



Consonanze 11.1

ANANTARATNAPRABHAVA

STUDI IN ONORE DI GIULIANO BOCCALI

*a cura di Alice Crisanti, Cinzia Pieruccini,
Chiara Policardi, Paola M. Rossi*

I



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“The Poetry of Thought”¹ in the Theology of the *Tripurārahasya*

Silvia Schwarz Linder

The Tripurārahasya and the Śrīvidyā Tradition

The *Tripurārahasya* (TR) (‘The Secret [Doctrine] of [the Goddess] Tripurā’) is a Sanskrit work of South Indian origin, probably composed between the XII and the XV-XVI century CE, if not later,² and associated with the tantric, Śākta religious tradition of the Śrīvidyā. It is a well-known, yet marginal text of this tradition, since it seems to have left no trace, in terms of references or quotations, in the later related literature.³

The Śrīvidyā tradition – the foremost deity of which is Tripurā, also known as Tripurasundarī or Lalitā – has flourished from the X-XI century CE to the present day. It originated in Kashmir and subsequently spread to other regions of India, especially the South. In common with the majority of the tantric texts, its literary sources deal chiefly with ritual matters. Whenever discussed, the doctrinal notions of the tradition are influenced by the philosophical and theological teachings of the non-dualist Kashmirian Śaivism, particularly by the Pratyabhijñā school. In any case, the speculative issues are not very elaborated in the Śrīvidyā scriptures, whose aim is to indicate to the initiate adept a practical way of liberation, a liberation which can be attained in this world, while still alive (*jīvanmuktī*). Accordingly, the core of the Śrīvidyā scriptures is devoted to the salvific experience of the adept, which is realized through the worship of Tripurā by means of the Śrīyantra and the Śrīvidyā, i.e. the *yantra* and the *mantra* of the Goddess, which are the embodiment of her cosmic power.

The *yantra*-s are used as supports for meditation and ritual worship. The *yantra* of Tripurā, called Śrīyantra or Śrīcakra, is the graphic symbol, or rather the visual, aniconic form of the Goddess and of her cosmic activity. It is a dynamic *yantra* which, despite being represented in the form of a static geometric diagram, is a pulsating model symbolising, or rather embodying the process of manifestation

1. *D’après* the title of a book by George Steiner (2011).

2. The still uncertain period of composition of the TR is discussed in my forthcoming monographic study on this work.

3. See Hulin 1979, 9, 12.

and reabsorption of the world by divine energy. By means of intense meditation (*bhāvanā*), in which the attention is focused from the centre of the *yantra* to its outer enclosures and vice-versa, the adept reproduces and actualises within himself the cosmic creative and destructive play of the Goddess. By contemplating the *yantra* from its outer parts to its centre, i.e. following the order of the reabsorption of the world in the Absolute – which is represented by the union of the Goddess and Śiva at the centre of the Śrīyantra – the adept comes to identify his own self with the Absolute.

As far as the *mantra* is concerned, the chief *mantra* of Tripurā, called Śrīvidyā (from which the tradition derives its name), is the phonic form, the sonorous body of the Goddess, her highest, most powerful manifestation, embodying both her essence and creative energy. By mastering the secret, symbolic meaning of the Śrīvidyā, the adept does not limit himself simply to the recitation (*japa*) of the *mantra*, but performs a complex, meditative, yogic, ritual practice, aiming at the fusion of his individual consciousness with the divine consciousness.

“The Poetry of Thought”

Hopefully, these brief introductory remarks will give an idea of the complex background against which the TR is to be considered. The aim of this article is to highlight the stylistic devices adopted by the author(s) of this work and to show how he/they chose to deal with doctrinal issues and ritual elements through the medium of a literary and poetic language. In reading the TR in this particular perspective, I have been inspired by George Steiner’s essay *The Poetry of Thought*, where the distinguished polymath retraces the history of Western philosophy focusing on the essential relationship of thought and language, of philosophy and poetry.

