THE MONKEYS AND THE MAGICAL CAVE (*RĀMĀYAṆA* IV 49-52) PARADISES, BIRDS, AND TREES OF GOLD AND JEWELS

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RIASSUNTO: Secondo la teoria estetica classica indiana, *adbhuta*, il 'meraviglioso', è uno dei nove canonici *rasa*, 'stati d'animo', che possono essere suscitati nel pubblico da un lavoro teatrale o letterario, e l'epica sanscrita ne è colma. Un episodio del *Rāmāyaṇa* (*Rāmāyaṇa* [Critical Edition], IV 49-52) narra di come un manipolo di scimmie, capeggiate da Hanumān, durante la loro ricerca di Sītā si trovino a entrare e a restare per un periodo quasi imprigionate in una grotta creata da Maya, il grande architetto degli Asura. La descrizione di questa grotta è intrisa dell'immaginario che connota, nell'epica sanscrita e nella letteratura buddhista dei primi secoli e.c., i paradisi e i luoghi remoti e favolosi. Gli elementi ricorrenti di questi luoghi includono una vegetazione fatta di oro e gemme e la presenza di uccelli, e la luminosità è un attributo costante.
PAROLE CHIAVE: *Adbhutarasa, Rāmāyaṇa*, *Mahābhārata*, *Saundarananda*, *Mānasollāsa*, *Sukhāvatīvyūhasūtra*, Maya, paradiso, giardini

ABSTRACT: According to classical Indian aesthetic theory, *adbhuta*, the 'marvellous', is one of the nine canonical *rasa*s, 'moods', that can be aroused in the audience by a theatrical or literary work, and Sanskrit epics largely resonate with *adbhuta* features. An episode of the *Rāmāyaṇa* (*Rāmāyaṇa* [Critical Edition], IV 49-52) recounts how, during their search for Sītā, a handful of monkeys led by Hanumān find themselves entering and remaining for some time almost imprisoned in a cave created by Maya, the great architect of the Asuras. The description of this cave is steeped in the imagery that connotes, in the Sanskrit epics and Buddhist literature of the early centuries CE, paradises and remote, fabulous places. Recurring elements of these places include vegetation made of gold and jewels and the presence of birds, and brilliance is a constant attribute.
KEY-WORDS: *Adbhutarasa*, *Rāmāyaṇa*, *Mahābhārata*, *Saundarananda*, *Mānasollāsa*, *Sukhāvatīvyūhasūtras*, Maya, paradise, gardens

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According to classical Indian aesthetic theory, *adbhuta*, the 'marvellous', is one of the nine canonical *rasa*s, 'moods' that can be aroused in the audience by a theatrical or literary work.[1] On the basis of the conception that one of the *rasa*s must be dominant in a single work, the great philosopher and literary theoretician Ānandavardhana (9th century) set a milestone in the interpretation of the two great Sanskrit "epic"[2] poems, the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*, by establishing that their essential *rasa*s were the *śānta*, the 'pacified', and the *karuṇa*, the 'compassionate' respectively.[3]

However, in a new essay that is announced as forthcoming as I write these pages, an authoritative scholar such as Alf Hiltebeitel argues that the dominant *rasa* of the *Mahābhārata* and its supplement, the *Harivaṃśa*, may instead be considered the *adbhuta* (HILTEBEITEL 2021). Could some similar remark apply to the *Rāmāyaṇa* as well? Certainly, the latter is teeming with "marvellous" motifs, both in the general plot and in the accessory moments. I would like to dwell on one of these here, the entry and sojourn in a magical cave of the monkeys who are searching for Sītā (*Rāmāyaṇa* [Critical Edition], IV 49-52).[4] This episode has no real relevance to the plot, although it certainly functions, in a way, to usefully slow down the pace and as an emotional catalyst; in any case, since it draws on the imagery that connotes paradisiacal and otherworldly places,

[1] The Chapter Six of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* [Ghosh], the founding text of this aesthetic theory, enumerates, as is well known, eight *rasa*s: *śṛṅgāra*, 'amorous'; *hāsya*, 'comic'; *karuṇa*, 'compassionate'; *raudra*, 'violent'; *vīra*, 'heroic'; *bhayānaka*, 'terrifying'; *bībhatsa*, 'disgusting'; and *adbhuta*, 'marvellous'; later, with the decisive contribution of Ānandavardhana, a ninth *rasa* will be added, the *śānta*, the 'pacified'.

[2] The qualification of "epic" for these two great poems, which has entered into general use and is in its own way undoubtedly fitting, would obviously require more details about their specific nature, details that cannot be addressed here. For material and reflections on the definition and self-definition of these poems and a comparison with Homer, it may be worth seeing PATHAK 2014. As for dating, the essential editing of the *Mahābhārata* may have taken place in the last two centuries BCE (see, for instance, HILTEBEITEL 2001), while according to Brockington the composition of the *Rāmāyaṇa* would probably have extended roughly between 500 BCE and 300 CE, with further later additions (BROCKINGTON 1984: 307-346).

[3] ĀNANDAVARDHANA, *Dhvanyāloka* [Śāstri], IV 5.

