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The Ideology of Self-Willed Death in the Epic *Mahābhārata*

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On the night of the final day of fighting at Kurukṣetra, Sañjaya was attacked by Aśvatthāman and begged the enraged warrior to kill him to free him from the pain of all the killing he has seen. Years later, Yuyutsu has become mute and commits suicide. Kṛpa professes the view that "This suicide will echo in this entire civilization . . . self-annihilation will become the ultimate aim of man." Vidura offers the equally disturbing prediction that "In the kingdom of Yudhiṣṭhira, suicide will flourish." Yudhiṣṭhira longs for death by asceticism in the Himālayas. This is not the Sanskrit Mahābhārata—it is *Andhā Yug* (Bharati 2005), a drama composed in Hindi some fifty years ago. The drama forcefully uses suicide as an indicator of despair and grief over social and ethical collapse. One of the points I make in this essay is that various forms of self-willed death are also central to the ideology of the Mahābhārata (MBh).

One of the most striking features in the MBh is the frequency with which self-willed death figures in the narrative. My thesis is that such instances of self-willed death function as a literary device in the MBh, the purpose of which is to emphasize the futility of worldly aims and to bring the audience to a realization of the transcendent value of renunciation. In an effort to articulate the meaning(s) of self-willed death in our text, I will also make a few comments on the role of self-willed death in legal literature and classical dramas.

Self-Willed Death in the Legal Literature

In *dharma-śāstra* and *dharma-sūtra* texts, the general attitude toward self-willed death is very negative; it is both a crime and a sin, and relatives of a person

who kills himself or herself are required not to perform post-mortem rituals.[1]

Complementing this general attitude, legal authorities actually prescribed killing oneself as the means of atoning for certain horrible crimes[2]—the punishment fits the crime in such cases. Legal texts ignore the tradition of some people making pilgrimage to sacred places and killing themselves there to escape *saṁsāra* (Kane 1968-77: vol. 2, 924-25). This apparently popular practice of fatal pilgrimage, however, is known and even advocated by the Mahābhārata: killing oneself at Prayāga on the Ganges (MBh 3.85.83), or Pṛthūdaka on the Sarasvatī River (MBh 9.39.33-34) terminates rebirth.[3]

In *dharma* texts, aside from these examples of atonement, killing oneself is permitted to only two types of person: the retired king and the renounced ascetic. Not the widow as a *satī*, however: all ancient legal authorities envisioned her survival.[4]

For the king who had fulfilled all his responsibilities, killing oneself is an appropriate act. According to *Manu* (9.323), "When a king has given to Brahmins the wealth that comes from all the fines, and has given the kingdom to his son, he should go to his death in combat."

The *vānaprastha* and *saṁnyāsin* renouncers are discussed much more extensively. *Manu* (6.31-32) describes the Great Departure (*mahāprasthāna*) by which renouncers perform self-willed death in a ritualized manner:

> . . . he should set out in a north-easterly direction and walk straight ahead, diligently engaged in consuming nothing but water and air, until his body dies. When a Brahmin has abandoned his body by any of these practices of the great sages, freed from sorrow and fear, he is exalted in the world of Brahmā.[5]

This and other methods for a renouncer to kill himself appear in various texts.[6] They describe a rite of initiation for renouncers that includes a funeral ceremony, and self-willed death seems to be the "default option" or primary function of the rite.[7]

For the legal tradition of ancient India, then, taking one's own life is prohibited; exceptions to that general position are those atoning for heinous crimes, and those who formally renounce their social roles by means of appropriate rituals. The king and the renounced ascetic both perform the self-willed death of their social identities. *Dharma* texts provide legal sanction for these persons to end their own lives.

Self-willed Death in the Mahābhārata

As we turn to the MBh, we find that self-willed death is a recurrent motif. We see it advocated as a means of atonement, and as the final act for renounced ascetics or retired kings. In this regard, then, the MBh echoes the dictates of the legal literature. I want to focus attention, however, on instances of self-willed death threatened and committed in the MBh by persons who have not formally renounced and are deeply engaged with the social world—deaths that are not legally permitted, according to the authorities on law. For example, Duryodhana, due to frustration at the accomplishments of his rivals and shame at his lesser attainments, threatens to kill himself on numerous occasions.[8] He vows to fast to death because of shame at being saved by Arjuna from defeat in battle (3.238-239). Karṇa observed that despite their deprivation, the Pāṇḍavas were not fasting to death, and that without his friend Duryodhana, Karṇa himself could not bear to live. Interestingly, the ritual procedure of fasting to death is regarded by Duryodhana and others as leading to heaven (3.238.49; 3.239.16), while the Demons clearly state that killing oneself leads to a bad rebirth (3. 240.1-2).

