Reading and Re-reading the *Vasu-caritramu*

1.

All readers of classical Telugu know that Bhaṭṭumūrti's *Vasu-caritramu* (VC) is one of the hardest books to read in the entire literary corpus, in some ways harder even than its closest rival in this respect, Kṛṣṇarāya's *Āmukta-mālyada*, famous for its complicated, non-native syntax and strange metrical effects. Nearly every verse in the VC presents the reader or listener with a challenge. Many, probably most, are bitextual, *śliṣṭa*, often in ways atypical of earlier paronomastic practices in Sanskrit and Telugu. Typically, such verses have to be deciphered, preferably with the help of a good commentary such as Tanjanagaram Tevapperumallayya's, which can be shown to go back to eighteenth-century predecessors and thus to embody one traditional way of reading. It takes time to make sense of such verses; also, understanding them on the level of primary denotation is only the beginning of a much longer process of exploring meaning, for each verse is embedded in a sequence, or rather a set of interlocking sequences that make up the book as a whole, and it is never enough to make do with the singular momentary flash of illumination that a single poem provides. Like all the great *prabandha* texts of the sixteenth century—not only in Telugu but also in Tamil, Kannada, and Malayalam, not to mention the Sanskrit works produced concurrently with these—the VC imparts a powerful sense of integrated composition. We need to ask about the particular form such integration takes in this particular work.

Velcheru Narayana Rao has said that connoisseurs of Telugu poetry come in two discrete parties; there are the partisans of Pĕddana and his close

contemporaries and the aficionados of Bhaṭṭumūrti. One can see why this would be the case. Pĕddana's *Manu-caritramu* flows along a compelling narrative channel, capacious enough to allow for many long lyrical passages. Despite, or perhaps because of, its elevated diction and style, the *Manu-caritramu* is an immensely readable work, quite unlike the textures of the VC that I have just described. One could say the same for Mukku Timmana's *Pārijātāpaharaṇamu* and, on another plane entirely, for Piṅgaḷi Sūranna's *Kaḷāpūrṇodayamu* and *Prabhāvatī-pradyumnamu* as well as for Dhūrjaṭi's *Kāḷahastīśvara-māhātmyamu*. It would be a mistake to undervalue the narrative force of these major works; the story exists as an autonomous force that provides coherence, fascination, and thematic consistency. In the VC, by way of contrast, the story, though a critical component of the text as a whole, chugs along like the Śuktimatī River blocked by rocks, heavy boulders, and, ultimately, by the Kolāhala Mountain (see below). The obstacles are the verses that tell this story and that divert the reader's attention to a recurring set of themes, linguistic practices or, perhaps, obsessions. Complexity informs these themes and practices and has its own aesthetic force. We need to imagine an audience capable of finding pleasure in complexity of this order.

It seems clear that the VC marks a later stage in the literary experiment that sixteenth-century Telugu poets were engaged in—a stage that, incidentally, follows upon the destruction of the Vijayanagaram capital in 1565 and that unfolded primarily in the southern reaches of the Telugu world, in Rāyalasīma, where Bhaṭṭumūrti, Tenāli Rāmakṛṣṇa, Dhūrjaṭi, and Sūranna were living and working in the relevant decades alongside the master sculptors and architects who produced the great Rāyalasīma temples (in Tadipatri, Lepaksi, Srisailam,

and elsewhere) that, in their own way, share the aesthetic stance of these poets. A Rāyalasīma sensibility infuses these masterpieces and awaits definition. The VC is, perhaps, its finest literary expression. "Complexity" is too crude a rubric to make sense of what is going on in this series.

It is common to read in modern Telugu essays on the VC that this book is musical to an extraordinary degree-- that the phonoaesthetic and rhythmic effects of many famous verses (such as 1.125, *lalanājanāpāṅga*…) overshadow the verbal semantics of these poems. Such a statement is even true, as far as it goes. It misses, however, the deeper poetic mechanisms that give the VC its true character and the fundamental tension that activates so many of its verses. There is no doubt that the VC is absorbed in the sheer musicality of sound, as we can see by a profusion of verses that refer directly to the crystallized *rāga* system from the time of Kallinātha (at Vijayanagaram itself), and also by what we might call musicological notions, or implicit theoretical statements, about how sound, with or without accompanying words, works on the mind or the heart of a good listener. These reflective statements are worth an essay that would align them to the musicological texts of the sixteenth and seventeenth century in the south. There is much to be learned from such a study. But in this preliminary essay, I want to suggest another way of thinking about the VC and its major expressive drives. This text offers us a new mode of combining sound and sense, one that is, however, not unrelated to similar experiments taking place in Tamil and Malayalam—with their newly articulated grammars—in the sixteenth century.[1]

How do we know that with the VC we have entered a new stage in Telugu poetry? For one thing, the later (seventeenth-century) *cāṭu* tradition tells us so. A

[1] See Clare and Shulman, "Taṇṭi/Daṇḍin in Tamil Literary History."

beloved verse from the VC was, so we are told, actually purchased by Bhaṭṭumūrti from the poet Mukku Timmana, "Timmana of the Nose," whose name is directly linked to this verse. By this time, as Narayana Rao has said, a verse is a commodity to be sold and bought. Here is the famous poem:

nānā-sūna-vitāna-vāsanalan ānandiñcu sāraṅgam' e-
lā nann' ŏllad' aṭañcu gandha-phalī bal kākam tapamb' andi yo-
ṣā-nāsākṛti tālci sarva-sumanas-saurabhya-saṃvāsiyai
pūněn prekṣaṇa-mālikā-madhukarī-puñjambul ir-vaṅkalan (2.46)

In agony, the *campaka* blossom wondered
why bees seek the honey of so many flowers
but never come to her.
She fled to the forest to do penance.
As a reward, she achieved the shape of a woman's nose.
Now she takes in the perfumes
of all the flowers, and on both sides
she is honored by eyes
black as bees.[2]

Bhaṭṭumūrti supposedly liked this verse enough to want to insert it in a passage that marks an extraordinary tour de force in both narrative and poetic playfulness—the moment just preceding the hero Vasu's first direct glimpse of

[2] Translated by Velcheru Narayana Rao and D. Shulman, *Classical Telugu Poetry,* p. 178.