[4] All passages quoted below without further specification refer to the Critical Edition of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, on which our analysis is essentially based. Abbreviations used in the quotations of other Sanskrit works are listed in the References.

one of its essential purposes is undoubtedly to provoke wonder, that is, to arouse the *adbhutarasa*.[5]

Let us first briefly introduce the episode. Sugrīva, king of the monkeys and Rāma's ally, has sent his troops to the four cardinal points in search of Sītā, Rāma's bride, who has been abducted by Rāvaṇa, a very powerful demon (*rākṣasa*) ruler. He gives them orders to return within a month. The group with the best chance of finding the princess is the one travelling south, which includes Hanumān, the great ape son of Vāyu, the Wind god. But their search is proving fruitless; exhausted, hungry, thirsty, and desperate after wandering for so long, all of a sudden they find themselves at the mouth of an enormous cavern (*bila*) surrounded by luxuriant vegetation (IV 49). From this they see birds flying out, dripping with water, and they deduce that they will be able to quench their thirst inside the cave. After advancing uneasily for a long time in the darkness, they catch sight of a light: and a fabulous spectacle soon unfolds before their eyes, for the cavern conceals a splendid forest beautified by precious buildings; it is, as the passage will describe it, 'a forest of gold' (*kāñcanaṃ vanam*, IV 50: 10d). There they meet its guardian, an ascetic woman named Svayamprabhā, that is, 'Self-radiant', who offers them food and drink, with which they refresh themselves. Finally, having regained their strength, the monkeys are allowed to leave the cave to resume their mission; Svayamprabhā takes them back out in an instant, and the monkeys find themselves on the seashore (IV 52). They are terrified by the prospect of Sugrīva's wrath, because of the time limit passed in vain; but, thanks to the information offered at this point by another character, the great vulture Sampāti, they will discover that Sītā is being held prisoner on the island of Laṅkā, beyond the sea.

These are the main features of the episode and its contours; let us now go into more detail and analyse the individual themes.

[5] This episode is also recalled in the *Mahābhārata*'s narration of Rāma's story, where it is briefly reported by Hanumān (*Mahābhārata* [Critical Edition], III 266: 37-42), which plays in favour of its perceived importance, even though it does not directly influence the plot. In the *Mahābhārata*, the ascetic woman is called Prabhāvatī, 'Radiant' (see below). The *Mahābhārata* is always quoted here according to the Critical Edition.

Basically, here we have a group of "men" who, on a journey, gain access to a magical place guarded by a woman, and here they find themselves stranded, essentially prisoners. The time allotted for their mission vanishes, or perhaps it has already vanished, and the consequences that lie ahead because of Sugrīva's reactions frighten them. But it is significant that the passage, in fact, offers some rather conflicting indications about time: the allotted month seems already to have passed before they enter the cave (IV 49: 3), or, as more insistently stated, it runs out while they are sheltering there (IV 52: 2; 15; 20; 56: 17).[6] However, nothing the apes are said to do in the cave justifies the latter assertion; in fact, the cave appears to be a place of estrangement, of magical imprisonment where time flows differently. A significant detail appears in Gorresio's edition: the monkeys search in vain for the passage through which they entered the cave, but to no avail (*RG* IV 52: 8; 12). And when Hanumān asks Svayamprabhā to allow him and his companions to leave the place, she replies: 'It is difficult, I believe, for anyone who has entered here to get out alive' (IV 52: 6cd).[7] One cannot escape from the bewitched place simply by relying on one's own forces.

However Svayamprabhā is no Circe, but rather, in perfect accordance with the general spirit of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, a pious woman; she is an ascetic, who among other things refuses any kind of possible reward from the monkeys for the refreshment offered, declaring that, given her life choice, she does not need anything (IV 51: 19). She readily agrees to free the group, explaining that she will be able to do so thanks to her ascetic power (IV 52: 7), even though normally the place does not allow anyone to escape alive; and the expedient she asks of the monkeys is the almost childish one of closing their eyes during this sort of teleportation she is about to perform, 'for those whose eyes are not

[6] Gorresio's edition also insists that the month is completed while the monkeys are inside the cave (*RG* IV 50: 24; 52: 14; 53: 7).

[7] *jīvatā duṣkaraṃ manye praviṣṭena nivartitum //*. The translations given here of the passages of the Fourth Book of the *Rāmāyaṇa* are taken from *Rāmāyaṇa* [Lefeber]. Elsewhere, except when otherwise specified, the translations from Sanskrit are mine.

shut cannot get out' (IV 52: 8cd).[8] Then, having led the group outside in an instant, she returns to the cave.

Nevertheless, Svayamprabhā is not the original heir and guardian of this place. The connected statements in the passage would sound superfluous, if we did not bear in mind the paradisiacal characteristics of the cave, on which I shall shortly dwell. In fact, Svayamprabhā claims to be there because she is standing in for a friend, Hemā, an *apsaras*, a celestial nymph, who was the bride of Maya, the supernatural architect who created this place 'by magic' (*māyayā*, IV 50: 10d; cf. 52: 15a; 32a; 56: 17a). Also to Maya we will go back later, but let us immediately remember that in the *Rāmāyaṇa* Maya and Hemā are attributed a significant, albeit indirect role, because Mandodarī, Rāvaṇa's wife, is one of their children (VII 12).[9] After having lived here for a long time, Svayamprabhā says, Maya was killed by Indra, king of the gods, and the god Brahmā has now given the place in perpetuity to Maya's darling Hemā (IV 50: 13-15). The ascetic woman declares: 'My dear friend Hemā is skillful at dancing and singing. Granted a boon by her, I watch over this fine dwelling' (IV 50: 17).[10] The *apsaras*es are the splendid courtesans of the celestial world, who entertain the gods with music and dance in their paradises, and in particular who populate Nandana, Indra's paradise;[11] they are distinctly erotic figures, because, according to a well-known and widespread mythical theme, they make men and ascetics fall in love with them, the latter when the gods decide to annihilate the power they have