The great warrior Bhūriśravas provides an interesting case. In his feud with Sātyaki, Bhūriśravas was on the verge of victory, but at the urging of Kṛṣṇa, Arjuna shot an arrow that cut off the sword-arm of Bhūriśravas. He sat down on the battlefield, vowing to fast to death (*prāya*), and embarked on this ritualized self-willed death while being *yogayukta*, that is, engaged in yoga (7.118.16-18). Sātyaki leaped up and beheaded the (now quite literally) disarmed Bhūriśravas while he was awaiting his desired end.[9] As one might have predicted, sitting down defenseless in the midst of the battle, with his sworn enemy nearby, did indeed prove to be fatal, even if not precisely by the yogic method he had intended.

The fatal vow of Bhūriśravas foreshadows a similar but more significant self-willed death. Droṇa, tricked into believing that his son had been killed on the battlefield, willed his own death, laying down his weapons and devoting himself to yoga (7.164-165). He became tranquil, filled with *tapas* and *tejas*, and, *yogayukta*, went to Brahmā's heaven (7.165.35-40). Dhṛṣṭadyumna, who had vowed to kill him, beheaded the defenseless Droṇa while he was sitting in the lotus posture in the well of his chariot having this "out-of-body experience." Clearly, by refusing to defend himself before his avowed enemy, having shifted his attention to spiritual transcendence in the middle of a battlefield, Droṇa voluntarily gave up his life, fulfilling his fatal vow even if not precisely by the yogic method that he, too, had intended.

Two self-willed deaths are linked, those of Bhīṣma and Ambā. Ambā was a warrior princess, carried off with her two sisters by Bhīṣma to be wed to a Bhārata prince; left without a husband, she had an insatiable hatred of Bhīṣma for ruining her life. She vowed to kill him, but as a woman she was hindered in attaining her goal. Single-minded ascetic practice resulted in her receiving a boon from Shiva; she chose the death of Bhīṣma (5.187.18-34). Shiva granted her a rebirth in which she would remember her vow, so she decided to end this life for a rebirth in which she could kill Bhīṣma. She built her own funeral pyre and sat in the flames, with the oath "For Bhīṣma's death" as her dying words (5.188). She was reborn as a female in the palace of king Drupada, who disguised her as a boy (5.189). When the truth came out, Shikhaṇḍinī went to the forest, resolved to kill herself and began the ritual process of fasting to death (5.192.17-19). A *yakṣa* traded genders with her, so the now male Shikhaṇḍin returned to the palace and his wife, and eventually fought to achieve Ambā's purpose of revenge, an aim engendered (so to speak) in the previous life.

Bhīṣma knew that Shikhaṇḍin(ī) was Ambā reborn, and he would not defend himself against him/her. Bhīṣma had vowed that he would not shoot arrows at a woman, at one who had formerly been a woman, or had a woman's name, or was apparently a woman, and furthermore that if he were to kill a woman, he would kill himself (5.193.63-66). After nine days of battle, the Pāṇḍavas and Kṛṣṇa approached Bhīṣma to ask how they could kill him; he reminded them of his vow and told them to use Shikhaṇḍin as a human shield (6.103). Arjuna did so, and Bhīṣma willed the time and manner of his death.[10] Ironically, his vow placed him in a double-bind: to avoid having to kill himself for even fighting Shikhaṇḍin, Bhīṣma gave up his life in a different way.

Karṇa is famous for generosity and adherence to his vows; truthfulness to his word is more important to him than his own life. Indra comes to Karṇa disguised as a Brahmin and asks him to surrender his armor and earrings made of *amṛta* that grant him invulnerability. Karṇa knows that this is Indra, and knows that Indra is making his request to protect Arjuna, yet Karṇa is intent upon his avowed course of action. Karṇa surrenders his armor and earrings, knowingly shortening his lifespan on the eve of war. His fatal generosity brought him fame, and enabled him to be true to his word, but brought death soon thereafter, a death he preferred over infamy for breaking his vow.

In addition to Ambā, other warrior-class women in the MBh also took

fatal vows. Madrī joined Pāṇḍu on the funeral pyre, demonstrating that she was a *satī*.[11] The death of Pāṇḍu and Madrī prompted the family matriarch Satyavatī to leave the palace for forest asceticism with her widowed daughters-in-law Ambikā and Ambālikā, the mothers of Dhṛtarāṣṭra and Pāṇḍu (1.119.5-13). After some time, they set out on the Great Departure and we hear no more of them. Thus, all three sisters seized by Bhīṣma for his brother met self-willed deaths.

Draupadī had never despaired so much that she threatened to kill herself at any point in the story, even when dishonored at the dice match. At the end of the war, however, she threatened to fast to death unless Aśvatthāman was killed that very day (10.11.14-16). She later abandoned her fast when she learned that Aśvatthāman had been defeated and banished for his actions (10.16.36).