Beginning his brilliant and challenging survey with the teachings of the Pre-Socratics, the obscure vestiges of which «direct us toward connections between the genesis of philosophic rationality and the far older, at times ritual performance of poetry»,⁴ Steiner remarks that, «where philosophy and literature mesh, where they are litigious toward one another in form and matter, these echoes of origin can be heard. The poetic genius of abstract thought is lit, is made audible».⁵ «This endowment with poetry, – Steiner writes – the *Dichtungsvermoege*n, which constitutes both the primordial and the ultimate condition of man, is the source of those attempts at a synthesis of the self and the perceived world which energize

4. Steiner 2011, 29.

5. *Ibid.*, 13.

the philosophic enterprise from Anaximander to Heidegger [...]. Born of poetry, philosophy will at the end of time return “to the great ocean of poetry”».⁶

Dialogues and Philosophic Tales

Returning to our text, there are two extant sections of the TR: the *māhātmyakhaṇḍa* (*mk*) (‘Section of the Majesty [of the Goddess]’), a mythical narrative in purāṇic style, devoted to Tripurā and to the goddesses who are regarded as her own particular manifestations, and the *jñānakhaṇḍa* (*jk*) (‘Section of Knowledge’), dealing with speculative issues; a third, ritual section, mentioned in the text as *caryākhaṇḍa* (‘Section of Right Conduct’),⁷ has been lost.

The text is composed in the form of a dialogue, but – unlike the majority of the Śākta and Śaiva tantric texts in which the interlocutors are Śiva and the Goddess – here the dialogists are two human characters: the seer Nārada and Sumedhā Hāritāyana, the alleged author of the work. Their conversation frames the dialogue between the great *yogin* Dattātreya and the brāhman-warrior Paraśurāma, who play the roles of spiritual teacher and disciple, respectively. This choice of the main interlocutors is not simply a formal artifice, but enhances the dramatic flavour of the dialogue. In fact, whereas in most *Tantra-s* «[...] the dialogue situation is no more than a divine play or semblance»⁸ – as Goudriaan remarks with regard to the exchange of questions and answers between the divine partners – in the TR the two mythic-yet-human characters engage in a true, lively conversation. Moreover, as Michel Hulin observes, the doubts, difficulties and objections raised by Paraśurāma are precisely those that would occur spontaneously to any listener, and furthermore the dialogue form is an integral part of the content of the work.⁹ *Mutatis mutandis*, as Steiner remarks with regard to Plato’s dialogues, «abstract and speculative thought of utmost complexity is embodied or as Shakespeare puts it “bodied forth”. Intellectual moves and counter-moves are dramatically voiced».¹⁰

Paraśurāma is represented as a man experiencing an existential turning-point: after having perpetrated the massacre of the *ksatriya-s* for twenty-one generations, to avenge his father’s murder by the king Kārtavīrya Arjuna, he roams around, tormented by remorse for having killed so many innocent women and children. He understands that he had been living trapped in the course of worldly existence,

6. *Ibid.*, 198-199.

7. See TR, *mk*, 1, 83d-84: [...] *khaṇḍe tritayam eva ca // 83d // ādyo māhātmyakhaṇḍaḥ syāt jñānakhaṇḍas tathā paraḥ / caryākhaṇḍas trītyaḥ syād evam etad bhaviṣyati // 84 //*.

8. Goudriaan–Gupta 1981, 26.

9. See Hulin 1979, 16.

10. Steiner 2011, 53.

prey to anger and desire, which are the roots of all misery. Thus, along with his increasing disillusionment with the world, his desire to resort to a *guru* grows.¹¹ Dattātreyā begins his teaching with the narration of the deeds of the goddess Tripurā, with a view to eliciting in his disciple the devotion by which he will obtain the Goddess' grace, and thereby, eventually, true knowledge.

It is not so much in this first step of Dattātreyā's instruction – i.e. the celebration of the majesty of Tripurā, which occupies the whole *mk* – as in the *jk* that the literary device of the dialogue plays an essential part in the progressive disclosure of the philosophical teachings of the TR. Moreover, in this section of the work, Dattātreyā illustrates his teachings by means of philosophic tales, which are structured after the framing device typical of classical narrative literature, and in which the different characters who discuss speculative issues are none other than *alter ego*-s of Dattātreyā and Paraśurāma respectively.

