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The Idea of Decorum in Indian and Western Poetics

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As a principle of propriety and appropriateness the validity of decorum is not confined to one period. It has both aesthetic and moral considerations, as a criterion of right relationship whether between style and subject matter or in the fulfillment of social obligations. Not only did decorum have a respectable ancestry both in Western and Indian poetics, but its validity as a critical concept seems unquestionable. Here it is sought to demonstrate this by an examination of the basic assumptions of this doctrine as discussed by Indian and Western theorists. The question of decorum is crucial to literary criticism as it raises fundamental questions with regard to the language of poetry and poetic semantics, criteria for the judgment of literature, and even questions involving the philosophical language.

In the Western criticism the concept of decorum goes back to Aristotle. In his *Rhetoric* Aristotle assumes the decorum of rhetorical efficacy in discussing the appropriateness of style to the theme, and in *Poetics* he assumes the mimetic decorum with regard to the various kinds of imitation that he discusses, like tragedy, epic, comedy etc. In the discussion of the conditions of successful oratory, Cicero, like Aristotle, focuses on the fact that the purpose of the orator being broadly to teach, to delight and to move, his style must be a combination of different kinds to suit the different purposes; simple for teaching, coloured yet restrained for delight and sublime for moving men's emotions. In other words, the style must be in accordance with the aim it is intended to serve. The idea naturally leads on to the discussion of decorum. The methods employed are the outcome of the principle of decorum which became in course of time the all-embracing critical doctrine of Roman criticism. Cicero says that a perfect orator should speak in whatever style the case may demand. He must only observe propriety in his work as a whole as well as in parts thereof. There must be a perfect correspondence between the subject matter and the style, or the matter and the manner at every stage. Cicero also quotes approvingly the dictum of the actor Roscius who said that a sense of fitness is the most important thing in art, although that is something which cannot be taught. To put it in a broader perspective the idea of decorum is actually a matter that fully concerns the sensibility of a person. In art we only apply what is essentially relevant to life. Decorum thus is a principle of life transferred to art. Cicero then discusses style, and there, too, the guiding principle is decorum or propriety. What Cicero says in this connection would at once remind one of Wordsworth's theories of poetic diction propounded a few centuries later. Cicero says that a good style is one that is based on a choice of fit words, that is words selected from the language actually used by men, not a separate jargon; words that are free from commonplace elements and yet words that comprise unusual forms and metaphors to give elevation and colour to the effect. Words in a certain combination produce a certain kind of effect. According to Cicero, the words must be chosen in a way that they sound well and have a harmony and produce pleasure. Cicero analyses the style of many orators and, almost in a manner of practical criticism, points out their distinctive features and their effectiveness in fulfilling the purpose they are intended to serve. An orator has to appeal to many persons at a time, and the ears of the people are the instruments on which the orator has to play. Moreover, the artistic