[8] *na hi niṣkramituṃ śakyam animīlitalocanaiḥ //.*

[9] In this passage, which describes the meeting between Maya and Rāvaṇa in the forest and the offering of Mandodarī's hand in marriage to Rāvaṇa, Maya says that he had built for his beloved Hemā – with a play on words – a 'city of gold' (*hemapuraṃ*, VII 12: 8b), rich in precious stones, where, however, after Hemā left him, he no longer found pleasure; so he took his daughter with him and went into the forest (VII 12: 6-9). The 'city of gold' is undoubtedly Svayamprabhā's cave. This passage is extensively analysed in the notes of Goldman and Sutherland Goldman's translation (*Rāmāyaṇa* [Goldman - Sutherland Goldman 2017]: 549-557, nn. to *sarga* 12).

[10] *mama priyasakhī hemā nṛttagītaviśāradā / tayā dattavarā cāsmi rakṣāmi bhavanottamam //.*

[11] For the sake of clarification: here I deliberately omit to deal in detail with Nandana, Indra's paradisiacal garden inhabited by nymphs, which we will meet in the account of the *Saundarananda*, just as, for the vegetation with extraordinary qualities (see below), I will not deal with the paradisiacal *kalpavṛkṣa*s, 'trees of desires', *kalpalatā*s, 'creepers of desires', and the like, because in the perspective adopted here these mythical elements deserve a separate dedicated analysis to effectively establish the modalities of their attestation.

conquered through asceticism by inducing them to unite with these wonderful celestial women. Although, by assigning the custody of the cave to a rigorous figure such as Svayamprabhā, the author of the passage wanted to make the passage "Brahmanical", serious and orthodox, he could not refrain from recalling the heavenly connotation of the place, which he evokes through an *apsaras* and the sensual echoes that such a figure inevitably imprints.

But let us now come to the passage that gives a description of the marvellous buildings, gardens, furnishings, and food that the monkeys see once the darkness is overcome and the cave becomes full of light (IV 49: 19-29):

> 19-21. Soon they reached a pleasant spot, a brightly illuminated forest; they saw golden trees bright as a blazing fire: *sāla*s and *tāla*s, *puṃnāga*s, *kakubha*s, *vañjula*s, *dhava*s, *campaka*s, *nāgavṛkṣa*s and blossoming *karṇikāra*s,[12] radiant as the newly risen sun. Around them were benches[13] made of emerald and there were lotus beds the color of sapphires and emeralds, crowded with birds.

[12] The listing in general (see also below, about birds), and specifically of trees and plants in descriptions of forests and gardens is a very common feature in Indian "epic" narratives. The trees mentioned here are identifiable as follows: *sāla*, *Shorea robusta* Gaertn.f.; *tāla*, *Borassus flabellifer* L.; *puṃnāga*, *Calophyllum inophyllum* L.; *kakubha*, *Terminalia arjuna* (Roxb. ex DC) Wight & Arn.; *vañjula*, *Dalbergia ougeinensis*, *Jonesia asoca*, *Calamus rotang*, or *Hibiscus mutabilis* [MW]; *dhava*, *Anogeissus latifolia* Wall.; *campaka*, *Michelia champaca* L.; *karṇikāra*, *Pterospermum acerifolium* [MW]. It is difficult to find a correspondence for the *nāgavṛkṣa*, '*nāga* tree'. Later we will also meet the *aśoka* tree, *Jonesia asoca* Roxb. [MW] or *Saraca asoca* (Roxb.) De Wilde. The definitions are taken from the *Pandanus Database of Indian Plants* (http://iu.ff.cuni.cz/pandanus/database), except for those marked [MW], which are taken from the Monier-Williams' dictionary (MONIER-WILLIAMS 1899).

[13] I have modified Lefeber's translation here, because I think that rendering *vedikān* as 'sacrificial platforms' is wrong, as are the conclusions she draws from this interpretation (cf. *Rāmāyaṇa* [Lefeber]: 325, n. to 19-21). I believe that, here at least, *vedika* can be considered a synonym of *vedikā* (feminine). In Sanskrit theatre, *vedikā*s are benches often found in gardens; see for example KĀLIDĀSA, *Mālavikāgnimitra* [Clay], V 2, and HARṢA, *Ratnāvalī* [Clay], III 61, where a *vedikā* is also inlaid with precious stones (*marakatamaṇiśilāvedikāyām*). In the *Kāmasūtra* (VĀTSYĀYANA, *Kāmasūtra* ([Shastri], I 4: 7) a *vedikā* is part of the furniture of the house of the *nāgaraka*, the 'citizen', i.e. the elegant man, and here, judging from Yaśodhara's commentary, it resembles a kind of bedside table. For *vedika* in the *Rāmāyaṇa,* see also *Rāmāyaṇa* [Goldman - Sutherland Goldman 1996]: 334, 359, 389, nn. to V 3: 8-11, V 7: 14-15, V 12: 35, and the references provided therein.

