

HERMENEUTICS AND NARRATIVE ARCHITECTURE IN THE
MAHĀBHĀRATA

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I. Introduction

Appearing in the *Pauṣyaparvan*, the first narrative book of the *Mahābhārata* (*Mbh*), the story of Uttara is baroque even by the *Mbh*'s standards. In this paper, I demonstrate that Uttara is not just a character within the text, but operates at three distinct levels in the text: as a character in it, as its interpreter, and as someone who transcends the text altogether.¹ Uttara reappears toward the epic's end in the *Āśvamedhikaparvan* as a character within the narrative, but what are we to make of his strange story in the *Pauṣyaparvan*? Appearing in this no-man's land² between the frame-narrative and the core epic, between

¹ Uttara is referred to in the *Mbh* in the following passages: 1. The *Pauṣyaparvan* describes the greatness of Uttara (*māhātmyam uttāṅkasyopavarṇitam*; *Mbh* 1.2.72). 2. Veda has three students: the two *kṣatriyas* Janamejaya and Pauṣya, and Uttara (*Mbh* 1.3.85-86). 3. The story of Uttara appears in the *Pauṣyaparvan* from *Mbh* 1.3.86-1.3.195. 4. A reference to Takṣaka's insult of Uttara (*uttāṅkasya vidhatsva*; 1.46.25), although the story of Uttara is *not* told here. 5. Janamejaya says to please Uttara (*uttāṅkasya priyaṃ*; *Mbh* 1.46.41), he will avenge his father. 6. Story of Uttara from *Mbh* 3.192.8-193.27. Story of Dhundhumāra, where Uttara plays a decisive role (*Mbh* 3.194.1-195.39). 7. Second Uttara narrative (*Mbh* 14.52.1-14.57.56).

² Vyāsa, the epic's composer, is also known as Kṛṣṇa Dvaipāyana, Kṛṣṇa of the island, as he was born on an island in the middle of a river. The *Pauṣyaparvan*, which occupies a no-man's land between the two beginnings is akin to Vyāsa's birth place at the center of two arms of a river: it can be interpreted as the Archimidean point from which the flux of becoming can be understood.

the first beginning and the second,³ in this unique book written in prose, Uttanka is not what he appears to be.⁴

The *Summaries of the Books* say that the *Pauṣyaparvan* glorifies Uttanka's greatness (*pauṣye parvaṇi mähātmyam uttankasyopavarṇitam; Mbh 1.2.73*),⁵ a statement we should take

³ Following the *Pauṣyaparvan*, the narrative resumes with a description of the bard's arrival at the Naimiṣa forest, where he is once again requested to narrate the epic. The two passages (*Mbh 1.1.1* and *1.1.4*) are identical except for three words which the second version adds at the end: *lomaharṣaṇaputra ugrāśravāḥ sūtaḥ pauraṇiko naimiṣāranyaḥ śaunakasya kulapater dvādaśavāṛṣike satre [rṣīn abhyāgatān upatasthe]*. This double beginning to the epic has long puzzled scholars, many of whom have questioned the authenticity of the two beginnings (see Sukthankar 1944, Keith 1937 and Mehta 1973). Sukthankar argues that "Here we have an old conflation of two different beginnings. They were not harmonious in juxtaposition, but each was too good to lose, in the opinion of the ancient redactors. They therefore put both in, making but a poor compromise" (1944: 110). Mehta considers the double beginning to be the product of "two different redactorial agencies" (1973: 549) and argues that the epic thus combines two versions of the same narrative. (All *Mbh* citations are taken from John Smith's electronic version of the Pune Edition 1933-66; all translations are from van Buitenen 1973a except where noted).

⁴ In spite of the predominance of the Bhṛgu in the *Ādiparvan* (a fact noted by both Sukthankar 1936 and Goldman 1977), the *Pauṣyaparvan* conceals Uttanka's Bhṛgu ancestry. Only in the *Āśvamedhikaparvan*, do we learn that this mysterious figure who triggers the main event of the *Mbh*'s outer books is actually a Bhṛgu. The overabundance of references is striking: *bhṛgunandana* (*Mbh 14.52.23, 14.53.09, 14.53.16, 14.53.17, 14.54.27, 14.54.34, 14.57.43*), *bhārgava* (*Mbh 14.52.23, 14.53.13, 14.53.17, 14.54.29, 14.54.30, 14.55.11, 14.55.19*), *bhṛgūdvaḥa* (*Mbh 14.53.08*), *bhṛgukulodvaḥa* (*Mbh 14.57.15*), *bhārgavāyāmrtaṁ* (*Mbh 14.54.30*), *bhārgavasyātitējaṣaḥ* (*Mbh 14.57.49*).