One retired king renouncing and dying in the forest can be cited: Dhṛtarāṣṭra. After the disastrous war he engaged in intense ascetic practices with his wife Gāndhārī and sister-in-law Kuntī and the bard Sañjaya (15.45). Having abandoned his sacred fire, he and both queens fasted to a point near death. In that weakened state, they were consumed in a forest fire that had spread from the abandoned sacrificial fire, making no effort to save themselves from it. While the fire was the immediate cause of death, their ascetic regime of fasting seems likely to have had a similar result soon enough—they were abandoning not only kingship and luxury, but life itself through their ascetic practices. Dhṛtarāṣṭra observed that the fire would be the means of their attaining the final state (15.45.23), and that as renouncers such a death is "not unwilled" (15.45.26), i.e., it would be a self-willed death. Just before his death, Dhṛtarāṣṭra advised Sañjaya that "water, fire, wind, and starvation are praised for ascetics" as means of committing suicide; immediately thereafter Sañjaya departed from the bank of the Ganges to the Himālayas, and we hear no more of him in the MBh.[12] I interpret this act as Sañjaya making the Great Departure, dying by means of his own ascetic practices.

Pāṇḍu retired from ruling the Bhārata kingdom and went to the forest with his two wives, where they engaged in ascetic practices. After a considerable period of celibacy, his second wife Madrī made love to him at his insistence despite a lethal curse on him. His death resulted—was it self-willed? In consecutive verses the text says that he forgot the curse, and that he threw off all fear of the curse (1.117.9-10). His is not a death in battle, as specified by *Manu* for a retired king. Nor is it death by one of the means

renouncers are directed to employ; in fact, it is death by the inverse of the method of renounced ascetics, for whom celibacy is one of their defining self-denials! My inclination is to regard the death of this retired king as a conscious and intentional act, as a self-willed death.

After the war, Yudhiṣṭhira was morbidly grieving, and contemplated adoption of the ascetic way of life (e.g., 12.9), though his brother Bhīma vehemently rejected asceticism as pointless and inappropriate, saying that it was equivalent to suicide: ". . . what we are doing is like when a man slays his enemies, then kills himself!" (12.10.12). With this and other similes, Bhīma argued that only by ruling the kingdom did the war become meaningful. Soon thereafter, still disconsolate over his role in the war, Yudhiṣṭhira did indeed vow to kill himself by ritual starvation (*prāya*), and only persuasive argument by Vyāsa convinced Yudhiṣṭhira to relent and abandon his self-destructive aim (12.27.18-26).

Arjuna is involved in an interesting case of suicidal vows. While following the horse that was the centerpiece of the horse sacrifice intended as expiation for Yudhiṣṭhira, Arjuna came to Manipura where his son Babruvāhana ruled (14.79-81). They fought fiercely, and Babruvāhana mortally wounded Arjuna, whose wife Citrāṅgadā and son Babruvāhana both vowed to kill themselves by fasting (*prāya*) due to grief over Arjuna's death. Another wife of Arjuna, Ulūpī, revived Arjuna, allowing Arjuna's son and wife to abandon their vows of self-willed death. As Ulūpī explained, Arjuna's (temporary) death at the hands of his own son was necessary as expiation for his unfair killing of his own "grandfather" Bhīṣma.[13] This episode recapitulates some issues raised by the conflict, such as violence within the family.

Kṛṣṇa and his brother Balarāma abandoned their bodies voluntarily in self-willed deaths while engaged in yoga practice (16.5). When Balarāma ended his life, a huge white serpent exited from his mouth as he ceased to be embodied (MBh 16.5.12-13; see also Bigger 1998: 56-58). This self-willed death took place as Balarāma was *yogayukta* (16.5.12). His brother Kṛṣṇa determined that the time had come for the end of his (Kṛṣṇa's) earthly life, and very shortly thereafter he was shot in the heel by the hunter Jarā while Kṛṣṇa was *yogayuktam* (16.5.20), with his senses entirely withdrawn. Some of Kṛṣṇa's wives immolated themselves on his pyre; others went to the forest (16.8.71-72).

Arjuna's subsequent failed attempt to protect Kṛṣṇa's female kin caused him to realize that his powers had waned and that the time had come for his own life to end. The Pāṇḍavas renounced the kingdom and set out on the Great Departure north into the Himālayas (17.1) until they died and attained heaven (Book 18). The heroes of the MBh met their self-willed deaths as the culmination of the epic narrative, and precisely as *Manu* said that a forest-dwelling renounced ascetic should.

Vidura willed his own death by resorting to yoga and exited the body, merging his soul into Yudhiṣṭhira; his is another self-willed death by means of yoga (15.33.24-37). Thus all three of Vyāsa's offspring for the Bhārata dynasty (Pāṇḍu, Dhṛtarāṣṭra, and Vidura) can be seen as dying self-willed deaths.

Shuka's version of the Great Departure is more spectacular than usual — it is airborne—but it accomplishes the same purpose as more pedestrian versions, namely self-willed death and liberation (12.310-320). And Shuka is Vyāsa's other son; thus all four of the sagacious author's offspring died at their own initiative.

Noteworthy too is a hunter who vowed to complete the fatal Great Departure (12.143.1-10). While engaged in this fatal pilgrimage to attain heaven, he happened on a forest fire and ran to where the blaze was the hottest, destroying himself and, according to the text, all his sins, thereby attaining heaven (12.145). Like Dhṛtarāṣṭra, the hunter had resolved upon death and found a forest fire a convenient and more rapid means of effecting his self-destructive intent.

