of Christian European death narratives, the Bhāgavata’s goes on for eighteen thousand verses! Unlike Plato’s or Cervantes’ narrative, the focus of the final moment—as I have mentioned—is not on the individual and his fate, not on his or her immediate surroundings and loved ones, and not even about dying itself. The Bhāgavata’s “death-narrative” is an amplification, an expansion of the collective past as opposed to a personal confession or statement of belief. Nevertheless, the stories told do help Parīkṣit complete his life and approach death with dignity, even with exaltation, although this happens almost as an afterthought to the ongoing, all-encompassing story itself.

Umberto Eco has remarked that “. . . death, once it has occurred, and only then, constitutes the one and only referent, or event which cannot be semiotized.”<sup>38</sup> Eco reasons that a dead semiotician no longer communicates semiotic theories. This is understandable because, from the materialist viewpoint, death is ultimate: it cannot be represented. The vision of death as an unequivocal finality charges it with eschatological power. However, when the scenario is framed by rebirth, as is the case in most Indian religious traditions, death ceases to be as ultimate. In the discourse of endless transmigration, the heroic quest for elevation, adventure, *cleos*, or even for salvation itself, loses some of its grip. From this perspective, which is the perspective of the Bhāgavata, death can become a call to a greater awakening while remaining part of the natural order of things.<sup>39</sup>

In the first *skandha* narrative of Nārada, which we shall discuss in detail later on, the fated death of the protagonists’s own mother is seen as an opportunity for liberation, and he leaves home, without mourning, to follow his destiny. When Nārada, himself, gives up his body, he is immediately transferred to another divine one.<sup>40</sup> Such a vision of dying, whether it be a wish-fulfillment fantasy or not, is seen as an important event that can open one to the greater truth, that one, in fact, has never died. What dies or who dies in normative Indian traditions is not the essential person, the *ātman*, or *self*, but the ever-changing forms of the *guṇas*, or elements of nature. There indeed are, as we shall see, fates worse than death in the Bhāgavata, and they have to do with *viraha*,

being separated from one's beloved. The narrative will build up to this vision, which ironically sees death and dying as a subset of *samsāra*, and *samsāra* itself—or the illusory condition of duality in the mind—as the real issue which one opens to in dying. It is important, therefore, to keep in mind the Bhāgavata's perspective on this: its focus on the collective biography as opposed to the biography of a lifetime, the hope-and-fear-based narrative of a mortal individual. Even this idea of an Indian collective-social ego is subsumed under the power of *kāla* (endless time) in its *samsāric* aspect. The great solar and lunar dynasties, for example, reveal themselves to be players in the *līlās* that appear and reappear through the cycling ages. The Bhāgavata, then, integrates human psychology into cosmology. The individual and social narrative expands into cosmic dimensions, not as some peculiar altered state but as the way things actually are.

It is fitting, then, that the hero of the Purāṇa, if one would dare use such a word, is spoken of neither as a great warrior nor as the founder of a dynasty. The hero is the inheritor of a holocaust, the one surviving grandson of the Pāṇḍu clan who has seen Viṣṇu in the womb of his own mother. He exemplifies the new generation, the possibility to build upon what was; and his great act will be to die. Likewise, the narrator, Śuka, the son of Vyāsa, is also of a new generation. He is a peerless, pure sage who retells the vision of the past by offering a very different narrative. What, then, should one do who is about to die? The Bhāgavata declares that one should immerse oneself in the treasury of stories whose perspectives on living and dying are healing in a way different from what we may be accustomed to. Parīkṣit's is not a night-sea journey, not a descent into the underworld. He does not return to the world of the living in order to better accomplish his tasks and lead his people. This is all the more ironic since Parīkṣit has survived, indeed has been saved, in order to die. And there is no sense whatsoever, of the king's death serving an historical purpose, offering hope for the future, or redeeming the world. Perhaps his task is simply to die more consciously than his predecessors. And, in living and dying with Parīkṣit, one may learn to negotiate loss through the ritual of hearing and singing, envisioning the individual, not as an isolated entity, nor even as part of a sociohistorical collective, but as something greater which cannot be grasped but which can be shared through deepened participation in narrative form.