> 22-24. There they saw great golden trees splendid as the rising sun surrounding lotus ponds with clear waters, filled with turtles and large fish made of pure gold. And they saw gold and silver palaces covered with fretworks of pearl, with round windows of pure gold, and with floors made of gold and silver set with emeralds.
> 25-26. Everywhere the monkeys saw fine mansions and blossoming, fruit-bearing trees looking like coral set with gems. And all about were golden bees and honey, and beds and seats glittering with gems and gold.
> 27-29. And on all sides they saw costly chariots and piles of vessels made of gold, silver, and brass, as well as heaps of aloe wood and heavenly sandalwood. And they saw pure, edible roots, and fruit, and costly drinks, sweet and flavorful; and piles of heavenly, costly garments, and of bright-colored wool blankets and black antelope skins.[14]

This is the imagery that characterises the otherworldly and heavenly places. As for the Brahmanic epics, here are a few examples. We find similar elements, although poetically less elaborated and expressed with a different language, scattered in the long description of several celestial abodes given by the sage Nārada in the *Mahābhārata*, and, particularly, of those of the divine guardians of the cardinal directions, Indra, Yama, Varuṇa, and Kubera (*MBh* II 2: 6-10). Such elements appear at some points in the long discourse with which Sugrīva illustrates the remote and fabulous geography of the regions at the four cardinal points, presided over precisely by the four guardian divinities, where the monkeys must go and which they must explore in their search for Sītā (IV 39-42). In

[14] *tatas taṃ deśam āgamya saumyaṃ vitimiraṃ vanam / dadṛśuḥ kāñcanān vṛkṣān dīptavaiśvānaraprabhān // 19 // sālāṃs tālāṃś ca puṃnāgān kakubhān vañjulān dhavān / campakān nāgavṛkṣāṃś ca karṇikārāṃś ca puṣpitān // 20 // taruṇādityasaṃkāśān vaidūryamayavedikān / nīlavaidūryavarṇāś ca padminīḥ patagāvṛtāḥ // 21 // mahadbhiḥ kāñcanair vṛkṣair vṛtaṃ bālārkasaṃnibhaiḥ / jātarūpamayair matsyair mahadbhiś ca sakacchapaiḥ // 22 // nalinīs tatra dadṛśuḥ prasannasalilāyutāḥ / kāñcanāni vimānāni rājatāni tathaiva ca // 23 // tapanīyagavākṣāṇi muktājālāvṛtāni ca / haimarājatabhaumāni vaidūryamaṇimanti ca // 24 // dadṛśus tatra harayo gṛhamukhyāni sarvaśaḥ / puṣpitān phalino vṛkṣān pravālamaṇisaṃnibhān // 25 // kāñcanabhramarāṃś caiva madhūni ca samantataḥ / maṇikāñcanacitrāṇi śayanāny āsanāni ca // 26 // mahārhāṇi ca yānāni dadṛśus te samantataḥ / haimarājatakāṃsyānāṃ bhājanānāṃ ca saṃcayān // 27 // agarūṇāṃ ca divyānāṃ candanānāṃ ca saṃcayān / śucīny abhyavahāryāṇi mūlāni ca phalāni ca // 28 // mahārhāṇi ca pānāni madhūni rasavanti ca / divyānām ambarāṇāṃ ca mahārhāṇāṃ ca saṃcayān / kambalānāṃ ca citrāṇām ajinānāṃ ca saṃcayān // 29 //.*

the thirteenth book of the *Mahābhārata* the motifs are prominent in the description of a 'world of cows' (*gavāṃ loka-*), a sort of paradise to which those who make donations of cows are destined (*MBh* XIII 80: 17-29). But the imagery that connotes Svayamprabhā's cave appears to be connected to paradise in a deeply conscious way particularly in a Buddhist context. Here, as important points of comparison, we can consider the description of Indra's paradise in the Tenth Canto of the *Saundarananda* of Aśvaghoṣa, and those of the paradisiacal garden, the Sukhāvatī, the 'Happy', of the Buddha Amitābha (or Amitāyus) in the Mahāyāna literature of the *Sukhāvatīvyūhasūtra*s: in the latter texts, the so-called *Shorter* (or *Smaller*) *Sukhāvatīvyūhasūtra* and *Longer* (or *Larger*) *Sukhāvatīvyūhasūtra*, the theme unfolds in terms of extreme elaboration and magnificence.[15] The paradisiacal elements which, albeit declined in various ways, all the mentioned texts may be said to have in common, can be reduced to the essentials as follows:

- brightness, also through the radiance of precious materials;
- vegetation made of precious metals and gems;
- the satisfaction of every need or wish;
- the presence of splendid nymphs (*apsaras*es).[16]

A couple of details deserve special attention. The animals in Svayamprabhā's cave mentioned in the passage are fish, turtles, bees and birds. The presence of birds is particularly emphasised in the passage as a whole: it is because the monkeys see them coming out of the cave dripping with water that they are driven to venture inside (IV 49: 8):

[15] See PIERUCCINI 2014. Olivelle has authoritatively established that Aśvaghoṣa lived in northern India most likely in the 2nd century (AŚVAGHOṢA, *Buddhacarita* [Clay], XVII-XXXIII). The original composition of the *Longer Sukhāvatīvyūhasūtra* is thought to predate the end of the 2nd century, while that of the *Shorter Sukhāvatīvyūhasūtra* is judged by some to be later, by others even significantly earlier (WILLIAMS 2009: 239-240). The editions referred to here are AŚVAGHOṢA, *Saundarananda* [Johnston] and, as for the *Sukhāvatīvyūhasūtra*s, *Mahāyāna-sūtra-saṁgrahaḥ* [Vaidya].