his beloved Girikā and the poet's concomitant attempt to provide a model of perception per se. We will examine this passage briefly in a moment. I suppose one might claim that the *cāṭu* story about this verse—which was in fact clearly composed by Bhaṭṭumūrti himself, who had no need to buy it from anyone else--is derived from an accident, the striking "nosiness" of Timmana, who may well have had a prominent nose, and its coincidental affinity with a poem seeking to make sense of the poetic convention comparing a woman's nose to the *campaka* flower. But a closer look reveals typical features of the VC textuality, as we would expect from a *cāṭu* quotation meant to offer literary-critical comment: we have, first of all, an assertion of intertextual interdependence of our text with that of the Vijayanagaram poet Timmana and his time; and this intertextual basis for understanding the poem is, in fact, a basic element in the overall structure of the VC, which quotes directly and indirectly from Pĕddana, Kṛṣṇarāya, the Sanskrit *Naiṣadhīya*, and the synoptic model of Kālidāsa (for example, the final two chapters of the VC, describing the wedding of Vasu and Girikā and its aftermath, continuously remould the wedding passages in *Kumāra-sambhava* 7-8 and *Manu-caritramu* 5). Both Flaubert and Walter Benjamin dreamt of producing a book that was entirely made up of quotations; Bhaṭṭumūrti has given us a work haunted in every major passage by its earlier intertexts.

Intertextuality as a formative principle is, however, only one piece of this picture. It should never be seen as operating in a mechanical way. Each quotation has its own peculiar force and meaning, and there is always a logic to its insertion into the text at any given point. For now, please notice, keeping the story of the poem's origin in mind, that the emotional or cognitive coloring of this verse is all about the *campaka* flower's sense of rejection and neglect-- and

about the successful tactic the *campaka* adopts in order to overcome its misery and, in effect, to take revenge on all its rivals. Technically, a poetic convention, *kavi-samaya*, about the shape of the flower and a beautiful nose has been stretched, examined, turned inside out, exposed as artificial and perhaps even ridiculous, humanized, and then reinstated with the help of a standard figure, *utprekṣā* (informed by *rūpaka*): women's eyes are to be seen as a kind of super-bee, always present on either side of the nose, so the lucky and determined flower has triumphed over its enemies (and another standard figure, *vyatireka*, "surpassing," comes into play). Sanskrit poetics provides us with a vocabulary for analyzing these poetic moves that, nonetheless, cannot be reduced to the useful categorical terms the *śāstra* offers. Incidentally, the textbook on poetics that is attributed to Bhaṭṭumūrti under the patronage of Narasa, the nephew of Aliya Rāmarāja, the *Kāvyālaṅkāra-saṅgrahamu*,[3] despite its rather traditional topical format, clearly shows an awareness of the principle just stated: the aesthetic force of a literary work exceeds the sum of its analytical components, including figuration itself.[4]

This kind of analysis, based on the well-known figurative categories, can even be misleading. We might rather say, abstracting and extrapolating from the laconic *cāṭu* story about noses, that Bhaṭṭumūrti has here 1) taken off from earlier intertexts that are incorporated and radically extended in his hands 2) used the available tools of figuration to suggest the reality of fierce competition, despair, and ultimate triumph over one's (poetic) competitors 3) reflectively dissected a configured syntagma based on poetic convention, revealing its limits,

[3] The attribution is controversial and cannot be taken as established.
[4] See the introductory verses, especially 20-26.

thus undermining its natural meaningfulness 4) reconstituted the underlying idea in a new syntactic form that preserves and reveals the subtle process just described. Even more simply, poetic language itself has been exposed, stretched to its limit, broken open, examined, and put back together in a new form. All this takes place on the level of a single, fairly straightforward verse, but we see such methods at work almost everywhere in this book. I think the seemingly slight seventeenth-century comment on a sixteenth-century masterpiece is remarkably insightful, as is usually the case with this form of literary commentary.

2.

Before going any farther, we had best spend a moment with the narrative that ostensibly serves the VC as its scaffolding. There is a mountain, Kolāhala, in today's Madhya Pradesh, south of Bundelkhand. He—the mountain is said already in the *Mahābhārata* to be a sentient being, *cetanā-yukta*—was the son of the Himālaya and thus a brother to Pārvatī. The *MBh* also tells us, in a concise vignette, that he fell in love with the Śuktimatī river and impregnated her with twins.[5] One of these twins was Girikā, who became, in complicated ways, the mother of the Bhārata line of heroes. Thus we have a tale of origins, not entirely unlike the story of Manu that Allasāni Pĕddana chose for his great text. And like the Manu story, the story of Girikā and Vasu Uparicara, "the aviator,"[6] proceeds via rich affective complexities that are clearly integral to the very idea of generating human beings. In our case, King Vasu Uparicara kicked the mountain with his big toe and thus removed it from the path of

[5] *MBh*, Southern Recension 1.53.50-52.
[6] Vasu received this title when Indra gave him a crystal chariot that could fly through the sky.

the river.[7] This same king, known for having first established the annual New Year's festival for Indra, fell in love with Girikā and married her. This story is one of the traditional starting points for the epic and, possibly for that very reason, was selected by Bhaṭṭumūrti when his patron summoned him and asked him to produce a *kṛti* that would narrate an ancient story of royal deeds in a newly imagined and embellished way (1.19, a well-known metapoetic verse within the introduction to the text).

Within the structure of this story, the *VC* is a book about nature and the natural world as conceived, in a strong departure from earlier notions, in the sixteenth century. It is also, of course, a book about love—that of a mountain for a river, at first, but then primarily that of Vasu and Girikā. The unfolding of this love reveals further themes to which we will return.

Take a moment to listen to the way Mount Kolāhala seeks to win the river's heart, and how she responds. This passage, in Canto 2, is one of the simpler narrative segments of the book, thus an easy way into it; but it, too, like all the rest of the verses, is saturated with bitextual (*śliṣṭa*) passages that reflect the compounded nature of reality and the complex mechanisms by which human beings perceive it. Here is the opening of Kolāhala's speech, describing the moment he first caught sight of Śuktimatī on a visit to Brahmā's court:

"I saw you when you were leaving
after bowing to the god, you and all the other
lovely rivers—saw your limpid way of being,
your good taste, your depth, the way you contain
us all, your flowing fullness. Since that moment,

[7] *Ibid.*

in my mind I can imagine

only you." (2.125)

Each of the words he uses breaks into at least two semantic registers. The river has *acchāccha-bhāvambu*, both a good heart or temperament and a limpid way of being; *sarasatvamu*, good taste and the quality of being liquid;[8] *gambhīrata*, both physical and emotional depth; *sarvaṅkaṣa-prauḍhi*, the pervasiveness of water (*sarva*) as well as the quality of holding or containing everything (also a third register: the fact of being the ultimate touchstone); and, finally, *paripūrṇatvamu*, the fullness of heart or mind and of a flooding river. It is also worth noting that the mountain mostly spends his time imagining (here in the first-person: *bhāvintun*); I have argued elsewhere that in the mental economy of sixteenth-century Telugu, *bhāvanā* is the defining faculty around which all other mental functions are organized.

