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GĪTA GOVINDA

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GĪTA GOVINDA

In the history of Vaishṇavism the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* exercised a profound influence on the development of the *Bhakti* cult in mediaeval India as its doctrines proved a turning point in religious thought. The *Bhāgavata* concentrated upon the boyhood and youth of Kṛishṇa around whom the *Purāṇa* weaves its theories of personal devotion. Although Rādhā, whose enchanting figure flitting through the lilting songs of Jayadeva, is absent in the *Bhāgavata*, the *gopīs* figure prominently merging their personality with that of Kṛishṇa. The utter self-effacement with which they pour out their love, becomes the accepted symbol in Vaishṇavism for the soul's yearning for God. The eternal sports of the Lord in an imaginary Vṛindāvana are regarded by his devotees as a stepping stone for the realisation of godhood. The supreme message of the *Bhāgavata* is passionate love for the beloved which transforms bare sex impulses into ecstatic religious fervour. The devotional eroticism of the *Bhāgavata* weaned away the people from the senseless ritualism of mediaeval Hinduism in which the mysteries of sex were exalted, but which in course of time degenerated into orgies of debauchery.

Vaishṇavism existed in Bengal before Jayadeva's time and the Sena rulers were themselves Vaishṇavites. But there is no doubt that it is in the passionate songs of Jayadeva that we find, for the first time, a new trend in the growth of Vaishṇavism. The *Gīta Govinda* is regarded by the Chaitanya Vaishṇavas not only as a poetic composition of great sensitivity and lyrical charm, but is also interpreted in terms of Vaishṇava dogmas, though it is doubtful whether Jayadeva had anything of the nature in mind, for he is primarily a poet and not a doctrinaire. He has woven into his songs an eroticism of fascinating beauty, imageries which make the poems throb with passion and above all word-music which flows like a murmuring brook gushing in a verdant forest.

Jayadeva, the court poet of the Sena king Lakshmaṇasena (A.D. 1185-1206), whose reign saw the end of the Hindu empire in the north, was the son of Bhojadeva of Kindubilva. Not much is known of his life, though legends stress his devotion to Kṛishṇa who is said to have aided him personally to describe the loveliness of Rādhā when his own powers had failed. Be that as it may, the poet had the genius to create a novel form of literature which has been regarded by the later generations as a thing of enduring beauty. Within a century after his death Jayadeva's fame spread all over India and the songs of the *Gīta Govinda* were sung and danced in the temples and to gatherings of the Vaishṇavas both in the south and north.

The form of the *Gīta Govinda* is singularly original. It has been termed a little pastoral drama, a lyric drama, a refined *yātrā*, a composition between song and drama and a melodrama. It is, however, clear from the division of the work in cantos that Jayadeva intended to treat it as a *kāvya* and not as a drama. However, it is also sufficiently clear that he had before him the dance-drama *yātrā* of Bengal, accompanied by music and song, and therefore by combining these elements in his work he saw the possibility of its use in Vaishṇava temples and at festivals. In order to emphasise the musical character of his work he has prescribed *rāgas*, *tālas*, and dance for his songs. According to Keith in his *History of Sanskrit Literature* (Oxford, 1928, p. 192): "To conceive writing such a poem was a remarkable piece of originality, for it was an immense step forward from the popular songs of the *yātrās* to produce so remarkably beautiful and finished a work."

The accomplished technique of Jayadeva shows itself in the skilled handling of the theme in which songs and recitatives are cleverly inter-wreathed to avoid monotony of form, and give variety to the composition. The poet celebrating himself and his fellow poets Umāpatidhara, Govardhana and Dhoī, sings the glories of the ten incarnations of Vishṇu. Further on in a recitative verse he tells how Rādhā's friends spoke to her in the spring, and then describes how Kṛishṇa danced with the *gopīs* in the groves of Vṛindāvana. Then follow the stanzas describing the spring and the love-lorn *gopīs* attracted by Kṛishṇa's charm gathering around him. Canto VII tells that Kṛishṇa had not yet kept his tryst and the moonlight was increasing Rādhā's passion. Kṛishṇa suddenly arrives but Rādhā rails at him. In the following cantos her friend consoles her, Kṛishṇa himself moves in that direction, but the reluctance and shyness of Rādhā have yet to be countered. The poem closes with songs in which Kṛishṇa addresses his beloved and receives her replies in turn.