For the sake of brevity, a short list of other self-willed deaths is given: Haṁsa and Ḍibhaka (a pair of warriors) killed themselves, each despairing over the death of the other (2.13.40). Aśvatthāman stepped into the sacrificial fire and offered himself as an oblation (10.7.54-58). Damayantī threatened to kill herself often from frustration with Nala (3.53; 3.61.85; 3.67.; 3.71.9). After the war, the widows of the warriors were led into the Ganges by Vyāsa in a watery version of mass *satī* (15.41.17-22), thereby resolving through their death the incomplete annihilation of the warrior class.

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Yudhiṣṭhira, Dhṛtarāṣṭra, and seemingly Pāṇḍu, are the only cases of self-willed death in the MBh involving a retired king who has completed his reign and passed on the obligations of kingship. Some of the cases considered here, such as the Pāṇḍavas, involve ascetics who have formally renounced social roles, although in certain instances the renouncer is a surprising figure such as a widow or low-status person. Ambā is an interest-

ingly different example, in that her ascetic practices were motivated not by the usual intent of escape from *saṁsāra* but to attain another rebirth in which to exact revenge! Those who do not formally renounce with the sort of ritual performance specified in the legal tradition, but who turn to yoga just before giving up their lives, are surely manifesting the theme of renunciation, and we must more fully account for this. First, however, I want to make a brief comment on India's tradition of classical drama.

Self-willed Death in Indic Theatre

There are many instances of the threat of a self-willed death in the drama literature of ancient India; I will discuss only one such drama, one that takes its plot from the MBh. In *Veṇīsaṁhāra* (by Bhaṭṭa Nārāyaṇa), the final act opens with Bhīma having vowed to find Duryodhana by dawn or kill himself. The climax of the drama is reached when Yudhiṣṭhira and Draupadī think that Bhīma and Arjuna have been killed by Duryodhana. Mourning and weeping, in despair Yudhiṣṭhira and Draupadī began the ritual process of killing themselves on a funeral pyre, and their chamberlain threatened to join them in self-willed death as well. Their self-annihilation was stopped only by the entrance of Bhīma with the news that he and Arjuna were fine, and that Duryodhana was the one mortally wounded (Devasthali, 1953: Act 6, verse 22 ff.). Obviously the author of this drama has drawn on motifs within his source text of the MBh that I am also highlighting in this essay—rather like the drama *Andhā Yug* (Bharati 2005), to which I referred at the outset.

Interpretations

Why then do we see so much self-willed death in the MBh?

While they do not focus attention specifically on self-willed death, ancient literary critics aid in our interpretation. In ancient India, the attitude of detachment from, and renunciation of, the world on the part of the epic's heroic figures has been regarded by literary critics as indicative of the dominant emotional motif (*rasa*) of the MBh. In his ninth century work *Dhvanyāloka*, Ānandavardhana analyzed the MBh as a literary work and did so according to the tenets of poetics and aesthetics, the first known critic to take into account the work as a whole (Ānandavardhana, 1990; Masson & Patwardhan 1969; Tubb 1985). He saw in the MBh a quality of transcendence; in short, his reading of the text was that its ultimate aesthetic purpose was to communicate religious and spiritual values. For Ānandavardhana and the later critic Abhinavagupta, the power of suggestion in a work of literature is greater than explicit articulation. The reader is enabled to have an imaginative experience only through the poet's use of suggested meanings, never by directly stating the meaning without first suggesting it. For these two literary critics, then, the ultimate meaning of the MBh is to be found not in the heroism of the Pāṇḍavas, but elsewhere. As Ānandavardhana states it,

> . . . in the Mahābhārata, which has the form of a didactic work although it contains poetic beauty, the great sage who was its author, by his furnishing a conclusion that dismays our hearts by the miserable end of the Vṛṣṇis and Pāṇḍavas, shows that the primary aim of his work has been to produce a disenchantment with the world and that he has intended his primary subject to be liberation (*mokṣa*) from worldly life and the *rasa* of peace.[14]

The MBh is seen by both these critics, and others after them, as the prime example of the ninth *rasa, śāntarasa*, the aesthetic motif of the peace of religious experience. Interestingly, though, none of the classical dramas based upon episodes of the MBh made *śānta* its predominant *rasa*. Some critics even insisted that dramatization of *śāntarasa* was impossible: after all, who in the audience would have attained *mokṣa* and thus be in a position to relish *śāntarasa*?[15]

Ānandavardhana's idea, endorsed by Abhinavagupta, is that the MBh was composed to articulate, through suggestion, the greater value of transcendental goals such as heaven and release from rebirth, and that the effect of this powerful suggestion on the audience of the MBh would be to inspire them similarly toward world-weariness and seeking spiritual peace. As the casualties mount, as characters die whom the audience has come to know over the long course of the MBh, and as we see many of these prominent characters even take their own lives, it would be difficult for the audience not to share in the feeling manifested by the characters of "disenchantment" or world-weariness (*vairāgya*).