[16] In the description of the Sukhāvatī (cf. *LS* 19; 23) the *apsaras*es are mentioned, but, as generally in Buddhism, they are not charged with eroticism. On the desexualisation of the Buddhist paradise gardens, cf. ALI 2003: 245-247, and SHIMADA 2012: 24, 35.

> 8. Out of it flew *krauñca* birds, geese, sarus cranes, and *cakravāka* birds, dripping with water, their bodies red with lotus pollen.[17]

Now, in the passages I have mentioned for the purpose of comparison, birds are almost always present, and quite often they are in fact the only animals mentioned. This is exactly the case in the *Mahābhārata* passage, where they are said to populate the *sabhā*, the 'hall', i.e. the residence of Varuṇa, which is introduced as follows (*MBh* II 9: 2cd-4):

> 2. [...] and [it] is surrounded by trees made of celestial jewels that yield flowers and fruit,
> 3. covered with carpets of flowers, blue, yellow, black, dark, white, and red, and with bowers that bear clusters of blossoms.
> 4. In the hall sweet-voiced birds of many feathers fly about, indescribably beautiful, by the hundreds and thousands.[18]

And here are a couple of stanzas from the *Saundarananda* that describe the fabulous birds of Indra's paradise, again the only animals present (*SN* X 28-29):

> 28. Birds are there with beaks of the colour of red arsenic, with eyes like rock crystal, brown wings having scarlet tips, claws like madder and half white.
> 29. And other birds roam there, with sparkling golden wings and limpid eyes blue as beryl; they are called 'Jingling' and with their singing they steal ears and mind.[19]

As for the *Sukhāvatīvyūhasūtra*s, here the birds spread a Buddhist message with their melodious songs, but one detail is especially interesting: it is explicitly stated that they

[17] *tataḥ krauñcāś ca haṃsāś ca sārasāś cāpi niṣkraman / jalārdrāś cakravākāś ca raktāṅgāḥ padmareṇubhiḥ //.*
[18] *divyaratnamayair vṛkṣaiḥ phalapuṣpapradair yutā // 2 // nīlapītāsitaśyāmaiḥ sitair lohitakair api / avatānais tathā gulmaiḥ puṣpamañjaridhāribhiḥ // 3 // tathā śakunayas tasyāṃ nānārūpā mṛdusvarāḥ / anirdeśyā vapuṣmantaḥ śataśo 'tha sahasraśaḥ // 4 //.* The translations of the passages from the Second Book of the *Mahābhārata* are taken from *Mahābhārata* [van Buitenen], here with a slight modification.
[19] *manaḥśilābhair vadanair vihaṃgā yatrākṣibhiḥ sphāṭikasaṃnibhaiś ca / śāvaiś ca pakṣair abhilohitāntair māñjiṣṭhakair ardhasitaiś ca pādaiḥ // 28 // citraiḥ suvarṇacchadanais tathānye vaiḍūryanīlair nayanaiḥ prasannaiḥ / vihaṃgamā (sic) śiñjirikābhidhānā rutair manaḥśrotraharair bhramanti // 29 //.*

were created by the supreme Buddha Lord of the place himself, since in the Sukhāvatī, the paradise of future liberation, there is no reincarnation in animal form (cf. *SS* 6; *LS* 15-16, etc.), and in fact, here too, no other animal is mentioned. Why, then, are birds mentioned when their presence must be justified? The primary reason might ultimately be a simple one: paradise is in fact a magnificent garden in Aśvaghoṣa, and it is likewise described in extraordinarily glowing terms in the *Sukhāvatīvyūhasūtra*s; and birds are animals that inevitably populate "real" gardens. They are as much a part of any garden as the vegetation: it is a fact of common experience, which in these descriptions is transfigured in terms of beauty and meaning.[20]

Another point of notable importance is the vegetation made of precious materials, which I mentioned in the outline of the motifs, and which in fact constitutes, in the epics, a constant element of the "marvels" of the most fabulous places; I will dwell briefly on this aspect, highlighting it in the quoted passages. In Svayamprabhā's cave there are 'golden trees' (see also IV 50: 4a, *kāñcanā vṛkṣās*; IV 50: 6cd, *jāmbūnadamayāḥ pādapāḥ*), as well as 'golden lotuses' (IV 50: 7a, *kāñcanāni ca padmāni*). In the quoted passage from the *Mahābhārata*, as we have seen, there is mention of 'trees made of celestial jewels' (*divyaratnamayair vṛkṣaiḥ*, *MBh* II 9: 2c); while in the 'world of cows' there are, for example, 'many lotuses [...] with leaves of gems of great value and filaments of the splendour of gold' (*mahārhamaṇipatraiś ca kāñcanaprabhakesaraiḥ* [...] *bahupaṅkajaiḥ*, *MBh* XIII 80: 21). In the remote places mentioned by Sugrīva we also find similar vegetation in several instances; again for example, this is what is said of the lotuses and waterlilies of the legendary country of the Uttarakurus, in the far north (IV 42: 39-41):

> 39. There are rivers by the thousands there, their waters brimming with beds of golden lotuses, rich with leaves sapphire and emerald.
> 40. The ponds there sparkle for they are adorned with clusters of red lotuses made of gold, bright as the newly risen sun.