Kolāhala describes, in such doubled language, his passion, his suffering, and his belief that only the river can heal him. At no point does he relinquish the useful *śleṣa* layering of thought and image. Since I have dealt with this passage at length elsewhere,[9] we can, I think, move on to other aspects of the text and to a few striking verses that exemplify these elements. But I want to repeat: this passage is atypically simple to read. Once Vasu begins to fall in love with the young Girikā, and once he sees her with his own eyes, the poetry becomes dense, deep, turned inward, often scrambled, thus demanding a particular kind of concentrated attention (Śuktimatī has an apt term for this poetic register, *dhvani-garima*, "weightiness of speech").

[8] Śrīnātha famously uses this word is his metapoetic characterization of good poetry: *Bhīma-khaṇḍamu* 1.
[9] Shulman, "Empirical Observation."

What Bhaṭṭumūrti has added to the inherited narrative scaffolding has to do with the post-Kolāhala generation: Vasu's tantalizing vision of his beloved, and hers of him; their inevitable agony of impatient and thwarted desire, *viraha*, akin to Varūthini's dark night of longing in *Manu-caritramu* 3; then, at the very center point of the book, Canto 4 (out of 6), a *sandeśa* or messenger episode, in which Girikā's girlfriend, Mañjuvāṇī, goes to King Vasu's court to deliver a garland from his beloved along with a wild verbal tirade, and to receive in exchange his ring as a gift for her friend (shades of the *Cloud Messenger*, radically reconceived); and finally, the two long cantos describing in overwhelming detail the wedding of the two lovers and the consummation of their passion. One might even go so far as to describe the entire VC, from a compositional standpoint, as a massive *sandeśa-kāvya*, very close in its motifs and probably in its origin to the contemporaneous Tamil genre of *tūtu*, that is then encircled or thickened by the layers of plot preceding and succeeding this moment of delivering the message that encapsulates the book's expressive drive. But no one, I think, reads the VC in order to find out what happens next.

3.

An excursus: whatever else the VC offers us, it most certainly aims at articulating a theory—or perhaps several competing theories—of human perception. Moreover, this thematic focus is fundamental to the wider set of topics and their related poetic devices that we find throughout the work. Why, we might ask, is perception so important? A partial answer is ready at hand from our discussion above. There is something about human language that allows perception to take place at any given moment and that shapes that perceptual process. What we see or hear or touch, like what we think, is informed by language in both its figurative and its sheer

rhythmic or musical modes. We know this theme well from Piṅgaḷi Sūranna's *Kaḷāpūrṇodayamu,* a heavily discursive reorganization, from a generation after Bhaṭṭumūrti, of the implicit assumptions we find at work in the VC. The latter, however, need to be seen in their own setting. Note that by insisting on the linguistic drive intrinsic to all forms of perception, Bhaṭṭumūrti has produced, in effect, a radically new form of naturalistic description, *svabhāvokti*, which I see as the dominant figure or ornament of the entire text. Given the thick encrustation of such descriptions in paronomastic and other compounded figurative moves, this conclusion comes as something of a surprise.

Let us briefly consider what happens, according to the poet, when King Vasu sees Girikā for the first time. Note that this moment of initial seeing— the first impression and its articulation in figurative language—is clearly understood as critical, as was the case with Kolāhala and Śuktimatī.

His two eyes were full of desire.
More than the two eyes, his mind
was full of desire in a very strange way.[10]
Even before his mind, his body was flooded: a wonder.
Even more than that change in body, hunger,
agitated and pressing, rushed in. (2.62)

Please notice the sequence and its retrograde movement: eyes to mind to body to hungry desire. The eyes come first as the verse is stated; but the body precedes the mind, and hunger or wish, *īpsitamu*, takes precedence over the body. Also, the very

[10] *aticitra-vṛttiy agu*…leading into *citramai* at the end of the line.

fullness of vision is clearly a major element in the overflow or excess that the poet is bringing to the surface: something has broken free.

As the king looked at that woman, he wanted never to blink (*animeṣatvambu*).
He succeeded in this by joyfully surrendering, with all his memories,[11]
to her moonlike face. Then he wanted to be king
of the unblinking gods, with a thousand eyes.
That's how kings are. They're unstable, always striving
for a higher station. (2.63)[12]

First lingering at her feet,
then rising to her thighs,
then reaching the zone of her belt,
his glance longed to climb up to the mountain bastion
of her breasts—which would have made him emperor
of the whole world. (2.64)[13]

Eagerly entering the tunnel of her navel,
grasping the ladder of her three folds of skin,
pulling himself up by the ropes that were the hairs
on her tummy, and finally conquering the high fortress

[11] *kānta-kānta-mukha-candrāsevanānanda-vāsanā*, with *vāsanā* glossed here, as elsewhere in the *VC*, as *saṃskāra*. Bhaṭṭumūrti has his own specialized lexicon.
[12] This verse should be read together with Pĕddana's *Manu-caritramu* 2.33, where Varūthini loses her *animeṣa-sthiti*, her divine failure to blink, upon seeing Pravara—another consequential first glimpse.
[13] *cakra-śāsanonnata-sthānamu*: Or, "of her breasts that have displaced the *cakravāka* birds."

of her breasts: that's how the king's vision fulfilled
a soldier's mission. Is there anything that can't be achieved
by one who delights in battle? (1.65)

Both of the last two verses, embodying a physical ascent from feet to breasts, are technically classed as a compounding of the figure *samāsokti* and *śleṣa*: the superimposition of a multiform riddle onto a paronomastic blending of two or more distinct registers (or vice versa). Each verse builds, bit by bit, a military metaphor, making the king's glance or vision, *dṛṣṭi*, a desperate and somewhat aggressive invader of enemy territory. At the same time, the latent register defuses this desperation: the *cakra* over which the king may someday rule is "really" the *cakravāka* bird that conventionally serves as an *upamāna* for breasts. Notice that this somewhat more innocent undertone inherent in the *śleṣa* makes for a mild irony that reveals the playfulness of the figure. Most *VC* verses have this reflexive, ironic tone. It's as if the poet were saying, "Look how far I can push the figure—how outlandish and even surreal I can make (or configure) it." We have already seen this trajectory in the verse on nosiness selected as exemplary by the *cāṭu* tradition.