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Apart from the outstanding merits of the poem, Jayadeva was inspired by the natural surroundings in which he lived and which formed charming settings for his verses. He seems to have imbibed the hot and moist climate which created in him a peaceful languor heightened by the sweet smell of the earth watered by the river and luxuriant with rich vegetation. According to Sylvain Levi the inexhaustible fertility of the soil responding to the caresses of the hot sun made Jayadeva pour out songs throbbing with love and passion. The dream-like quality of his verse transports the devotee to the world of ecstasy which is not ephemeral. Bengal is the land of mysticism where the Great Mother unites and destroys, loves and is loved and holds sway over all sentient beings. But the Eternal Mother principle in Bengal before the advent of Vaishṇavism had more or less a ritualistic emphasis as the Mother formed an important element in Śākta worship. The grossest sexual practices of the Tantra are explained on the basis of the union of the body and soul. Tantric esoterism unfortunately reduces woman to an automaton but all the conundrum of the Tantras disappeared in the face of the love of Rādhā and Kṛishṇa. There is every possibility that Rādhā represents the consecrated woman of the Tantras chastened by the divine love of Kṛishṇa. The frolicsome and sprightly Kṛishṇa, adored by the *gopīs* who quarrelled for his favour, satisfied all by his divine grace. At times the *gopīs* sang of his beauty, at times he slipped aside and played tender music on his flute, which made the sweet *gopīs* agitated and mournful, suspecting and accusing him as they searched for him and appealed to him. His devotees remembered his dalliances, and the Indian rural theatre became a vehicle for the propagation of the Kṛishṇaite cult. Even now the popular shows of Bengal enact his deeds, and in Nepal, strongly influenced by Buddhism, a popular version of the *Gīta Govinda* is performed.

The role of the *Gīta Govinda* in the spread of neo-Vaishṇavism is inestimable. In mediaeval times, the *Gīta Govinda* became a favourite of the Vaishṇavas from Gujarat to Bengal, and Assam to South India. Many interesting commentaries were written on the work and the songs are not only sung by the members of the Chaitanya sect, but are also esteemed by musicians in South India. The dance-dramas in Manipur and Assam have also kept the pristine form of the *Gīta Govinda* alive.

Nothing is known about the impact which the *Gīta Govinda* made on the art of the 13th century, though the rich imageries, the pen pictures of landscape and the treatment of various stages of love rendered these songs a rich repertoire for artists to draw upon. With the spread of Vaishṇavism in Gujarat and the Punjab Hills, the importance of the *Gīta Govinda* as a pictorial theme came to be fully realised. In the latter half of the 15th century, it received attention from Western Indian artists. In *circa* A.D. 1550, however, as is apparent from the illustrations of the *Gīta Govinda* probably of U.P. origin, now in the Prince of Wales Museum, the subject began to spread in north India. Here there is no tinkering with the theme but the throbbing colours, controlled but expressive draughtsmanship and above all the lively landscape set up a standard for the *Gīta Govinda* illustrations in future. The *Gīta Govinda* in popular Mughal style appeared by *circa* A.D. 1600 and in the 17th century it became an important theme in various art centres of Rajasthan and Gujarat. Naturally the style varies according to the provenance, but every attempt was made to accentuate the predominant theme of the poem, namely the all-absorbing love of Rādhā and Kṛishṇa.

The *Gīta Govinda* in the first half of the eighteenth century was illustrated in an extensive series which is in the Basohli style of Pahārī painting. But there is no doubt that the highest point of artistic expression in the Kangra style is reached in the series of which six paintings are presented herein from the collection of the Maharaja of Tehri-Garhwal. The verse illustrated is inscribed at the back of each painting. This series, however, has raised controversy among scholars about its provenance and date.

N. C. Mehta, who in his *Studies in Indian Painting*, Bombay, 1926, p. 49, for the first time brought this series to light thought that it belonged to the school of Tehri-Garhwal. Khandalavala, however, in his *Pahārī Miniature Painting*, Bombay, 1958, p. 83, points out that the series is stylistically unrelated to the Garhwal school and was executed in all probability by the Guler painter Māṇak who latterly appears to have been in the service of Sansār Chand of Kangra (A.D. 1775-1823). Whether the series was painted in Guler or in Kangra is debatable. These paintings, according to Khandalavala, reached Tehri-Garhwal as part of the dowry of the two daughters of Sansār Chand who were married into the Tehri-Garhwal family.

The date of the series is also not free from doubt, ascriptions ranging from A.D. 1730 to 1820, though most writers would place it between A.D. 1760 and 1790. I am inclined to ascribe it to *circa* A.D. 1775.