The *jk* opens with Paraśurāma's disappointment about the ultimate efficacy of the ritual worship of the Goddess to which, after having been initiated by Dattātreyā, he has devoted himself for a long time; he realizes that, as long as one is prey to the demon of duty (*kartavya*), even if it is a ritual obligation, one shall never be free of sorrow.¹² To relieve Paraśurāma's despondency, Dattātreyā tells a first tale, in which a wise princess lectures her spouse. The latter's indifference towards worldly objects (*nirveda*) – which echoes the initial melancholic mood of Paraśurāma – is regarded as *a conditio sine qua non* and a first step on the path towards salvation. The core of the princess' – *alias* Dattātreyā's – teaching is that the liberating knowledge of the Self is the awareness of what remains after having discarded all that which is called 'mine-ness' (*mamatva*);¹³ it is the recognition of the omnipresent principle of consciousness (*cittattva*), in which the whole world is contained like a reflection contained in a mirror.¹⁴ Under the guidance of his wife, the prince devotes himself to meditation, experiences deep absorption (*samādhi*) and eventually attains the liberating knowledge, thereby becoming a *jīvanmukta*; then, though liberated while still alive, he continues to perform his royal duties with the detachment of an actor playing his role on the stage.¹⁵

The puzzlement evoked in Paraśurāma by the statement that the world is nothing but consciousness (*citīmātrasvarūpaka*) gives Dattātreyā the opportunity to

11. See TR, *mk*, 4-5.

12. See TR, *jk*, 1-2.

13. See *ibid.*, 9, 14: *gatvaikānte vivicyaitad yad yad bhāti mamatvataḥ / tat tat parityajya param svātmānam abhilakṣyata // 14 //*

14. See *ibid.*, 7, 92: *ādarśanagaraprakhyam jagad etac carācaram / tadrūpaikatvatas tatra nottamādhama bhāvanā // 92 //*

15. See *ibid.*, 10, 45cd: *karoti rājakāryāni naṭavad raṅgamaṅdale // 45cd //*. For the entire episode, see *ibid.*, 3-10.

elaborate the idea of the spiritual mirror: the Supreme Consciousness, identified with the Goddess Tripurā, by her own free will (*svatantrya*) manifests the whole world. The latter appears within herself like a city reflected in a mirror; but whereas a common mirror needs light and external objects to reflect, the divine consciousness has the power to cause the reflection, i.e. the world, to appear within herself as her own creation. The world, like a mirror image, has no existence independent from the divine consciousness, yet it is real in so far as it derives its reality from that of the divine consciousness, the free play of which is her continuous unfolding in the world.¹⁶ These ideas, marked by a realistic idealism and indebted to the doctrine of reflection (*ābhāsavāda*) of Abhinavagupta,¹⁷ are further elaborated by the main characters of the tales through which Dattātreyā illustrates his teachings.

Accordingly, urged by Paraśurāma’s questions about the reality of the world, Dattātreyā tells the story of a *yogin* who, by means of the power of his creative imagination (*bhāvanā*), brings into existence a whole universe inside a mountain. A prince asks to see this extraordinary world and, after having explored it under the guidance of the *yogin*, realizes that the day spent therein has been equivalent to millions of years in the ordinary world. Seeing the bewilderment of the prince, the *yogin* explains that the world is like a dream, and that it is none other than the belief that one projects onto it. Just as every night fanciful worlds are brought forth by dreamers, so the world inside the mountain is the product of the creative imagination of the *yogin*. However, unlike the worlds of dreamers that disappear upon awakening, the world inside the mountain derives its lastingness from the vigour of the *yogin*’s *bhāvanā*. Similarly, the universe derives its objective reality and permanence from the manifesting power of the divine consciousness, in which every manifested thing is contained.¹⁸

Incidentally, as regards the prince experiencing the relativity of time, it may be useful to recall Hulin’s reflection that the disorienting effect on the listener/reader of the framing device borrowed from classical narrative literature subtly prepares the listener/reader’s mind to receive those teachings of the TR which highlight the relativity of the space-time frames of the human, customary way of thinking.¹⁹