"Reflexive" is one of our words, one we habitually, and unreflectively, overwork. Let me find a simpler way to say what I mean. The poet immerses us in the king's intense perception; we repeatedly follow his eyes, or his glance, as the latter moves from below to above, lingering over each beautiful body part. Because the glance is driven by intensifying desire and its pleasures, we can speak, as the commentators do, of *cakṣuḥ-prīti*, an overarching category in this passage. But the true subject here is not the object of vision, namely Girikā, but the process of viewing her: the glance is turned back on itself, so what we are seeing is the act of seeing

itself—seeing seen from within. This act turns out to be internally incongruous and highly figurative. It is also, so we have seen, strange, a wonder, something utterly different from everyday perception. The viewer is surprised by his vision, as the reader is by his or hers (our glance is thus also turned back on itself, just like Vasu's). Apart from being unfamiliar, this vision is also defined as a flooding profusion of sensory and cognitive elements—*rasottuṅgamu…īpsitamu*, 2.62—that have the property of agitating and destabilizing the viewer's mind. Intense perception like this is inherently unstable, *cañcala*, like the ambitions of a politician-king. It is also endowed with an urgent sense of reality, as lovers know. We could say that the domain of what counts as real is reorganized in the light of the poet's perception; or, turning this equation around, what we perceive is what is real and must conform to the way our seeing configures it.

Another element worth exploring is the irreducible singularity of the vision. Girikā is beautiful in ways we might expect from having read Sanskrit and Telugu poetry. But the poet keeps telling us how singular she is. The nuts and bolts of linguistic figuration generate a set of shifting vantage points converging on an "object" that is incomparable. Naturalistic description in the *VC* is usually of this sort—thus very different from Kṛṣṇarāya's *svabhāvokti* verses, or the hunting scene in *Manu-caritramu* IV. In the *VC*, the entire visual field is extended, distended, and repeatedly examined along with the space that is occupied by the act of seeing itself. In fact, the latter impacts upon, indeed structures and moulds, whatever is seen. In this poetic world, objectivity is what is achieved through the process of impinging upon and re-conceiving what is there to be seen.

I have so far said almost nothing about the linguistic, or grammatical, counterpart to this emergent model of perception. So let us read a few more verses:

His glance fell upon her face, like a wild garden,
with the fragrant *tilaka* mark on her forehead
(or was he seeing dark *tilaka* trees?),
then it slipped from her cheeks that were glossy
with the fresh honey of her smile
and slipped again, over and over, as if seeking a footing
on smooth moonstones, until, desperate,
it found the vines of her long, thick hair
and held on for dear life. (2.66)

Notice that the direction of movement has shifted: now we are moving, with the king's eye and his overheated mind, from top downwards.

Once more, that royal glance:
it turned her feet into fresh buds,
revealed her thighs, like the stem of the banana plant,
as the site of all happy beginnings,
showed an elephant's back in her buttocks,
caused her non-existent waist to merge with the sky
and her breasts to touch the mountain peaks,
drew the conch, one of the nine treasures, on her neck,
let him find whatever fruit he desired in her sweet lips,
disclosed the shape of the syllable Śrī in her ears,
transformed her lovely face so that it could rule over the moon

(and all other kings), and as for her dark curls—
they were rainclouds, or any other rich
wondrous thing. (2.67)

He was a king all right, even the best of them all,
but he was drowning in dense wonder,
an ocean of driving passion where all
was one, beyond word or mind.[14]
He praised her beauty deep in his heart
that now depended on no
other object. (2.68)

I'd recommend that you keep in memory, at least till the end of this essay, that "ocean of driving passion where all was one, beyond word or mind." Now comes a typical metalinguistic verse (2.69), which demands or perhaps allows only for prose translation:

Her dark curls, which we call *bhramaraka*, have given bees their name (*bhramaraka*) and helped them proliferate. Her face, which menaces the lotus, justifies the title we give the moon: *san-mitruḍu*, "a true friend" (also: friend of the stars). If people call the *dŏṇḍa* fruit *bimba*, that's because it's a pale reflection (*bimba*) of her sweet lips. Her breasts are golden mountains, which is why people affectionately call mountains *gotra*— (their) "relatives." Necklaces are so similar to her arms that they are called

[14] *vāṅ-manasa-gocaretarādvaita-rāga-jaladhi.*

sarulu, "equals." Wheels, being round, are "*cakra*"—that is, an army subservient to her buttocks. Do you know why lotuses are called "younger brothers," *tammulu*? It's because they were born as the younger siblings of her feet. As for flowers, named *prasavamulu*, "pupils"—that's because they learned to be flowers by studying her fingernails.

Top-down movement again, but this time tied to an etymologizing effort worthy of Plato's *Cratylus*: each of the standard objects of comparison, *upamānas*, received its name, and possibly its very existence, from the subject (*upameya*) routinely compared to it. This verse belongs to a wider set of figurative etymologies (see 1.107, beautifully explaining the name *kalpa-vṛkṣa*), some of which reverse the direction of the historical derivations we, like the Sanskrit grammarians, would normally prefer (why are curls called *bhramarakas* if not because they mimic the bees?) The *upameyas* have an ontological priority to their *upamānas*: the former were there first, while the latter live a demoted, derivative existence, entirely dependent on these surpassing—and, again, singular, incomparable—embodiments of beauty. Not only do the *upameyas* precede, and effectively create, the standards of comparison that somehow imitate them; they have also generated names and meaningful synonyms for each *upamāna*, thus spilling over into language itself, at least in its nominal categories. Technically, the master trope is *kāvya-liṅga*, "causal sign," as the commentators note; but because of the superior existential status of Girikā's limbs and organs, we also have an implicit *vyatireka*, "excelling, exceeding," as well as *hetūtprekṣā*, an explanatory flight of fancy. Note, however, that these three figures are not simply compounded in the cumulative way that we see everywhere in *kāvya*. Something much more powerful—a second-order or even third-order reflection on

figuration, indeed, on language itself—is built into this mode of articulating the poet's thought. In fact, once again, the standard form of figurative analysis that the *alaṅkāra-śāstra* offers us is simply not adequate to making sense of such a verse.