[20] More generally, birds are of remarkable importance in the literatures of classical India, where they are involved in many poetic images. See in particular KARTTUNEN 2020, and the bibliography cited therein.

> 41. The whole region is covered with bright clusters of blue waterlilies, with leaves like precious jewels, and filaments shining like gold.[21]

I have dealt elsewhere (PIERUCCINI 2014) with the prodigious vegetation that Aśvaghoṣa places in Indra's paradise in the *Saundarananda* (*SN* X 19-27), [22] and likewise with that of the Mahāyāna paradises, where trees and lotuses are made of precious substances in a general phantasmagorical jubilation of gold and precious stones, according to imagery and motifs that develop in specifically Buddhist terms; here a common expression is *ratnavṛkṣa*, 'tree of jewels' (*SS* 3-7; *LS* especially 15-23). On the other hand, trees and lotuses of precious substances, as well as the abundance of precious materials in general, do not appear only in gardens that express a dimension, so to speak, of bliss (see also below). In the *Rāmāyaṇa* itself, they figure in one of the key places in the whole poem, namely the *aśokavanikā*, the 'grove of *aśoka* trees',[23] the great garden where Sītā is held captive by Rāvaṇa at Laṅkā (especially V 12-13). I have also dealt with the characteristics of this place in detail elsewhere (PIERUCCINI 2016). This is obviously not a "paradise" in any way, but rather, for Sītā, it is a prison of acute suffering. However, the magnificence with which it is described underlines its extraordinary qualities, a mirror of fabulous wealth, while it also achieves the purpose – the very one at which Sugrīva's descriptions of remote countries also ultimately aim – of setting the place at the limits of the human

[21] *tataḥ kāñcanapadmābhiḥ padminībhiḥ kṛtodakāḥ / nīlavaidūryapatrāḍhyā nadyas tatra sahasraśaḥ // 39 // raktotpalavanaiś cātra maṇḍitāś ca hiraṇmayaiḥ / taruṇādityasadṛśair bhānti tatra jalāśayāḥ // 40 // mahārhamaṇipatraiś ca kāñcanaprabha kesaraiḥ / nīlotpalavanaiś citraiḥ sa deśaḥ sarvatovṛtaḥ // 41 //*. The description of this place (IV 42: 39-52) contains all the "paradisiacal" elements I have outlined; for a comparison with the *Saundarananda*, see the following note. I have slightly modified the *Rāmāyaṇa* [Lefeber] translation, translating *utpala-* more correctly as 'waterlilies' instead of 'lotuses'.

[22] To be compared with IV 42: 44-48, i.e., with the trees which the *Rāmāyaṇa* places in the country of the Uttarakurus.

[23] For the botanical definition of this tree with bright, typically fiery red flowers, celebrated in much Sanskrit literature, see footnote 12.

world, in fact together with the whole splendour of Laṅkā, the kingdom of a sovereign of supernatural genealogy.[24]

However, I posed a question in both of these aforementioned articles: is it possible that artificial vegetation made of precious substances was in fact a feature of the gardens of the rich and powerful in ancient India? That these fantasies coincided with some kind of real decoration of gardens? First of all, one could ask, more precisely, whether it is the gold and gems of the trees and flowers of literature that reflect a corresponding practice.[25] Evidence that could lead to a positive answer comes from the *Mānasollāsa*, also known as *Abhilaṣitārthacintāmaṇi*, which is a much later text, but crucial for our knowledge of the gardens of rulers at least in medieval India. This is an encyclopaedic work in Sanskrit composed at the court of Someśvara III, ruler of the Western Cālukyas, who reigned between 1126 and 1138, and its authorship is traditionally attributed to the ruler himself. In Section Five, two chapters (*M* V 1-2) are specifically devoted to the sovereign's ideal garden; they discuss both the techniques of cultivation and the ways in which the king can enjoy the luxuriance of the place. Here, alongside an extremely extensive catalogue of "natural" vegetation and other precious embellishments, in the sovereign's great garden we find a mention of 'artificial trees' (*kṛtrimān dharaṇīruhān*, *M* V 1: 115b) with 'coral fruits', 'golden flowers', 'leaves of gems' (*pravālaphala-*, *suvarṇakusuma-*, *ratnapatra-*, *M* V 1: 114), a 'tree of multicoloured gems' and a 'fruit of heavenly gems' (*citraratnataru-*, *divyaratnaphala-*, *M* V 1: 119), 'golden lotuses' and 'novel waterlilies made of sapphires' (*kāñcanapaṅkaja-*,

[24] Actually, most of the long, kaleidoscopic description of the city of Laṅkā and Rāvaṇa's palace (V 2-10) can be easily interpreted in "paradisiacal" terms as well, despite the fact that the place is populated by hideous and frightening *rākṣasa*s. These *sarga*s give a lengthy account of the other canonical elements: an architecture of precious materials and a general dazzling abundance of gold and jewels, plenty of food and luxury objects, throngs of fascinating women also said to be of celestial descent (V 7: 65). The city, which at various points these chapters compare to a supernatural, divine city (e.g. V 2: 17), and which used to belong to Kubera, lord of wealth (and *Rāvaṇa's* half-brother), is said to have been created by Viśvakarman (cf. V 2 :19b), the architect of the *deva*s, while his counterpart Maya is the architect of the *asura*s (see below).