An inscription in Sanskrit which appears on the top of one of the paintings in the series is an identical copy of the inscription on a painting of the earlier Basohli style *Gīta Govinda* mentioned above. The inscription on the Basohli series gives the date of the completion of that series as A.D. 1730 and refers to one Māṇakū. This inscription on the Basohli series has been the subject of considerable controversy based on differing interpretations of the Sanskrit verse. The issues involved are, whether 'Māṇakū' mentioned therein is the patroness of the series or the painter thereof and whether the name is that of a male or a female. But it is not at all necessary to consider this controversy because this inscription, whatever be its meaning, has no relevance as far as the present series is concerned being merely copied from the Basohli series of A.D. 1730. There can be various reasons for the inscription of A.D. 1730 on the Basohli series being copied on a painting of the present series which is clearly much later in date.

The action in the *Gīta Govinda* takes place during the night and Rajasthani painters represent the night symbolically by introducing a blue sky strewn with stars and the moon. But the painter of the present series suffered from no such inhibition. He knew well that space and time had to be correlated to reveal the beauties of the poem. The darkness of the night is therefore emphasised by shades of grey, blue and brown, and the trees with the mass of foliage are deeply shaded looming out of the darkness. But when the mood of the night changes and the full moon lights the forest, the flowering trees, the clear blue sky with tufts of woolly clouds, the quietly flowing river and the yellow and brown mounds impart an indescribable charm to these paintings where the landscape serves as a background for the great drama of love.

The high technical proficiency of the painter of this series is evident and basically he was in perfect harmony with his theme. In the spirit of a devout Vaishṇava he approached the eternal love of Rādhā and Kṛishṇa in a reverent attitude. He tried to understand the meaning of the emotional stresses of the poem and then wove the theme and the technique in such a manner that the one became inseparable from the other and the finished product, is an offering of the highest merit to the Eternal Lovers—Rādhā-Kṛishṇa.

THE ILLUSTRATIONS

Pl. I. *The Invocation.*

इत्थंनंदनिदेशतश्चलितयोः प्रत्यध्वकुंजद्रुमं
राधामाधवयोर्जयंतियमुनाकूलेरहःकेलयः॥७॥

"Heavy clouds cover the sky; the woodland is dark with *tamāla* trees. Kṛishṇa is frightened of the night; Oh, Rādhā, lead him home.
Following the command of Nanda, on their way back home, Rādhā and Kṛishṇa reached a grove. Success to the secret dalliance of Rādhā and Kṛishṇa on the bank of the Yamunā."

Piercing the gloom emerge Rādhā and Kṛishṇa whose yellow, red and gold garments and ornaments light the darkness of the woodland.

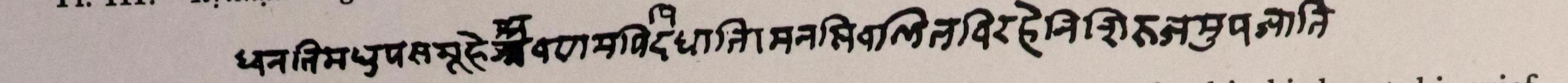
Pl. II. *Rādhā's longing.*

गणयतिगुणग्रामंभ्रामंभ्रमादपिनेहतेवरुतिचपरीतोषंदोषंविमुंचतिदूरतः
युवतिषुबलत्कृष्णोविह्रादितिमांविनापुनरपिमनोवामंकामंकरोतिकथेमिकिमू॥२॥

"She counts his virtues, she doubts not his unsteadiness, she is appeased, she keeps his faults at a distance. Kṛishṇa full of desire dallies with young girls without me. Even then the love for him makes my mind waver, what am I to do?"