The poet is playing with us; he ostensibly gives us a glimpse into the rather wild thoughts racing through Vasu's mind (presumably the king has read quite a lot of Sanskrit and Telugu poetry and sees the world through the creative logic active in the tropes). How seriously are we meant to take this set of interlacing configured or enfigured perceptions? It's not, after all, a Platonic dialogue. But I think the answer to the question is: seriously enough, *because* it is a form of play. We might try to come to terms with the notion that language, and especially language on the lips of a great poet, has no accidental, non-iconic, inorganic relations among its parts. Words mean what they say not by convention-- though the notion of a conventionalized metaphoric usage, *rūḍhi*, is present somewhere in the background to this verse-- but by an integral meaningfulness that inheres in the sonic patterns of the syllables and can be rationally paraphrased. A name or epithet or even synonym carries a non-random and causally effective semantic burden, as Patañjali already tells us in the introduction to the *Mahābhāṣya*. The Telugu poet has taken this principle to its playful, imaginative limit, in effect privileging sound over abstract meaning in so far as sound turns into, or animates, a name.

It is, in fact, doubtful if such a crafted verse contains anything random at all, at any level of analysis. What is more, Girikā is a child of nature, *prakṛti-putrika*; it is thus only natural that nature, a living and rule-bound domain, should have necessary links with the natural potentiality of language, links that emerge from and remain intimately linked to such a person, the subject of the poem and the object of the hero's racing mind.

He can't stop. Or Bhaṭṭumūrti can't stop. The exploration of the king's perceptual overload, studied from many vantage points, repeatedly transfigured, continues for another five verses. Here is one last example.

Darkness had a problem. The girl's face
had defeated his enemy, the moon,
using her eyebrows as its bow, and her glances
as arrows. Her smile stole the ambrosia,
her gleaming cheeks took the radiance,
her forehead the moon's slim slices
of loveliness. And Darkness saw it all.
Still afraid, even more frightened,
he took refuge in her full black hair. (1.70)

4.

To approach a formulation of the poetic effects inherent in any deep reading of this work, we have to look more closely at one or two verses from other parts of the VC. In theory, a principle of metonymic consonance should operate between individual verses and the larger whole. Let's see where this takes us. In the final section of this paper, I will propose a general, if tentative, protocol of reading perhaps relevant to this book as an integrated poetic work.

We saw what happens to Vasu when he sees Girikā directly for the first time. What happens to him, and to his vision, when she shyly retreats behind a curtain of vines? This happens only halfway through the next canto, in verse 3.75:

śatapatrekṣaṇa vĕṃṭan aṃṭina vasu-kṣmāpālakālokamuṃ

pratirodhimpaga cālad' ayyĕ bhavana-prāntoru-kāntāra-vel-

lita-vallī-valayambu tac-cikurapāḷī-nīradāḷī-milan-

nṛti-keḷī-rati[15]*-keki-loka-garud-unmīlan-marul-lolamai*

The eyes of King Vasu followed
after the girl with lotus eyes, almost
touching her, and the twisted vines of the forest
that might have blocked his vision
failed to do so for they were swaying
unsteadily in a gathering breeze
raised by the feathers of peacocks
who started dancing when they caught sight
of what they took to be dark rainclouds
that were, in fact, her long dark hair.

Like so many verses in this text, this one is a marvel of iconic precision on the level of sound as generating meaning: the unsteady swinging of the vines is heard before it is deciphered as meaningful words. In particular, one hears the mellifluous swish of labials, liquids and nasals, including (in lines 3 and 4) dental stops that have been turned into nasals and the liquid *l* because of *sandhi* rules (*milat* > *milan*, and the near-rhyme *unmīlat* > *unmīlan*, also *marut* > *marul*). The reader is invited to recite the verse in Telugu to herself, preferably several times. We could also spend time on the impressive Sanskrit compound that spills over from line 3 and comprises all of line

[15] v.l. *rasa-*

4—a spectacular crescendo. Then there is the inevitable figure, *bhrāntimat*, that suddenly turns up inside this compound and lifts the statement to a more complex cognitive level. The peacocks mistake Girikā's hair for monsoon clouds and start dancing, and the sweep of their tail feathers generates a wind, getting stronger by the second, that moves the vines in such a way that the king still can see something of his hidden beloved. We might paraphrase the progression in his mind, and therefore in the reader's mind, as a strong tension between concealing and revealing, the latter eventually winning out over the former—though the two processes are apparently logically, even existentially, twined together and should also, no doubt, be read as describing what happens inside a good poem. Now ask yourself what it is that is being concealed and what is revealed. I am reluctant to spell it out. In any case, we find ourselves studying a pregnant relation between the natural, partly humanized world outside and the human beings active within that world.

Another way to speak about this verse, precisely paralleling the tension just described, is in terms of overdetermined meaningfulness in relation to semantic (verbal) underdetermination. Interestingly, the sound patterns are, it seems, overdetermined in relation to their rather flat verbal counterparts—the sheer music taking precedence over deciphered meaning. But can a verbal semantics really be impoverished in an urbane, hyper-semanticized text like this? Generally speaking, as we have already seen, the bitextual verses, so prevalent in the VC, are charged with overlapping meanings, perhaps too many of them. They set off a dizzy oscillation in the reader's mind, not unlike what happens when the vines are made to dance by the wind. But it now seems that such verses cannot be understood simply by deciphering their parallel or overlapping semantic tracks. In fact, the very act of decoding runs contrary to the rhythmic and phonoaesthetic patterns that Telugu scholars always

praise in this text. So perhaps we need to posit a certain space that is opened up by two contrary poetic processes, that is, by the dense interaction of layered verbal utterance and the hyposemantic, yet overdetermined, musical sounds. The VC creates and inhabits such a space, and the recurrent surprise the reader feels has to do with something new that happens when she enters this intimate domain, "almost touching," as the poem says, whatever the poem describes.