By interpreting the MBh as a poetic work, rather than as merely a didactic or historical treatise, these critics have indicated that the text contains a multiplicity of meanings. Whether one were to analyze the work from the perspective of *dhvani* (for its power of poetic suggestion) or from the perspective of *rasa* (for its emotional qualities), either approach would empha-

size that the text's meanings are complex, perhaps layered. Different communities of readers or hearers may emphasize one or another of those meanings.

The approach taken by these ancient literary critics is echoed in that of V. S. Sukthankar, a modern critic who saw the epic as having three levels of meaning: (1) the mundane plane concerning familial conflict; (2) the ethical plane concerning *dharma* vs. *adharma*; and (3) the transcendental plane in which characters in the MBh are understood to represent symbolically higher and lower components of selfhood: Kṛṣṇa represents Paramātman, while the 100 Kauravas "symbolise in their aggregate the brood of ego-centric desires and passions . . ." (Sukthankar 1957: 100-105). Sukthankar here offers an interpretation in accord with the ancient *dhvani* and *rasa* theories of aesthetics with their emphases on layers of meaning.

One crucial component of the meaning of the MBh is that a human being is understood to live many lifetimes, so the death of the body is not the end of a person's existence.[16] We must not assume that self-willed death is indicative of depression or madness,[17] and the MBh gives us counter-examples such as Ambā's plan that transcends her present lifetime. Death has a somewhat different meaning in the context of multiple lifetimes than if a single life is all one has. Indic cultural traditions have long linked self-willed death and asceticism (including yoga); legal literature and Upaniṣads, as well as the epic, provide data.

In addition, Jain renouncers often end their lives in self-willed deaths, a religiously valued option for the advanced practitioner and one that the tradition distinguishes from the prohibited self-willed death or suicide precisely because the renouncer is said not to desire death.[18] The Buddhist tradition's *bodhisattva* is a saint who has so perfected compassion and generosity that he sacrifices his own life to benefit others. These "gift-of-the-body" stories emphasize the link between the self-willed death and sainthood (Ohnuma, 2000). Such a death represents a major accomplishment on the Buddhist spiritual path (e.g., *Jātaka* tales in which the future Buddha voluntarily dies but demonstrates virtues that lead to Buddhahood).

I have noted the association between yoga practice and self-willed death, and it is sufficiently widespread that we may follow Peter Schreiner (1988:13) in calling this phenomenon "the yogin's death" (*Tod des Yogin*). He describes yoga as a technique for killing oneself (*Sterbetechnik*), with Droṇa and Kṛṣṇa his prime examples. One might even wish to include in such a category the death of the Buddha, who attained *parinirvāṇa* in a state

of meditative equanimity in which he controlled the time and manner of his demise. But in the MBh not every such effort is praised universally: some thought Duryodhana's starvation would lead to heaven, others to a bad rebirth. I want to account for such different attitudes toward self-willed death in the epic.

Reiko Ohnuma's analysis of the Buddhist "gift-of-the-body" motif suggests to me another avenue of interpretation. She describes critiques of the fatal generosity of the *bodhisattva* from within the Buddhist tradition, some seeing the lethal act as extreme, and thus not in accord with the Middle Way. Many Buddhist "texts that recommend and praise the gift of the body clearly perceive it as a subject of meditation and as something to be cultivated within the mind" (Ohnuma 2000: 66), but not as a practice to be performed to one's death by taking texts literally. For the epic's audience, the phenomenon of self-willed death by the renouncer must have been sufficiently well known to have made such an act conceivable as a credible, appropriate (and even heroic) response—for example, by the Pāṇḍavas. The audience could apprehend and appreciate the epic's message of detachment and transcendence since everyone faces life and death, *saṁsāra* and *mokṣa*. I would like to suggest, though, that the epic's self-willed deaths are also narrative exaggerations of the mental act of renunciation, memorable for their symbolic power, for the way in which the self-willed death condenses renunciation into immediate transcendence.

Droṇa clearly manifests disenchantment, world-weariness, and detachment in his self-willed death by resorting to yoga on the battlefield. In contrast, Duryodhana's threats that he would kill himself over embarrassment reflect ego and attachment to worldly concerns of pleasure and reputation: detachment inspired by yoga (or any other method) is notably absent. In my view, the warriors who are presented by the MBh as admirable are those who have cultivated detachment (just as Arjuna was taught to do in the *Bhagavad Gītā*). The warriors who are attached egoists concerned with their honor, glory, and power are not presented as admirable—they are failed warrior-yogins.

Thus, one of the *Gītā*'s key messages about detached action can be seen as an ideal that permeates much of the MBh. Depending on the motives for a person's fatal vow, such an act reveals the extent of a character's detachment or attachment. The threat or act of killing oneself provides a life-or-death occasion for such a person to demonstrate his or her character. Here again, we see a parallel with the legal tradition's general prohibi-

tion on self-willed death with exceptions granted: extraordinary individuals may cultivate detachment to such a degree that even suicide is heroic because of its religious motivation.