Having grasped the essence of his *guru*’s teaching, Paraśurāma expresses further doubts, namely how to reconcile the liberating knowledge of the One, i.e. the divine Consciousness, with the manifold ways of living of the *jīvanmukta*-s who, though liberated, continue to take part in worldly life. Once again Dattātreyā illustrates his teachings by means of a tale: Aṣṭāvakra, the son of the god Varuṇa and proud of

16. See *ibid.*, 11.

17. See TĀ, 3, 1-66.

18. For this episode, see TR, *jk*, 12-14.

19. See Hulin 1979, 25-26.

his learning, is lectured first by a female ascetic, then by the king Janaka who show him the limits of his abstract, indirect knowledge of the Self. Only by turning one's own mental eye inwards can one attain true insight. Thus Dattātreyā has Janaka analyze the experience of meditation, and explain the subtle affinity among the states of immediate perception of an object, deep sleep and deep meditation, i.e. absorption free from mental constructs (*nirvikalpa samādhi*). These three states have in common the suspension of any mental activity, which also characterizes the instantaneous passage from one state of consciousness to another (namely from waking to dreaming and from dreaming to deep sleep); but only *samādhi*, with its ceasing of any awareness of both the external and the internal world, lays bare the pure consciousness, which thus shines fully manifest. It is the recognition of such consciousness as one's own true nature that brings about liberation.²⁰

The issues discussed by Janaka in this tale, as well as further, crucial queries made by Paraśurāma about the practical aspects of the way of salvation, induce Dattātreyā to develop and intensify his teachings. He explains that the means of liberation depend on the degree of spiritual maturity attained by different types of men; however, the most effective means is the passionate longing for liberation. In reality, liberating knowledge is not something that can be achieved, but is instead always there, in so far as it is the ever self-revealed pure consciousness.²¹ On the other hand, bondage is simply belief, held by the finite mind, in the reality of bondage.²² Coming back to Paraśurāma's perplexity before the variety of behaviours of the liberated, Dattātreyā maintains that for those who belong to the highest category of *jīvanmukta*-s, the awareness of the true Self is compatible with fully participating in social life because, as a matter of fact, these wise men act as if they were not acting.²³

This brief survey of the main ideas set out in the *jk* of the TR shows that the literary device of the dialogue – the dramatic character of which is highlighted by the existential urge and the subtlety of Paraśurāma's objections – together with that of the philosophic tale – which introduces theoretical matters to resolve the doubts of the various characters and to relieve their sufferings – appear as appropriate stylistic choices, functional to the transmission of the doctrine of the TR in the form of lively and accessible teaching.

20. For this episode, see TR, *jk*, 15-17.

21. See *ibid.*, 19, 9: *jñānaṃ kvacin naiva sādhyam siddhatvāt tu svabhāvataḥ / caityam eva vijñānaṃ tat sadā svaprakāśakam // 9 //*.

22. See *ibid.*, 18, 124ab: *eṣa eva mahābandho bandhasatyatvaniścayaḥ / 124ab*.

23. See *ibid.*, 21, 105c: *tatkriyā nīskriyasyoktā*.

The Stotra-s: Gems of Poetical Theology / Theological Poetry

The main doctrinal notions discussed in the *jk* can also be traced in the *mk*, particularly in the hymns of praise (*stotra*) by which the Goddess’ mythical narrative is punctuated. These *stotra-s* often mark the peaks of the narration and, on account of the richness of their language and the variety of their prosody, represent the most lyrical parts of this section of the work. Their poetical expressions are pervaded by devotional fervour, in accordance with the spirit of the whole *mk*, in which the celebration of the majesty of the Goddess aims to inspire the devotion by which may be obtained divine grace and, thereby, salvific knowledge.

In the hymns however, the tribute to the benevolence of the Goddess and the praise of the beauty and charm of her outward appearance are interspersed by the enumeration of the metaphysical attributes of Tripurā, identified with the Supreme Consciousness. In such a way both the devotional *élan* of the *mk* and the gnostic and esoteric perspective of the *jk* harmonize well with one another in the poetical theology, or theological poetry, of the *stotra-s*.