That newness should interest us, as it did Bhaṭṭumūrti in his putative work on poetics (1.21, where he speaks of *abhinavāndhra-kavita*). We might be able to define it. It supersedes what I am tempted to call the "mad figuration" that the poet brings to verse after verse. He can't do without these compounded figures, but usually they are twisted back onto or into the listener, revealing something of what is going on in her mind. The peacocks make a mistake that triggers a larger misperception happening elsewhere, as if outside the poem. Note the nonchalant, deceptive ease with which *bhrānti* misperception slips into the verse and provides a causal explanation binding together the pieces of the naturalistic tableau: woman, man, vines, peacocks, wind, and the driving vision that connects them.

I want to suggest that we are observing a strange, sometimes surreal form of realism, at once empirical, accessible to formulation, deeply configured, and infused by both the sound patterns and the cumulating meanings that tend to collide in intensified language. I'll come back to this point. To see the difference from earlier poets, with whose work Bhaṭṭumūrti is deeply engaged, it may suffice to listen to a verse from the *Manu-caritramu* such as the following, from a similar moment of deep seeing (Varūthini vis-à-vis Pravara):

She saw him. Stood up

and walked toward him, the music
of her anklets marking the rhythm,
her breasts, her hair, her delicate waist
trembling. Stood by a smooth areca tree
as waves of light from her eyes
flooded the path that he was walking. (2.29)

We have the same richness of mellifluous and iconic sound, but what about a poetic figure or two, preferably threaded together? Maybe the last two lines could be seen as an *utprekṣā*, except for the fact that light from the eye is thought to be a fully objectified physical force quite capable of literally flooding, in waves, whatever is being seen. But it is superfluous to spend time classifying when we have a verse like this, so immediately intelligible, charming, even ravishing to the ear—and so realistic in its own way, also far more direct in this respect than the VC poem we were examining. Of course Pĕddana, and even more strikingly, Kṛṣṇarāya, also give us verses of astonishing complexity, scrambled syntax, and the meta-poetic or meta-linguistic techniques that hypertrophy in the VC. Bhaṭṭumūrti did not invent them. He has, however, done something consistently different and new with these materials, as I think most readers intuitively recognize. Among other elements, the necessary presence of overlapping meanings in the *śliṣṭa* verses suggests, time after time, a new point of departure for both listener and author, who find themselves in an unanticipated and surprisingly elastic space. Overlapping, itself—what Carnatic musicians and musicologists call *vivāda*—is a technique designed to allow for just such a new departure through imaginative projection, where the known and the

unknown meet in unexpected ways.[16]

One more example and I will stop. Girikā has barely survived her extended *viraha* moment. Her girl friends are at a loss to help her. She's severely overheated, indeed on fire, and the standard methods won't work. All this is familiar. But at the culminating moment in this passage, the poet produces a verse (3.180) that, according to Viswanatha Satyanarayana, undoubtedly one of the finest readers of such works, is without parallel in all of Telugu literature.[17] The girl friends are speaking; an English paraphrase, rather than a translation, follows:

mohāpadeśa-tamo-mudritamul' ayina kanu-dammula himāmbul' unupa rādu
śrama-bindu-tārakāgama-khinna-kuca-kokamula candra-n¯mambu talapa rādu
śīryad-āśā-vṛnta-śithilitāsu-latāntam' asiyāḍa vīvanal visara rādu
paṭu-tāpa-puṭa-pāka-parihīṇa-tanu-hemam' iṅka pallava-puṭārc'iḍaga rādu
lalanak' ānaṅga-kīli-kīlā-kalāpa-santatālīḍha-hṛdaya-pātrāntarāḷa-
pūrita-sneha-pūrambu pŏṅġi pŏrala callani paṭīra-salilambu calla rādu

We can't sprinkle her lotus eyes with cool rose-water, since they are closed shut under the force of darkness that is desire.

We can't smear camphor on the *cakravāka* birds that are her breasts, because camphor is also called the moon, and you know the pain that overtakes these birds at night, and anyway they're already miserable because they think the drops of sweat on her overheated body are stars.

Her breath is a fragile flower about to fall from the shattered stem of desire, so we

[16] I thank T. M. Krishna for his insightful analysis of musical *rāga* and Don Handelman for helpful discussions of *vivāda*.
[17] Introduction to the Emesko edition, p. 28.

don't dare cool her, however gently, with our fans.
Her golden body, unrefined in the kiln of sharp suffering, can't be placed on a fiery bed of red buds.
And as for sprinkling drops of sandal water on this woman who is held tight in the flames of desire and boiling inside with love, like oil spilling from a full vessel—
no way!

Why did Viswanatha admire this verse, an *advitīya-padyamu*? What makes it unique? How many *viraha* verses have we read in Telugu, all of them on fire like Girikā herself? Peddana gives a whole canto (3) to a densely exuberant depiction of Varūthini's *viraha*, the helplessness of her girl-friends, her hallucinations and despair. Yet I think Viswanatha is right about the unusual nature of Bhaṭṭumūrti's verse. The armory of refrigerants normally available in such moments are ruled out, one by one, for the most part because each of them has an epithet or name used for something conventionally hostile to the *rūpaka*-metaphors that here characterize different parts of her psycho-physical being. (By the way, Girikā's eyes are presumably wide open, though she sees nothing.) As we have already seen, such phono-semantic coincidences are by definition non-random and hence saturated with consequential power; nature and language have been welded together in play. If we are left with any doubt about this, the next verse but one (3.182) gives us yet another example. In desperation, the girl friends go off to pray to Manmatha, the god of desire, himself: only you, they say, can restore this woman to life (*nělatak' īv' asu-lābhambu niñcumu*). Girikā, by now in a deep faint, overhears this phrase and immediately wakes up because she deciphers the request, unconsciously, bitextually, as *ī vasu-lābhamu*…, that is, "give her the gift of (King) Vasu." Hope returns. Language,

resegmenting, breaks open into its double registers, revealing a natural polysemy extending to figuration, phono-aesthetics, and unintentional paronomasia-- when circumstances are conducive, that is, under crisis conditions.