As Arti Dhand (2004: 48-51) has observed, Kṛṣṇa's teaching to Arjuna on equanimity through Karmayoga is echoed by Vyāsa's teachings to Yudhiṣṭhira—the warriors are to attain peace by doing their duty in this world without self-interest or attachment.[19] I would like to note though that both these MBh heroes in the end abandoned that path for radical disengagement with the world. Kṛṣṇa and Vyāsa teach Karmayoga as the MBh's method for acting effectively in the world; but another (and I would argue that for the MBh a higher) meaning is encoded in the eventual renunciation by our heroes of even Karmayoga's ethic of selfless action.

Their Great Departure is a ritual to end all ritual, and to end one's engagement with the world altogether. I believe that such acts of self-willed death in the epic are affirming the ultimate value of renunciation and the limited value of worldly ambitions such as revenge, fame, conquest, or temporal power, or even the selflessness of Karmayoga. While this is not the text's only meaning, it is crucial, and would inspire some in the text's audience. From a philosophical perspective, one might regard the theme of heroism as the text's *pūrvapakṣa* position (i.e., that which is to be refuted), and world-renunciation its *siddhānta* position (the demonstrated or logical conclusion).

The MBh depicts the self-willed death of so many of its heroic figures, deaths that might be regarded as self-sacrifice. The MBh often refers to the war as a sacrifice of battle (see Jatavallabhula 1999). Since the Vedic sacrifice was paradigmatic for the epic poets, we cannot be surprised that self-sacrifice figures often in the narrative, for self-sacrifice is "a commonplace notion in the ritualistic discussions of the *Brāhmaṇa* texts" (Heesterman 1987: 91). We have here another instance of the poetic intensification of meaning, in this case through the multiplication of the tropes of sacrifice within the MBh.

The tradition of Indian literary criticism has long recognized various kinds of hero. Such a differentiation can be traced back to the *Nāṭyaśāstra* (6.79) itself, where three kinds of *vīra* are named: heroes of generosity, religion, and war (*dāna, dharma, yuddha*). The MBh seems to elaborate on this theme in Bhīṣma's oration to Yudhiṣṭhira (13.74.23-27), where twenty-one types of hero (*śūra*) are listed. In their efforts to elucidate how dramatic or literary works achieve their aesthetic aims, literary critics have made use of

this differentiation. Abhinavagupta (Ānandavardhana 1990: 525-26, 665), for example, discusses how the Bodhisattva in *Nāgānanda* is heroic in offering up his own life to save another, describing him as a hero of compassion (*dayāvīra*). Gerow (1985) similarly views Duryodhana in *Urubhaṅga* as a *dayāvīra*. For Abhinavagupta, the defining feature of the hero of compassion is the absence of egoism, the very quality that makes this self-sacrificing type of hero superior to all others. Moreover, for him this type of hero leads to attainment of *śāntarasa* by audience members. I maintain that the MBh also differentiates between types of heroes, and that in various ways the text suggests the superiority of those heroes who transcend limitations of egoism and cultivate detachment.

In conclusion, as one of its meanings, the MBh advocates an attitude of detachment and world-renunciation through what characters say and do. Among the most powerful images by which this attitude is suggested are the ways in which major characters end their lives, often through a process of self-willed death. Self-willed death, whether threatened or performed, is a literary device or narrative strategy that assists the text in conveying emotional and spiritual messages to its audience. Killing oneself was taboo in ancient India, bounded by rules that governed who could qualify to perform the act and how.[20] The use of self-willed death as a literary device succeeds precisely because self-willed death can function as a means of expressing the deepest attachment to, or detachment from, this world.

Notes

1. *Vasiṣṭha Dharma Sūtra* 23.14-16, as quoted in Olivelle 1999: 312; see also *Manu* 5.89, which groups ascetic renouncers and those who kill themselves with certain lawbreakers as people for whom no ritual libation is performed. The *Arthaśāstra* (4.7.25-27) states that if a person kills himself, the king should have the body "dragged with a rope on the royal highway by a Caṇḍāla," and that no post-mortem rituals by kinsmen are permitted (Kangle 1969-72: vol. 2, 274).

2. See *Manu* 11.73-74; and (in Olivelle 1999) *Āpastamba Dharma Sūtra* 1.25.1-12 and 1.28.15-18; *Vasiṣṭha Dharma Sūtra* 20.13-14 & 22; *Baudhāyana DhS* 2.1.13-20. One must atone for violation of the guru's wife by self-mutilation or by incineration in a red-hot furnace (*Manu* 11.103-105). An alcohol drinker should consume the same fluid boiling hot, the offender being "purified" by such a self-willed death (*Manu* 11.91-92; *Vasiṣṭha* 20.22). I take such prescriptions of penance by the legal authorities as further indications that killing oneself is abhorred. Falk (2001: 135) observes that in the commission of serious crimes by Brahmins "where a death sentence was felt necessary, the culprit was kept outside the authority of the king by ordering him to kill himself."