⁵ Cf. Doniger 1986: 27. "The central figure in these episodes, Uttanka reappears later in the Epic at a crucial moment—right before Yudhiṣṭhira's horse sacrifice in Book Fourteen. Moreover, it is to Uttanka that Kṛṣṇa gives a vision (and a sermon) like that one that he gives Arjuna in the *Bhagavad Gītā*. (this one is much longer and is called the *Anugītā* [14.14-51]), and it is Uttanka to whom Kṛṣṇa makes his famous justification and apology for having allowed the war to take place [14.53.11-22]. Even today, the bards who narrate the Epic in South India say that the Uttanka story is the

seriously because, on closer look, the entire book is about Uttanka:⁶ about his teacher Veda and Veda's teacher, the tyrannical Dhaumya Āyoda,⁷ and Veda's classmates, if you will, Aruṇī and Upamanyu.⁸

But the story starts not with this lineage of teachers and their grotesque stories, but with a dog that approaches a sacrifice, Saramā, the ancient hound of the gods from the *Ṛgveda*. Saramā brings the kind of tidings one would expect at the outset of a

beginning of the *Mahābhārata*. The Uttanka stories are not, therefore casual interpolations..." However, Doniger holds that the version in the 14th book is the original version and was later reintroduced into the *Ādīparvan* "precisely because the redactors saw how very relevant it was to the introductory themes" (ibid., 30; Doniger's emphasis). In contrast, this paper takes a new tack: rather than determining which is original and which copy, we should focus on seeing how the two stories work *together*.

⁶ Wilhelm claims that Uttanka's story is the original story in the *Pauṣyaparvan* and that the other stories are later insertions: "All manuscripts, however, write in I, 2, 72, that the Pausya Book contains Utanka's story, other stories are not mentioned. This shows that Utanka's story alone appeared essential for the Pausya Book to the *Parvasamgrahaparvan*. One should thus ask, whether Utanka's story was not the original story in the Pausya Book and whether the stories about Dhaumya Āyoda's students were not inserted later. It is telling, that king Pausya, who gives the book its name, is only present in Utanka's story. Only Utanka's story... is brought into relation with the further events of the *Ādīparvan*" (1965: 25). This is only half the story, as we shall see.

⁷ Dhaumya Āyoda reappears in the in the *Sabhāparvan* and the *Āranyakaparvan* as a person of some consequence: he is the Pāṇḍavas' house-priest and an important advisor and ally. Nothing in the *Pauṣyaparvan* is what it appears: characters from the main narrative frequently step out of the narrative and duplicate themselves on a meta-textual level just as the Kurukṣetra battle is duplicated in the hermeneutic foil of the *sarpasattra*. As the family priest of the Pāṇḍavas, Dhaumya reappears in the *Āranyakaparvan* and in the *Virāṭaparvan* to set the stage for the exile and the incognito episodes.

⁸ The *Pauṣyaparvan* constructs a pedagogical genealogy, where the first generation undergoes initiations and tests (cf. Feller 2004: 219-30). Once this level of pedagogy is successfully completed, the reader can enter into the second level: hermeneutics.

narrative about a family feud that is about to erupt into an apocalyptic war. She announces: an unseen danger (*adr̥ṣtam*) will befall you. It is a warning that has uncanny resonances in the stories of the *Paṣyaparvan* itself: one of Dhaumya's students will go blind and fall into a well and Uttāṅka himself will lose a pair of treasured earrings to a mendicant who is by turns visible and invisible. And finally, Uttāṅka seals the fate of the snakes by instigating Janamejaya's sacrifice.