Poetic convention is first posited, then stretched, folded back into itself, and parodied, just as we saw before. Language contains this potentiality, useful in fields such as Tantric discourse, south Indian classical music, and even grammar, but above all in the experimental *prabandha* genres that come into their own in the sixteenth century. Synaesthesia—visible sound—is the default mode of early-modern poetic (grammatical, dramatic, musical) praxis in the languages of the south.[18] It attracts intertextual quotation as easily as it re-conceives traditional figuration. The verse just cited quotes, along with the Telugu precedents I have mentioned, Bhavabhūti's *Uttara-rāma-carita* 3.1, where the flavor of compassion, *karuṇo rasaḥ*, is like a "compress of healing herbs cooked in a clay oven" (*puṭa-pāka-pratīkāśa*); the same image, *puṭa-pāka*, serves for the kiln in which gold—that is, Girikā's body—could be (but hasn't been) heated and tempered. We could also think of the *puṭa-pāka*, this mode of burying some healing or precious substance in a thick bed of leaves or clay, as yet another concrete exemplification of how a truly great poem is made.

5.

I hope we can now see something of how the Telugu prabandha evolved after the initial burst of creativity under Kṛṣṇarāya (that itself followed upon precedents established by Śrīnātha a century earlier) into the highly self-conscious craftsmanship of the second half of the sixteenth century—both in the discursive and theoretically suggestive works of Sūranna and in Bhaṭṭumūrti's poetry of outlandish excess. I have stressed complexity effects as a generalized point of departure. Much depends on the

[18] See my Muttuswami Diksitar paper, auralization.

relative autonomy of sound and meaning as they come together and diverge, with varying levels of meaningfulness, expressive power, and determinate intention. There is a space somewhere inside, or beyond, both sound and meaning. The poet's task is to create that space and to breathe life into it from within.

This space is intimate, knowable only through the attunement of poet and listener/reader. It involves a repeated examination of acts of perception, a primary topic of concern in the VC. Perception, whether purely musical or primarily verbal, is never without an aspect of concealment. Figuration enables it to take place but fails to exhaust it.

In lieu of inventing a new language to describe this kind of poetry—as it deserves—we can resort one last time to the *śāstra*, which might suggest as a master-trope for the entire VC the figure *samāsokti*, the riddle-like complex which suggests the existence of a latent or displaced subject, the true *upameya*. The very name of this figure points to its integrative aspect, a fundamental feature of the Telugu *prabandha*. *Samāsa* is a collocation or assembly of constituent members whose shared reference is exocentric, that is, located outside the overt statements of the text but continuously, or repeatedly, intimated by them. A highly specific type of suggestiveness is therefore operative throughout. But what exactly is being suggested in a work as massive as the VC? Surprisingly, it is probably not an object or idea that can be paraphrased. Think, again, of an open space filled with sound. This space, however, does contain coherent ideas. Moreover, it expands and contracts in its own autonomous rhythms, concealing, revealing, overlapping, enabling the work of powerful, life-creating sound as it combines with, and then exceeds, the work of decoding verbal meaning. Those rhythms rule the VC from start to finish and might well be said to comprise the primary

purpose of this massive work, seen from inside the mind, or the ear, of the listener.

As we saw, the reader's experience of the VC is, at times, much closer to a process of deciphering or solving a riddle than to the novelesque exempla of the new *prabandha* style from the early half of the sixteenth century. Our text positively forces the listener to ***slow reading***, as is also the case with the *Āmukta-mālyada*. Reading, however, whether fast or slow, is not the same as listening. The VC drives the reader into listening for something that may depart from the act of decoding but then goes well beyond it.

Elsewhere Narayana Rao and I have argued that a novel notion of humanity—of what comprises a human being, and what makes it possible for such a creature to be born and to exist—fascinated the Vijayanagaram poets. Sometimes this idea, which we might also think of as an insoluble problem, is strongly linked to kingship and its travails. Another allied element is the realistic study of the natural world within which human beings move. It is, then, to be expected that the VC also takes up this set of themes, but with an important twist or shift. No longer is it a matter of an imaginative distortion or fantasy, without which nothing human can emerge, as Pĕddana shows us. Such distortion, which we can also term figuration, is now firmly situated within normative human language; and it is language that makes all the rest possible. Nature, autonomous in a particular way, rule-bound, amenable to observation, is nonetheless a linguistic domain before all else. It is also humanized at every moment by the human observer who articulates, or configures, what he or she sees. The human being makes nature come alive by perceiving it and is in turn enlivened by the natural, musical, hyper-linguistic world that envelops all living beings. The

human person, always singular, is thus a reality-generating being, and poetry (of a special type) is the finest tool he or she has to use.

What about the relation of the individual verse to the *samāsa*-whole of such a text? Since reading is slow, we can suppose a long series of non-repeatable moments of seeing and hearing—another definition of reality, or of realism. In this sense, we find a truly surprising affinity between Bhaṭṭumūrti's utterly dense, surreal verses, so intricately configured and interlinked, and the *padam* genre that crystallized with Annamayya in the fifteenth century. In both cases, we are dealing with singularities, patterned but always unique and transient moments heavy with feeling. *Padams* too, once collected and categorized, cumulate and intensify as one reads on. Nonetheless, the *prabandha* reaches toward a more wide-ranging form of integration, informed by narrative progression, each verse in any given passage building on what comes before it in the linear mode of reading. It is, however, possible, even likely, that the VC was never meant to be read in such a linear fashion, unlike works such as the *Manu-caritramu* and the *Pārijātāpaharaṇamu*. Perhaps reciters and listeners could pick and choose.

Who were these reciters and listeners? They must have had time on their hands. They understood music, Sanskrit, and the basic sciences of logic, grammar, and poetics, at the very least. They were familiar with earlier *prabandha* texts, probably not only in Telugu. They lived in small places with small-scale but infinitely pretentious royal courts, and they belonged, in all likelihood, to a proto-urban world of mobile castes for whom graphic literacy may also have mattered along with the oral literacy needed to appreciate good poetry. They must have been aware that something extraordinary had taken

place, and was still unfolding, in Telugu in their own lifetimes. Among them were those who copied the text and wrote the first commentaries on it, still present and indirectly active in the modern print versions. In my view, oral commentary must have been an intrinsic part of public recitation of such works, as is the case in other traditions (such as the recitation of the Tamil *Tiruvāymŏḻi* during the *Adhyayanotsavam* in the far south). Someone has to help the listener make sense of what he or she hears in a text such as this. It is also possible that a work of profound complexity such as the VC was meant for private (but probably not silent) reading at home. In any case, whether it was public or private or some combination of these modes, our aim should be to reconstruct, inductively, something of the way such people would have read this poem in the hope that we, too, in our ignorance, can still follow them a little ways, half a millennium later.