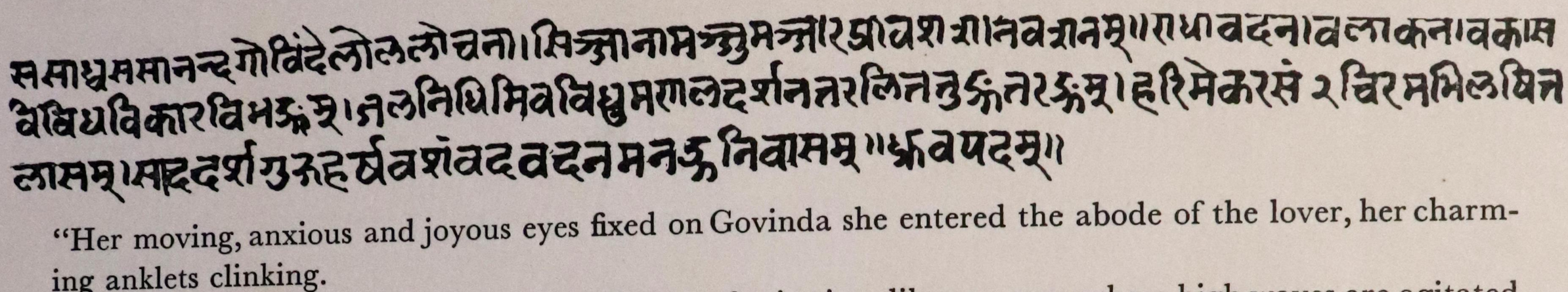
Kṛishṇa is playing with the *gopīs* in their colourful costumes, while on the left Rādhā in gold and red sits complaining to her friend about the waywardness of her lover.

Pl. III. *Kṛishṇa's regret.*



"When the bumble-bees hum, he closes his ears; the pangs of separation are fixed in his heart, his grief increases every night."

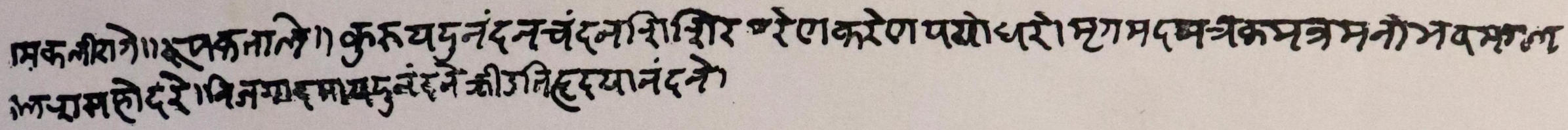
Pl. IV. *The lovers meet.*



"Her moving, anxious and joyous eyes fixed on Govinda she entered the abode of the lover, her charming anklets clinking.
Seeing the face of Rādhā, Hari manifested signs of agitation, like an ocean whose high waves are agitated by the sight of the full moon. She looked on Hari who desired her only, and had waited for long to dally with her. She manifested great joy and her face became the abode of love as it were."

Kṛishṇa sits on a bed of leaves looking expectantly on his beloved standing before him.

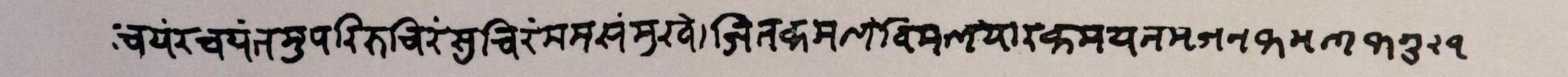
Pl. V. *Kṛishṇa painting designs on Rādhā's body.*



"O delight of the Yadus, paint with musk a floral pattern on my breast which is the twin of the auspicious pitchers of love, with the hand cooler than the sandal."

Kṛishṇa is shown painting a design on one of Rādhā's breasts.

Pl. VI. *Rādhā commanding Kṛishṇa to adorn her.*



"Arrange the tresses round my brows—the tresses that put to shame the spotless lotus, and form a cluster of bees as it were on my forehead."

Kṛishṇa on the banks of the Yamunā is lovingly arranging the dishevelled tresses of Rādhā.