3. Similarly, one who knows Vedānta and starves himself to death in the Himālayas is said to be reborn in Brahmā's heaven (MBh 13.25.62-64). The seventh-century account by the Chinese Buddhist pilgrim Hiuen Tsiang (Xuanxang) confirms the popularity of fatal pilgrimage for non-Buddhists (Beal 1968: vol.1, 188 and 232-34).

4. See *Manu* 5.156-66, on how a widow should live, and 9.69-70 on remarriage of a widow if still a virgin. Similarly, *Vasiṣṭha DhS* 17.24 (widows are exempt from tolls), 17.18-20, 17.55-62, 17.74 (levirate and remarriage); *Gautama DhS* 18.4-8 and 28.22-23 (levirate); and *Baudhāyana DhS* 2.3.27 and 2.4.7-10 (levirate and remarriage). On the performance of suicide by a widow to demonstrate that she was a "virtuous woman" (*satī*), Vidya Dehejia observed (Hawley 1994: 50), ". . . only after A.D. 500 did the practice begin to appear with any regularity." Dhand 2004 includes an interesting study of levirate in the MBh.

5. The phrase "by any of these practices of the great sages" refers to the preceding verses (22-30), in which ascetic practices including fasting, mortification of the body by means such as the five fires (exposure to four bonfires plus the sun), wearing wet clothes in winter, etc., are described as the renouncer's regime performed for the purpose of killing himself. On fatal pilgrimages see also Sax 1992 and Gode 1957.

6. *Āpastamba Dharma Sūtra* 2.9.22.1-5 (as quoted in Bronkhorst 1993: 15); the *Mānava Shrauta Sūtra* 8.25 (as quoted in Bronkhorst 1993: 23-25); and some *Saṁnyāsa Upaniṣads* (as translated in Olivelle 1992: 134, 145, and 258-59): *Kathaśruti Upaniṣad* 39, *Jābāla Upaniṣad* 68, and *Paramahaṁsaparivrājaka Upaniṣad* 279. On these passages, see also Bronkhorst (1993: 23-25).

7. Olivelle (1992: 82-97) summarizes the rite of initiation into the renounced state, and how it is both a ritual death and rebirth. His important article "Ritual Suicide and the Rite of Renunciation" (1978) presents an interpretation of the rite, arguing that "suicide is presented as the concluding act of the initiatory rite of renunciation." (p. 20)

8. Duryodhana threatens to kill himself by means of poison, hanging, fire, or battle should the Pāṇḍavas return to the kingdom (MBh 3.8.5-6). He threatens to kill himself (3.43.25 and 3.45.43); he yearns for death (3.48.34); asks how it benefits him to live (3.49.23), and why live if he is not the equal of Yudhiṣṭhira (3.50.27). His entire enterprise of promoting war against his cousins and their ally Kṛṣṇa might be regarded as self-destructive, but perhaps it is as easily explained by delusion or misperception of reality. Gitomer (1992) argues persuasively that Duryodhana's opposition to Kṛṣṇa reflects his upholding of traditional warrior values as opposed to the values of Kṛṣṇa devotion championed by the Pāṇḍavas.

9. MBh 7.118.48. Condemned by other warriors, Sātyaki spoke in justification of his deed by quoting the respected sage Vālmīki (*Rāmāyaṇa* 6.68.27) to the effect that one must take any measures to defeat an opponent. Even this quotation of Vālmīki from the *Rāmāyaṇa* seems not to have altered the opinion of the warriors on the side of Bhāriśravas that he was unfairly killed. Goldman (1976: 99) and Leslie (2003: 89-90) regard this verse as the only certain reference to Vālmīki in the MBh. Although the story of Rāma is told at length in the MBh (3.258-75), it is not there attributed to Vālmīki and seems not to be a summary of his text but an alternate version of the story.

10. Bhīṣma vowed celibacy to enable his father's marriage to Satyavatī, so that he would have no offspring to contend for sovereignty; he was granted a boon by his father that Bhīṣma's death would occur only by his own choice; see, for example, 1.94.93-94. Once wounded, he sustained his life by yoga until the war ended (6.114).

11. See 1.116-117. The curious death of Pāṇḍu will be discussed below.

12. The reference here to "wind" as a means of self-willed death is a euphemism for falling to one's death after jumping off a cliff. Verse 33 says prayayau *sañjayaḥ sūto himavantaṁ* (Sañjaya the bard went to the Himālayas), which is highly suggestive of the Great Departure, given the context of methods for an ascetic to kill himself. I have found no further reference to Sañjaya afterwards in the electronic text of the MBh.

13. Sax (2002: 64-92) discusses a parallel episode central to the performance of Pāṇḍav Līlā in the Himālayas, and relates it to this story in the MBh, bringing out well quasi-Oedipal undertones of both stories.