There remains a literary-historical dimension to this problem. The closest affinities to the VC, in conceptual terms, lie, as I have said, with Sūranna, another Rāyalasīma poet. What Sūranna explores in a fast-paced, novelesque narrative Bhaṭṭumūrti puts into practice in densely overloaded verse. Both poets look into the inner recesses of language and find a creative power in sheer sound, which is at critical moments privileged relative to discursive meaning. One might even claim that the VC is, in a certain sense, mostly a non-discursive text. In effect, these two poets re-examine the classical definition of *kāvya* as *śabdārtha-pradhāna*, that is, as enjoying an equivalent or symmetrical predominance of both sound and meaning. The definition holds, but its two components may occasionally—often—be at odds with one another. Symmetry shifts toward syncopation, even dissonance. An evident tension emerges, far more explosive

than the syntactic strain we find (regularly) in the *Āmukta-mālyada* or (less frequently) in any of the other Vijayanagara *prabandhas*.

One way to formulate this tension is to situate it in the southern Andhra matrix of syllabic magic. Sound generates reality; the gifted poet functions as a kind of sorcerer; hearing a poem is enough to change the world, or your life. Like a good early-modern grammarian or a great Carnatic composer, the poet works with sonic patterns, first unraveling or subverting verbal meaning, then reconstituting verbal artifacts that have miraculously solidified, again, out of fluid sound. Seen from this vantage point, a highly aestheticized and self-reflective poetics like that of the VC shatters everyday speech by splitting it into its constituent registers, thus overloading it with meaning, and then proceeds to heal the induced fragmentation by musical, rhythmic, and other phono-aesthetic means. Once again, I stress the tension internal to such poetry: sound and meaning break apart and coalesce repeatedly even within a single verse.

We could also say that the VC embodies three distinct but convergent drives or vectors, all of them active, and interactive, in the literature and sculpture produced in Rāyalasīma in the mid-to-late sixteenth century. There is, first, the overwhelming presence of prestigious models and texts (for our purposes: the erudite intertextual world of elite poetry and poetics, including the new, experimental Telugu *prabandhas*), which supply a vocabulary of form and theme. The great *prabandhas* of the later sixteenth century continue to ride the creative wave that first swept over the northern Deccan, peaking at Vijayanagaram. Then there is the awakening interest in natural science, in rule-bound Nature as a concept, in empirical observation (evidenced in a rich new body of scientific texts in all the southern languages), and in distinctive forms of

realism. Remember, however, that for Bhaṭṭumūrti what is real issues out of language and embraces linguistically informed perception impinging on whatever is perceived. Hence, the astonishing power of this poet's many *svabhāvokti* verses, in which both figuration gone wild and bewitching sonic patterns produce together the surreally real.

Finally, the magical potency of sounds and words colors even the most subtle, and most powerfully analytical, forms of speech, especially poetic speech. *Śleṣa*, as Yigal Bronner has shown, invites analysis by the reader in terms of a cognitive or affective affinity established (by homonymy and resegmentation) between two or more distinct registers of meaning—with great consequences for expressive suggestion and unexpected levels of understanding. Such forms of bitextuality need not assume a principle of non-randomality in the sonic and supra-sonic work of language. But *śleṣa* can also be seen as channeling and revealing the inherent magic of human language which, along with sparking amazement, can also serve pragmatic purposes such as casting a spell, bringing someone or something to life, or healing what was fractured. Accidental effects are less likely in such cases, even, or especially, when we are dealing with poems intensified and elevated to an aesthetic extreme. Why, after all, should the same sounds, arranged in thick overlapping patterns, mean such diverse things unless an internal set of potent linkages pre-exists in the always miraculous domain of speech? *Śleṣa* conjures up those links, rendering the magic accessible, challenging the listener to unravel and re-ravel the coalescent sounds.

In this sense, and in light of these convergent vectors, Sūranna and Bhaṭṭumūrti belong together; they illuminate one another, the former by discursive narrative, the latter by empirical poetic praxis. Bhaṭṭumūrti adumbrates the

Kaḷāpūrṇodayamu world, where a single syllable uttered at the right moment, or a story heard by a proper listener, preferably out of linear sequence, may be enough to alter the nature of visible, or audible, reality. Moreover, such a reality, the poet has told us, is certain to be other than anything we can think or say—"an ocean of driving passion where all is one, beyond word or mind."

He also clearly and repeatedly states this underlying intuition in verses from the *avatārika* opening of the text, including the invocation to Sarasvatī that Narayana Rao and I have discussed elsewhere:

Live the exuberance of language,
first created by the Maker of Speech.
A thousand tongues at the root,
moon and sun above,
God himself within:
a whole world inheres
in what Telugu says.[19]

As we would expect, this verse is rich in overlapping: the Maker of Speech is both Brahmā, husband of Sarasvatī, and the first Telugu poet, Nannayya; the thousand tongues belong to the serpent Ādiśeṣa and to the poet Tikkana (*kuṇḍalīndruṇḍu*, referring in the poet's case to the *kuṇḍali* sacrifice the latter is said to have performed); and God himself, Śrīnāthuṇḍu, is both Lord Viṣṇu and the great poet of that name. There is probably a third level of overlapping in the second element of this series, a hint of Tantric Yoga and the project of awakening the *kuṇḍalinī* at the bottom

[19] VC 1.10, translated by Velcheru Narayana Rao and David Shulman, *Classical Telugu Poetry*, p. 1.

of the *cakra* series (*tan-mahanīya-sthiti-mūlamai*). We could go on unpacking this typically dense configuration of sound and sense; but for the purposes of this essay it should, by now, be enough to restate the world-generating propensity of sounds and words as conjoined in a skilled poet's manner of singing. This is not simply a matter of word-magic or sound-magic, in the default mode of the sorcerer-cum-poets mentioned above. The statement goes far beyond that mode and seeks to explore a highly aestheticized, self-aware understanding of the world, where sound and sense combine not seamlessly but in often incongruous, deliberately stretched and distorted ways. One starts with the overlapping and its immediate cognitive and affective results, in which the procedure of decoding plays a major role—and then the horizon of what is human, or of nature, suddenly splits open.

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what does an aestheticized magical world mean? opening verses, Sarasvati verse.

producing the self, and immortality. constructing the huge edifices of sound, often with superimposed slesa, as the mechanism. Bhattu—caste of oral bards.