Referring once again to Steiner’s essay, and with regard to this literary genre, he observes that, from Lucretius, and even before, «the paradigm of the philosophic poem» is that «of a seamless fit between aesthetic articulation and systematic cognitive content [...]».²⁴

Accordingly, to quote just few examples – i.e. a few stanzas taken from some of the hymns specifically dedicated to Tripurā²⁵ – the doctrine of the spiritual mirror, elaborated in the *jk*, is expressed as follows: ‘Your wonderful appearance, [all] exteriority suppressed, is like a mirror [that contains] the totality of this [world]. This is your great being, your victorious *śakti*, which accomplishes what is difficult to be accomplished [77]’.²⁶ Moreover, in a hymn that is called a bud of knowledge (*jñānakālikāstotra*), one reads: ‘[You are] she in whose body appears, like a painting on canvas, the manifold series of *tattva-s* from Śiva to earth; [in the same way] the sky with the moon and the stars appears in the water. You alone, the Supreme one, you are everything [20]’.²⁷ The playful cosmic activity of the Goddess is extolled in this way: ‘Thus you, [acting] under the impulse of your free will, call into existence the vast divine play [of the manifestation of the world] in the mirror of

24. Steiner 2011, 26.

25. In the *mk* there are also *stotra-s* dedicated to other goddesses who, in any case, are considered as particular manifestations of the Supreme Goddess Tripurā.

26. TR, *mk*, 51, 77: *naipuṇyam etad darpaṇasadṛśaṃ bāhyanirodhe ’py aticitraṃ te / vijayaty etat tava durghaṭanāghaṭanāśaktir mahatīśattā // 77 //*

27. *Ibid.*, 30, 20: *śivādikṣitiprāntatattvāvalir yā vicitrā yadye śarīre vibhāti / paṭe citrakalpā jale sendutārānabhovat parā sā tvam evā ’si sarvā // 20 //*

your own self [and,] contemplating this work of yours, rejoice incessantly. O Goddess, homage to you! [80].²⁸

In harmony with the devotional spirit permeating the *mk*, the theology of grace (*anugraha*) conveys the idea that the Goddess, in order to enable human beings to have the salvific experience of her presence, shows her favour and, out of her gracious disposition, reveals herself in forms in which she can be meditated and worshipped. Thus, in the first *stotra* of the *mk*, which the “author” of the work dedicated to the goddess Bālāmbikā (the Young Girl-Mother), one reads: ‘[...] in this world there might be nothing that is distinct from your form. Since you are the Self of all things, you shine forth always, the immensity of space being your body; [yet] under the impulse of compassion you manifest yourself to your devotees in this way, with a body limited by hands, feet, and so on [68].’²⁹ Furthermore: ‘Without name, form and activity, your only form being nothing but consciousness, yet you [take] form, name and activity in order to [bestow] grace upon beings [57].’³⁰ The eulogy by all the gods reads: ‘May there be the destruction and birth of countless universes thanks to the closing and opening of the eyes of she whose body is the greatest *śakti*! O supreme Śivā, what wonder [is produced by the fact that] you, endowed with the power of the great *māyā*, take manifold corporeal forms in order to accord the fruits of [their] desires to the beings who have resorted to you [for refuge]? [120].’³¹ Finally, the praise of the seductive, corporeal appearance of the Goddess, endowed with her symbolical attributes, is as follows: ‘Once again we here bow down before [your] playful, charming form which, red saffron-hued, curved under the weight of your breasts, adorned with the digit of the moon’s disc, bears the goad, the bow, the arrows and the noose [83].’³²

These few stanzas may already show how the *stotra*-s of the TR provide a good instance of the paradox of what Steiner calls the autonomous unison between phi-

28. *Ibid.*, 51, 80: *svātmādarśe pravitalilāṃ bhāvayasittham svātantryāt tvam / dṛṣṭvā kalpitam etat svīyaṃ mandasy anīśaṃ devi namaste // 80 //*

29. *Ibid.*, 1, 68: *atas tvadrūpān no pṛthag iha bhavet kiñcid api vā sadā sarvātmatvād vilasi mahākāśavapuṣā / tathābhūtāyās te parimitakarāṅghryādivapuṣā vilāso bhakteṣu prabhavati kṛpāyantraṇavaśāt // 68 //*