14. Ānandavardhana (1990: 690-91); see also the Sanskrit text and a different translation in Masson & Patwardhan (1969: 104-5). The text and commentary of section 4.5 in Ānandavardhana (1990: 690-702) is all relevant to the topic of *śāntarasa* in the MBh. See Tubb (1985) for an excellent summary of the issues surrounding *śāntarasa* in the MBh, and the extension by these critics of *rasa* theory to the analysis of literature other than drama and *kāvya* poetry.

15. For example, Dhanika in his *Avaloka* (4.45), a commentary on *Daśarūpaka* by Dhanañjaya (as quoted by Tubb 1985: 145): "Although *śāntarasa* is not brought into plays because it cannot be acted out, there is nothing to prevent its occurrence in poems, since all things, including those that are subtle or in the past, can be presented through their ability to be described in words." An audience member could experience *śāntarasa* only if the stable emotion (*sthāyibhāva*) of tranquility (*śama*) could be enacted, and some critics questioned whether any gestures or actions could effectively depict the liberated state of *mokṣa*. The drama *Nāgānanda* is cited as one in which *śānta* is the predominant *rasa*, but some literary critics dispute this point; see Tubb 1985: 145-48.

16. Sax (1992: 202) makes a similar point, and adds that "most Hindu cosmologies hold that human beings possess more than one body simultaneously," variously described as gross and subtle, etc.

17. The perspective of the psychoanalytic tradition in general, but its Freudian roots in particular, is that asceticism and suicide are understood as linked, both seen as manifestations of self-destructive mental illness, or even psychosis. Of course, the psychoanalytic tradition is not devoid of cultural presuppositions and biases, and its usefulness here is limited. The most relevant cultural presupposition of psychoanaly-

sis is its unstated assumption that a human being lives only one life, an axiom based on the Judeo-Christian worldview. Killing oneself thus is seen as a negation or violation of "the strongest of all human instincts," namely the "survival instinct" (Friedman 1967: 34); what Freud calls "the instinct which compels every living thing to cling to life" (1957 [1917]: 246). Only a person who is mentally ill could commit suicide, according to the prevailing ideology of psychoanalysis. In a classic study, Menninger (1938: 95) observes that those manifesting asceticism and martyrdom have "completely gone over to an unrealistic interpretation of life" and that this is evidence of psychosis. He also refers to asceticism as a "chronic suicide" or self-destruction at a slow rate (1938: 87). Masson (1976: 623) states that "all ascetics must have suffered from harsh and unloving parents in their childhood" and that "if the ascetic were to do to others what he does to himself, he would be a homicidal maniac rather than a saint."

Masson also attributes the loss of interest in and eventual renunciation of the world to depression or melancholia, and cites Freud's analysis that depression is "aggression toward someone important in one's life, being internalized and turned in against the self" (1976: 618; see Freud 1957 [1917]: 248-52). For Masson, the ascetic's regime of fasting, celibacy, etc., constitutes systematic destruction of the body, and is an act of aggression against others. As another perspective on the psychoanalytic tradition's negative attitude toward suicide, note the comment by Woody Allen's character in "Annie Hall" (1977): "I would have killed myself but my psychoanalyst is a strict Freudian, and I'd have had to pay for the sessions I missed." Despite its posture of objectivity and adherence to the scientific method, the tradition of psychoanalysis in this regard seems not to have made a practice of considering other possibilities.

18. See Chapple (1993), Zydenbos (1999), and Skoog (2002) on the Jain practice known as *sallekhanā*. While the rhetoric of the Jain tradition maintains the distinction between "personal suicide" and the religious suicide of *sallekhanā*, I would observe that the latter is the method endorsed by the tradition as the means of demonstrating (or enacting, or creating) sainthood. Rhetoric concerning this means of self-willed death as being "without desire" is religiously significant for Jains, but surely it is an act performed with the conscious intent of dying in the prescribed fashion for a religious purpose; indeed, ideally for the termination of *all* rebirths. Such a goal contrasts sharply with the Buddhist *bodhisattva*'s goal of being reborn to aid others, even if self-willed death occurs repeatedly. The Jain distinction between endorsed and prohibited methods of killing oneself parallels what we find in the *dharma* literature of the legal tradition.

19. Simon Brodbeck (2004: 100) has examined Kṛṣṇa's teaching to Arjuna in the *Gītā* and insightfully concluded that "non-attached action is not a realistic and available possibility for every human actor."

20. Menninger (1938: 13-16) draws attention to the taboo nature of suicide at the outset of his study. Modern India's governing authorities continue to wrestle with

legal issues raised by self-willed death, particularly the self-inflicted deaths of renouncers and widows (Bilimoria, 1995). The support given the performance of self-willed death by renouncers in early legal texts (and for widows in later literature) creates a special difficulty with regard to the right to die. Of course, the problem of self-willed death is much more widespread, and includes individuals of all social groups. As indicated by a study in the British medical journal *The Lancet* (Aaron, et al., 2004), suicide rates among young people in southern India today are the highest in the world, and this despite the sort of legal and religious prohibitions described by Bilimoria for the present-day, and the ancient traditions discussed in this essay.

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