II. Hermeneutics in the *Paṣyaparvan*

The two figures standing at either end of the *Paṣyaparvan*, Saramā and Uttāṅka are both hermeneuts. Let us see how:

In the *Ṛgveda*,⁹ Saramā is sent as a messenger of the gods (cf. Bloomfield 1896: 425; Hopkins 1908: 505; Srinivasan 1973: 45) to the Paṇis, a group of anti-gods who steal the gods' wealth (divine cattle and horses, i.e. the rays of the sun)¹⁰ every evening. Saramā journeys across the waters of the cosmic

⁹ On the *Ṛgvedic* background to the *Mbh*, see Feller 2004. Feller demonstrates that the *Paṣyaparvan* is especially rich in *Ṛgvedic* resonances, but does not discuss the Saramā myth.

¹⁰ *ṚV* 10.108.7 identifies this wealth as *gó, aśva, vāsu* (7.90 adds *híranya* to the list). However, cows and horses seem to be metaphorically identified with the dawn in this hymn, and the entire myth an aetiological description of the nightly disappearance of the sun and its reappearance with the rays of the dawn. For horses see Macdonell 1897: 31, 47. For cows see Srinivasan 1973: 53-4. Srinivasan notes: "It is well known that terms meaning 'cow' may be used metaphorically for 'rays of light, rays of dawn, dawns.' The Indian lexical material is the earliest source to direct our attention to this figure of speech. Nighaṅṭu 1.5 lists *gāvaḥ* and *usrāḥ* as *raśmi* terms, and, Nirukta 2.6 reiterates this: *sarve 'pi raśmayo gāva ucyante*. In a list of animals associated with different gods in the capacity of *vahanas*, Nighaṅṭu 1.15 mentions *aruṅyo gāva uśasām*." Srinivasan continues: "How do we know that the Paṇis withhold the rays of the Dawn? The frequent use of *usrā* and *usrīyā* in this context is our first indication. Both terms are derivatives of *vas* 'to shine'... In the myth of the Paṇis, *usrīyā*—the cow as 'light' (e.g. 7.57.7; 7.81.2)" (ibid.).

stream, Rasā down to the Paṇis' hiding place¹¹ and warns them to return the cows. They refuse and in the war that follows, Indra breaks open their enclosure¹² and recovers the stolen light. Saramā, who tracks down the Paṇis and aids in the recovery of light, manifests as a savior in the myth.¹³

As Hewitt,¹⁴ Woolsey¹⁵ et al note, Saramā and Hermes share many functions:¹⁶ both are messengers, both are linked to the

¹¹ Although the Paṇis are identified as *dāsyus*, suggesting a netherworld home, the myth does not explicitly support this interpretation. However, scholars (e.g. Srinivasan) have attempted to locate the Paṇis' home "in the western region of a lower world," a description that would also accord with the experience of the sun's passage across the sky and nightly setting in the west.

¹² Indra cuts through the enclosure (*valá*; 10.67.6) where the cows have been hidden, he makes a path to drive out the cows (3.30.10; cf. also 2.14.3). Other passages, however, refer to Bṛhaspati, the Aṅgirasas, the Navagvas and Daśagvas, as well as other priests in this context. On the identity of the Paṇis' foes, see Srinivasan 1973: 49-52.

¹³ Cf. Olson 2007: 251.

¹⁴ "Throughout the Rigveda and Brāhmaṇas the dog and Agni are both regarded as messengers of the gods. As Sāramēya, the Greek Hermes, he is both messenger and watch-dog, and both chronologically and mythologically he and Sarama, the dawn, stand, as Max Müller says, 'on the threshold that separates the gods of light from the gods of darkness'" (1890: 425-6).

¹⁵ "In the Vedic religion a dog was sent by Yama to accompany the soul on its journey after death and two four-eyed dogs guard the road that leads to the abode of Yama. And the dogs of Yama were called Saramēyas, which in Greek form, according to Dr. Kuhn, became Hermeias or Hermes, death's messenger, who was an infernal god, and conducted souls in their exit" (1993: 219).