[25] It is impossible not to recall the sixteenth-century accounts of the Inca practice of "fabricating" gardens of gold and silver; most famous is the garden of the Q'oricancha temple of the Sun in Cuzco. A recent analysis is in FLOYD 2016.

indranīlavinirvṛttanavendīvara-, *M* V 1: 102d; 103ab).[26] The general context in which these data are placed might, indeed, suggest some concrete practices.

However, other indications, whose greater antiquity and therefore closer chronological proximity to the mentioned epic and Buddhist texts make more consistent, lead in a completely different direction. Consider in fact a group of famous Sanskrit plays in which several scenes take place in the gardens of royal palaces: the *Svapnavāsavadatta* attributed to Bhāsa, Kālidāsa's *Mālavikāgnimitra* and *Vikramorvaśīya*, and Harṣa's *Priyadarśikā* and *Ratnāvalī*.[27] These works reveal many details of such gardens, but no trace of artificial vegetation made of precious metals and gems emerges; on the contrary, everything appears absolutely and beautifully "natural". This makes us think that, on these aspects, the *Mānasollāsa* itself was inspired by the literary tradition of the paradisiacal or exceptional places we have mentioned; or better, since we cannot exclude that an actual practice of this kind ever took place, the evidence from the theatrical world suggests that rather than having inspired the literary descriptions, such a practice, if anything, was instead inspired by them. In short, the 'marvellous', *adbhuta*, of literature may have been transferred to reality.[28]

But let us return to the cave of Svayamprabhā to speak now of its creator, Maya, who devised this place, as we have seen, 'by magic', or rather, according to the Sanskrit text, by means of *māyā*. Maya is one of the great architects in Indian myth; more precisely, our *Rāmāyaṇa* passage defines him (IV 50: 10-11) as a *dānava* and the architect of the *dānava*s, while elsewhere he is said to be, with substantial equivalence, a

[26] Cf. also *M* V 1: 100-101; 120. The text is quoted according to SOMEŚVARA, *Mānasollāsa* [Shrigondekar]. An analysis of these chapters, which remain for a great part untranslated, can be found in ALI 2012.

[27] The *Svapnavāsavadatta* is one of the so-called Trivandrum Plays, named after the place of their first publication, thirteen plays whose manuscripts were discovered and published by Gaṇapati Śāstrī at the beginning of the 20th century, and whose dating and authorship are widely debated; possibly this play is pre-Kālidāsa. As is well known, Kālidāsa is generally held to have lived in the 4th-5th century, while Harṣa, who was a great sovereign of north India, reigned in the first half of the 7th century.

[28] Golden trees can also have a much more disturbing aspect. Hopkins has collected a group of passages from the *Mahābhārata* in which seeing, or dreaming of, golden trees is mentioned; essentially, it is a sign of madness and an omen of the imminence of one's own death (HOPKINS 1910: 351-352).

daitya or, again, an *asura*, an 'anti-god', that is one of the "enemies" of the *deva*s, the victorious – so to speak – deities of the Brahmanical-Hindu world. Now, as is well known, although in Hindu myths the *asura*s are essentially powerful and terrible demons who threaten the cosmic order guaranteed by the *deva*s, in the Vedas, i.e. in a more ancient religious phase, *asura*s were called some great gods, one of whom is Varuṇa, a deity of immense majesty. And, in the Vedic context, a special prerogative of Varuṇa and the *asura*s (but not only) is a power that is precisely called *māyā*. The term, or rather the concept, will undergo a lengthy development, until it came to indicate, in Hindu thought and particularly in Vedānta, a key notion, that is the great illusion which prevents humans from seeing the authentic nature of things; but our epic texts are far from this meaning. Let us recall a basic definition of *māyā* proposed by Jan Gonda: «incomprehensible wisdom and power enabling its possessor, or being able itself, to create, devise, contrive, effect or do something» (GONDA 1965: 166). We will see shortly that this power, also for Maya, can fade into deception; and, in the case of this *asura* architect, this magnificent and at the same time uncanny creative power can be certainly rendered, for simplicity, as 'magic'.

The assonance Maya / *māyā,* which allows a play on words in Sanskrit, cannot go unnoticed. An actual etymological connection between the two words is problematic;[29] nevertheless, it is more than reasonable to think that Sanskrit authors perceived a direct relationship between them.

The most important, celebrated episodes concerning Maya are found in the *Mahābhārata*. Here he is saved by the hero Arjuna from the great conflagration which allows the god Fire, assisted by the prowess of the hero Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa, to devour the Khāṇḍava forest (*MBh* I 219: 35-40). Maya would like, so to speak, to repay Arjuna, but the hero does not consider it necessary, and invites the architect to do, instead, something for Kṛṣṇa; and it is the latter who, in turn, asks Maya to build a magnificent, inimitable 'hall', *sabhā*, for Arjuna and his brothers, the Pāṇḍavas. Maya enthusiastically agrees; then, with the help of a large number of *rākṣasa*s (or *kiṃkara*s) as transporters or

[29] Cf. *KEWA* I: 65-66; *KEWA* II: 624-625; *KEWA* III: 777; *EWA* I: 148; *EWA* II: 349-350.