Moti Chandra

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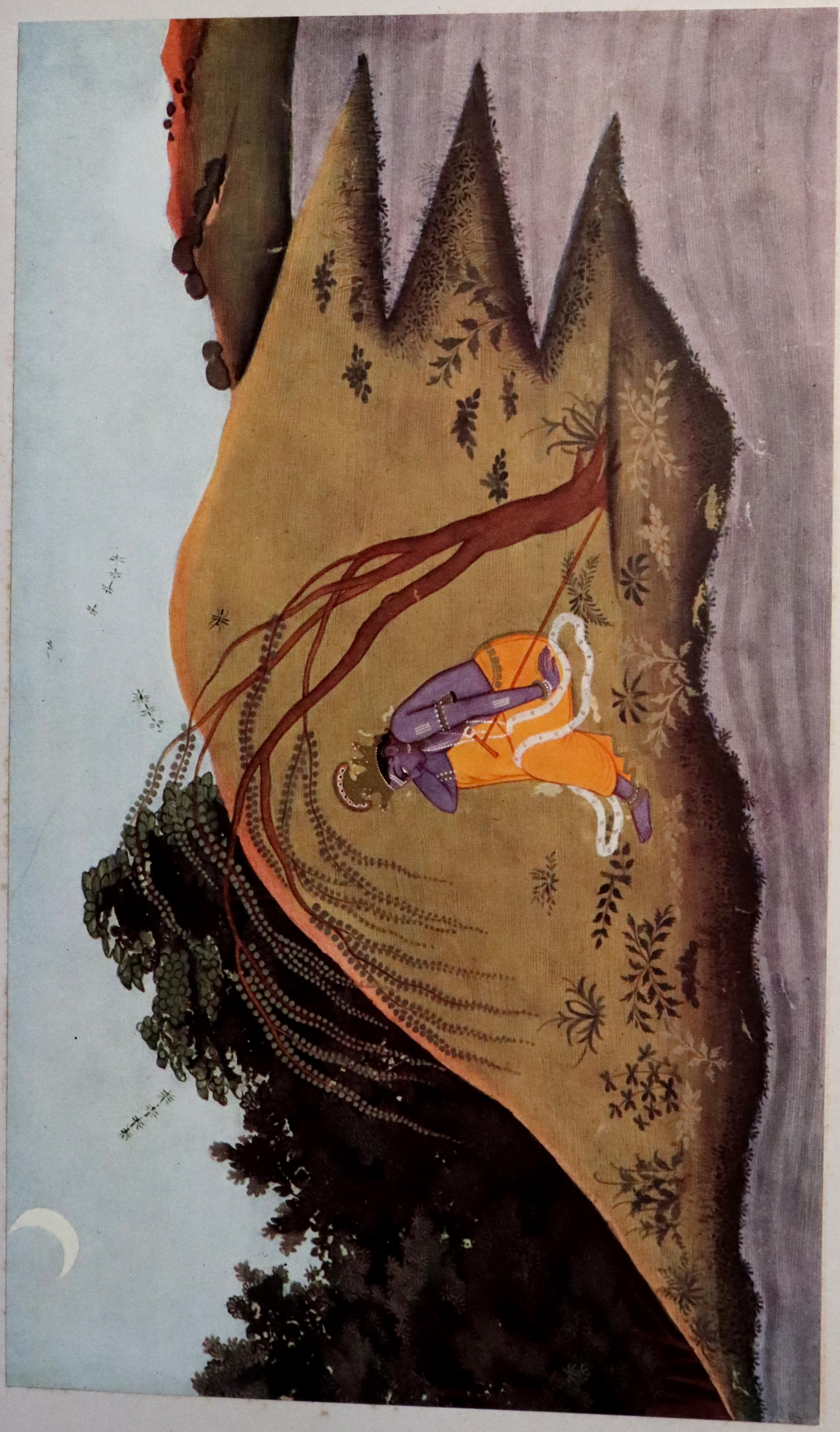