¹⁶ West notes the connection between the Greek god Pan and the Vedic god Pūṣan as well as Pan and Hermes. Interestingly, the same complex of associations (cattle, conducting the souls into the netherworld, making things visible, guiding) apply to all three gods as well as to Saramā. "Some of Pūṣan's functions parallel those for which Hermes is noted rather than Pan. Hermes too is a good lookout..., a god of roads... and a guardian of flocks and herds. As [*psuchopompos*] he guides the dead on the path that they must go, and similarly Pūṣan conducts the dead to join their ancestors (RV 10. 17. 3-6;

task of (hermeneutic) recovery and both guide the soul on its afterlife journey. Duncker, drawing upon Kuhn, notes that the names Saramā and Hermes are cognate: “Hermes is no doubt derived from ὄρμη; Sanscrit *sar*, to flow; Zd. *har*, to go. The two dogs of Yama, which watch the road of the souls (vol. 3, 50), are called Sarameyas, *i.e.* belonging to Sarama; Kuhn has accordingly identified Sarameyas and Ἑρμείας” (1883: 179).¹⁷

Saramā, who in the RV descends to retrieve the cows, which are light or *dhiḥ*¹⁸ in the Mbh, approaches king Janamejaya and as we saw, warns him that an unseen danger (*adr̥ṣtam*) will befall him.¹⁹ But Janamejaya’s narrative, strictly speaking, exists

AV 18. 2. 53-55, cf. 16. 9. 2)...With his knowledge of ways and byways, Hermes can spirit away cattle or other property; he is the patron god of the sneak-thief. But by the same token he is good at finding things that are hidden, he knows where animals have strayed, and he gets the credit if someone makes a lucky discovery...As [*mastérios*] (Aesch. Supp. 920) he helps people track down their stolen property. Pūṣan for his part is the patron of professional trackers, and can bring lost, hidden, or stolen goods to light [RV 1. 23. 13; 6. 48. 15, 54. 1-2, 8, 10; AV 7. 9. 4], and the same can be said of Hermes. So the Arcadian Pan and the Panhellenic Hermes overlap, and both have many features in common with Pūṣan. Pan was held to be Hermes’ son. It seems likely that originally they were the same” (2004: 282-3). West’s suggestion is especially significant given that Śaunaka, the interlocuter of the Mbh, adopted a Bharadvāja, seers who were especially known for their worship of Pūṣan (cf. Sarmah 1991: 197).

¹⁷ See also Kramrisch 1975: 236. “Although not definitely proved, her name seems to derive from *sar*, to speed.”

¹⁸ For the relationship of the dawn to *dhiḥ* or intellect, see Gonda 1963: 79. Gonda writes: “Now, what does it mean that the Aśvins are accompanied not only by the matutinal gods Agni, Uṣas, Sūrya (cf. e.g. st. 16), and not other divinities but also by the mountains, water, heaven, and earth? The answer seems to be that these brothers of Dawn (1, 180, 2) arrive as the deities of morning light before daybreak (e.g. 3, 58, 4) and disperse darkness (3, 39, 3; 4, 45, 6), so that the mountains become visible (cf. 1, 187, 7 *yad ado ... aḷagan vivasva parvatānām*) and the world seems to re-appear... Thus the *dhiḥ* obviously belongs to those power-concepts which become manifest or re-appear before daybreak.”

¹⁹ ... *tasmād adr̥ṣtam tvām bhayam āgamīṣyatīti //*; Mbh 1.3.8.

outside the core epic narrative: Janamejaya here is an abbreviation, a code if you will, for the entire Vaiśampāyana narrative and indeed for the reader himself. Saramā's warning is meant for the reader because the *Pauṣyaaparvan*, which occurs outside the epic's two beginnings, is ultimately the part of the text closest to the reader. The unseen danger that threatens the reader is that he may lose his cows, his *dhīh*, and the *Mbh* may appear a monstrous text.²⁰

Thanks to divine intervention and a teacher who teaches hermeneutics,²¹ Uttānka understands and links this

²⁰ Cf. Winternitz 1908-22, 1: 272 ("literary unthing"); Oldenberg 1922: 1 ("monstrous chaos").