guardians, he achieves the feat in fourteen months – a very long time for a divine being! (*MBh* II 1; 3). In order to recover the precious materials he needs, he goes to the extreme north-east to Mount Maināka,[30] which lies beyond Mount Kailāsa, where he had accumulated a 'collection of precious stones' (*maṇimayaṃ bhāṇḍaṃ*, *MBh* II 3: 2e), and from where he brings back 'crystalline substances' (*sphāṭikaṃ ca* [...] *dravyaṃ*, *MBh* II 3: 16c). And here are some salient passages in the description of this hall that comes to adorn Indraprastha, the capital of the Pāṇḍavas (*MBh* II 3: 19-20; 23; 27-28; 32):

> 19-20. The hall, which had solid golden pillars, great king, measured ten thousand cubits in circumference. Radiant and divine, it had a superb color like the fire, or the sun, or the moon.[31]
> 23. Made with the best materials, garlanded with gem-encrusted walls, filled with precious stones and treasures [...].[32]
> 27-28. Inside the hall Maya built a peerless lotus pond, covered with beryl leaves and lotuses with gem-studded stalks, filled with lilies and water plants and inhabited by many flocks of fowl. Blossoming lotuses embellished it, and turtles and fishes adorned it.[33]
> 32. Everywhere there were fragrant groves and lotus ponds made beautiful by wild geese, ducks, and *cakra* birds.[34]

We recognise motifs in common with the cave of Svayamprabhā. And, like the cave, which transforms time and precludes exit, this much more famous creation of Maya also has deceptive and illusory characteristics; in fact, the passage says that some kings, seeing it filled with precious stones, do not notice the pond and fall into it (*MBh* II 3: 30). Later on, in a very famous episode (*MBh* II 46: 26-35), similar lapses will befall Duryodhana,

[30] Just before the cave episode, the *Rāmāyaṇa* states that Maya lives on Mount Maināka, in a palace that he built himself (IV 42: 29).
[31] *sabhā tu sā mahārāja śātakumbhamayadrumā /daśa kiṣkusahasrāṇi samantād āyatābhavat // 19 // yathā vahner yathārkasya somasya ca yathaiva sā / bhrājamānā tathā divyā babhāra paramaṃ vapuḥ // 20 //.*
[32] *uttamadravyasaṃpannā maṇiprākāramālinī /bahuratnā bahudhanā [...] // 23 //.*
[33] *tasyāṃ sabhāyāṃ nalinīṃ cakārāpratimāṃ mayaḥ / vaiḍūryapatravitatāṃ maṇinālamayāmbujām // 27 // padmasaugandhikavatīṃ nānādvijagaṇāyutām / puṣpitaiḥ paṅkajaiś citrāṃ kūrmamatsyaiś ca śobhitām // 28 //.*
[34] *kānanāni sugandhīni puṣkariṇyaś ca sarvaśaḥ / haṃsakāraṇḍavayutāś cakravākopaśobhitāḥ // 32 //.*

the eldest of the Kauravas, the enemies of the Pāṇḍavas. In this *sabhā*, he sees a pond of crystal and gems and thinking it to be full of water enters it tucking in his clothes; he then sees another pond, judges it to be artificial, and falls into the water. In addition, he also strikes his forehead against a crystal slab, believing it to be an entrance. He is laughed at, and these incidents and the riches he sees unfolded before his eyes cause him great humiliation, anger and envy, feelings that inflame his desire for revenge.

To conclude, a few brief remarks. First, in the descriptions of these places we see a key concept at work connected with the idea of "beauty" in ancient India. What is "natural", spontaneous, can certainly be splendid, but this is not enough; it must be refined, perfected, decorated. This is notoriously valid at all levels: linguistic-literary (starting from *saṃskṛta*, the language 'refined, polished, made perfect'), of the figurative arts, and, indeed until today, in the modes and will of social representation and self-representation of men and women (clothes, jewellery...). Let us recall that a Sanskrit term used in the most varied contexts to designate 'ornamentation', *alaṃkāra*, literally means 'that which makes sufficient, adequate'.

Secondly, in the passages we have examined, the element that can be said to dominate is luminosity. Light, radiance, brilliance constitute a constant leitmotif, which the readers find imprinted on their minds in an almost intuitive way. In fact, brightness and beauty are combined in very broad terms in Sanskrit literature; with particular reference to court classical poetry, *kāvya*, David Smith effectively speaks of a poetics of "solidification of light",[35] which is exactly the definition that can apply here.

I have often used the word "paradisical". It is finally important to note that in the passages quoted here, the places in an apparently human world and the places of the afterlife share the same characteristics. The imagery to which these passages refer does not draw clear boundaries between the higher worlds and the earth in which the characters of the epics move; remote, attractive, or disturbing and strange destinations, such as Svayamprabhā's cave, create a sort of continuum between the different planes of reality, and this happens in the name of the 'marvellous', *adbhuta*.

[35] Cf. SMITH 1985: 174-175; 289; and SMITH 2010.

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LS = *Longer Sukhāvatīvyūhasūtra* (*Mahāyāna-sūtra-saṁgrahaḥ* [Vaidya])
M= *Mānasollāsa* (Someśvara (attr. to), *Mānasollāsa* [Shrigondekar])
MBh = *Mahābhārata* [Critical Edition]
RG = *Rāmāyaṇa* [Gorresio]
SN = *Saundarananda* (Aśvaghoṣa, *Saundarananda* [Johnston])
SS = *Shorter Sukhāvatīvyūhasūtra* (*Mahāyāna-sūtra-saṁgrahaḥ* [Vaidya])

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