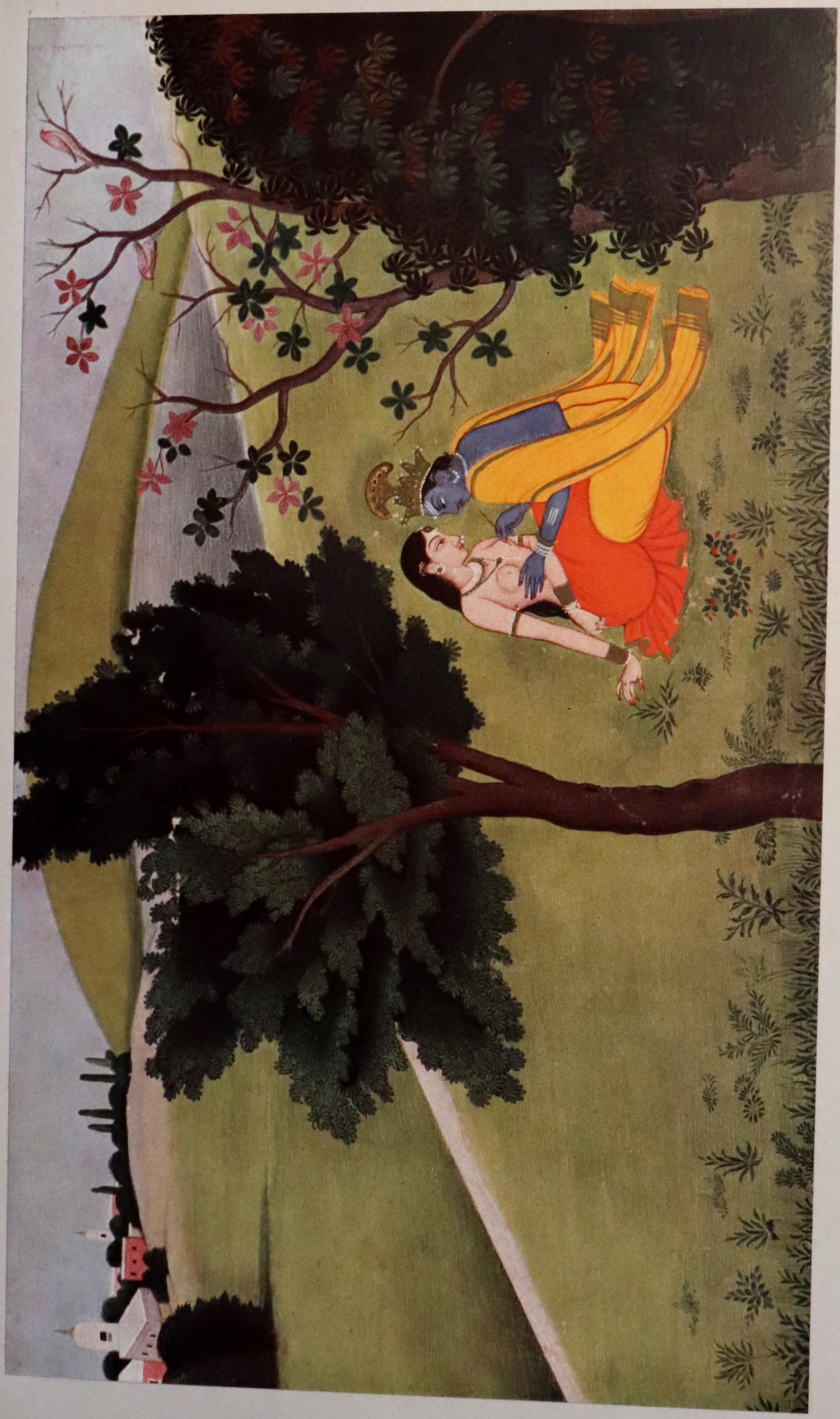
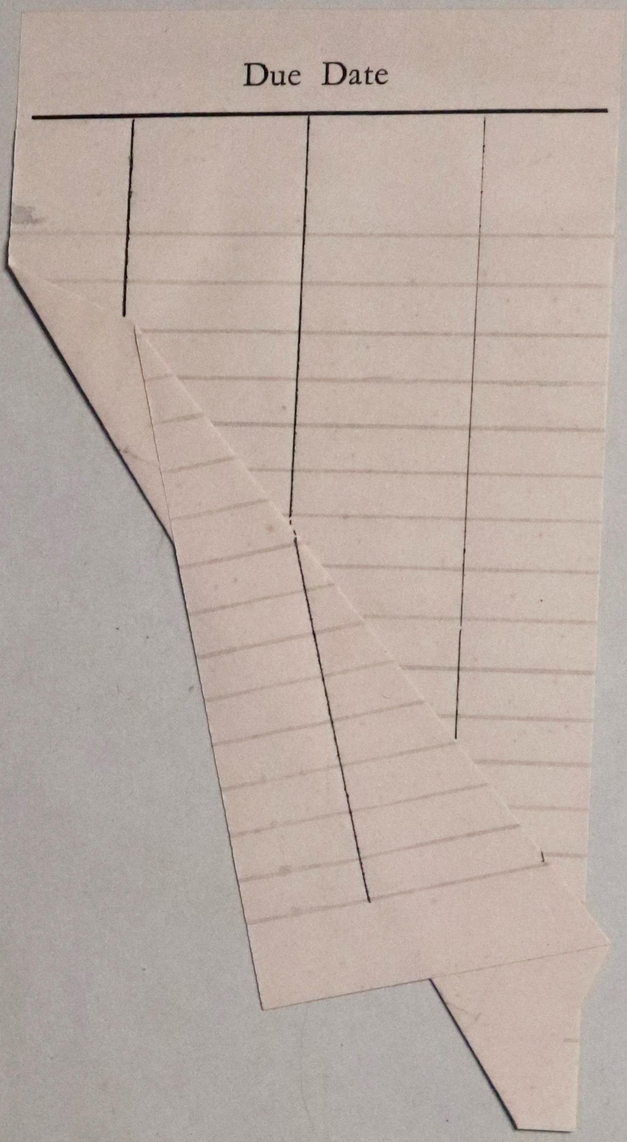


Pl. V





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