30. *Ibid.*, 9, 57: *nāmākṛtikriyābhīnā samvinmātraikarūpiṇī / anugrahāya lokānām rūpaṃ nāma kriyā ’pi te // 57 //*

31. *Ibid.*, 10, 120: *nimeṣonmesābhyām aganītavidhātraṇḍavilayodbhavau syātām yasyaḥ parataramahāśaktivapuṣaḥ / mahāmāyāsakteḥ śrītajanasamihāphalavidbau kiyaaccitraṃ nānāvidhatanu dhṛtis te paraśive // 120 //*

32. *Ibid.*, 51, 83: *kuṅkumaśoṇaṃ gurukucanamraṃ candrakalāḍhyaṃ sulalitarūpaṃ / śṛṅśāracāpān pāśaṃ bibhrad vāyam iha bhūyaḥ praṇamāmas tat // 83 //*

losophy and poetry,³³ or what Heidegger called «das dichtende Denken, die denkende Dichtung» (‘thought as poetry, poetry as thought’).³⁴

The Śrīcakra as Abode of Tripurā in the Island of Jewels

A last but by no means least representative case, showing how the author(s) of the TR dealt with a prominent element of the Śrīvidyā tradition by incorporating it in a literary context, is provided by the depiction of the Śrīcakra. The authoritative scriptures of the tradition – as exemplified by such a seminal source as the *Yoginīhrdaya* (‘The Heart of the Yoginī’) – describe the Śrīcakra in its abstract, geometric elements, and focus their attention on its function as a support for the meditative, yogic, ritual practices of the adept. In the TR instead, even if the complex symbolic implications of the constituent parts of the *yantra* are not overlooked, the Śrīcakra is represented as the royal residence of the Goddess Tripurā, from which she rules over the worlds.

The narrative context is the story of Lalitā (herself a form of Tripurā)³⁵ and of her victory over the demon Bhaṇḍa.³⁶ Requested by the gods to take a visible form in order to be worshipped, Tripurā consents to take up residence in a city built for her by Viśvakarman on the summit of mount Meru; this city, called Śrīpura, will be a replica³⁷ of her original abode. Thus Brahmā instructs Viśvakarman how to build Śrīpura, giving him a detailed description of the original abode of the Goddess in the Island of Jewels. This island is set in the ocean of nectar, and its shores are lined with forests of wishing trees. The abode of the Goddess is girdled by a series of ramparts enclosing regions inhabited by a variety of deities. Inside these wondrous enclosures there is a lotus garden and at its heart stands the palace made of the gems that grant all desires (*cintāmaṇigr̥ha*); there, on her throne, Tripurā sits on the left thigh of her spouse Kāmeśvara. Tripurā is attended by the goddesses forming her retinue and, to award them appropriate dwelling places, she creates the so-called *śakticakra*,³⁸ which is an image of the universe;³⁹ there, the abodes of the *śakti*-s are allotted according to the pattern of the Śrīcakra.⁴⁰ Thus guided by Brahmā, Vi-

33. See Steiner 2011, 214.

34. See *ibid.*, 198.

35. See TR, *mk*, 47, 30c: *lalitā tripurāmūrtir* [...].

36. This long sub-tale, which is narrated to Agastya by Hayagrīva, occupies the last part of the *mk* (chapters 47-78).

37. *Pratikṛti* in TR, *mk*, 53, 70cd, or *pratibimba*, in *ibid.*, 78, 19.

38. See TR, *mk*, 55, 79.

39. See *ibid.*, 56, 4ab: [...] *jagaccakrapratirūpam* [...].

40. For the whole treatment of the Island of Jewels and the Śrīcakra, see *ibid.*, 53-58.

śvakarman eventually builds Śrīpura, a city complying in every way with the model offered by the Śrīcakra, and after her victory over the demon Bhaṇḍa, the triumphant Lalitā is enthroned therein.

Hence the Śrīcakra appears in the TR as the pattern according to which, first the residence of Tripurā on the Island of Jewels, and then the capital city of Lalitā are constructed. In such a way this major component of the Śrīvidyā tradition, in its transposition from its original ritual sphere to a mythical context, is somehow translated into a narrative element, without however losing its essential feature of image of the world and embodiment of the divine energy.

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