²¹ See Malbon for a useful overview of historical and contemporary interpretations of hermeneutics: "Richard Palmer, James Robinson, and others open their discussions of hermeneutics with considerations of the various meanings of the Greek verb *hermeneuein* and its noun form *hermeneia* (Palmer: 12-32; Robinson:1-7; Achtemeier: 13-14). The words share a linguistic root with the name of the Greek god Hermes, the messenger of the gods and the inventor or discoverer of language and writing. The three basic meanings of *hermeneuein* are: (1) to speak (or express or say), (2) to explain (or interpret or comment upon), (3) to translate. As Palmer notes, 'all three meanings may be expressed by the English verb 'to interpret,' yet each constitutes an independent and significant meaning of interpretation' (13-14). Since the ancient Greeks, each of these three meanings has found its applications by various hermeneuticists. Hermeneutics as speaking has included not only the oral recitation of Homer's epics but also the proclamation demanded by the new hermeneutic. Hermeneutics as commentary has a long and varied history in biblical exegesis, from third-century Alexandrian allegorization to nineteenth-century historical-critical method. Hermeneutics as translation may be seen not only literally in traditional philology but also metaphorically in Bultmannian 'demythologizing.' Yet one may note, with Palmer, that in all three cases 'the foundational 'Hermes process' is at work: in all three cases, something foreign, strange, separated in time, space, or experience is made familiar, present, comprehensible; something requiring representation, explanation, or translation is somehow 'brought to understanding' is 'interpreted' (14)" (1983: 212). It is in this latter sense of "bringing something to

understanding to sacrifice by going to Janamejaya and inciting him to sacrifice. Let us see how Uttānka represents the task of hermeneutic understanding.

III. Uttānka's Education in Hermeneutics

Uttānka's teacher, Veda one day calls him and says to him: "... whenever anything is lacking in our house, I wish you to make up for it."²² While he is away, Veda's wife has her period and Uttānka is asked to inseminate her. But unlike Vyāsa, who engenders the main characters in the text, Uttānka refuses to inseminate his teacher's wife.²³ Somewhere between blind

understanding," "interpretation," that the term hermeneutics is used in this paper.

²² ...yat kiṁ cid asmadgrhe parihīyate tad icchāmy aham aparihīṇaṁ bhavatā kriyamāṇam iti //; Mbh 1.3.86.

²³ Uttānka reasons that Veda did not intend him to go so far in providing for what is missing. He thus *interprets* the Veda's words, in contrast to the first generation of students who blindly follow their teacher's instructions. Uttānka's refusal to inseminate Veda's wife is especially significant when seen against the background of Vyāsa's response. Satyavatī, the queen-mother, asks Vyāsa to beget sons upon Vicitravīrya's wives in order to ensure the genealogical line's survival. Vyāsa complies, siring Pāṇḍu and Dhṛtarāṣṭra. The epic's creator is thus also the progenitor of its principal characters: the Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas. He creatively inseminates his narrative at several levels and triggers the main events related in the text. Uttānka, in contrast, maintains his distance from the narrative: he appears only at the epic's end, following the death of its principal characters (excepting Janamejaya). He nevertheless triggers action on another level by instigating the snake sacrifice. Whereas Vyāsa is the author-father, Uttānka represents the interpreter-student, appearing after the events related in the text have come to a close to interpret their meaning. In contrast to Vyāsa, Uttānka's function is not to engender action at the textual level, to inseminate the narrative, but to engender action at the meta-textual, i.e. hermeneutic level through a *retrieval*.

obedience and complete randomness, lies the delicate task of interpreting a text.²⁴

Veda returns home and declares Uttāṅka's education complete: "I grant you leave to go. You will find complete success."²⁵

But Uttāṅka refuses to go without presenting him his teacher's fee (*gurvartham*; *Mbh* 1.3.97). Veda sends him to his wife, who asks for Pauṣya's wife's earrings.²⁶ On his way, he encounters a man on an oversized bull. The man tells him to eat the bull's dung. Uttāṅka hesitates, but the man says: "Eat it, Uttāṅka, do

²⁴ Ugraśravas and Uttāṅka thus respectively embody the double function of redactional activity: 1. Preserving and transmitting the text. 2. Explaining the text. The *Mbh* itself notes these dual functions: "Having expiated upon this great erudition, the seer thereupon made a summary thereof; for the wise wish to retain it for this world, in its parts and its entirety. There are brahmins who learn *The Bhārata* from Manu onward, others again from the tale of *The Book of Āstika* onward, others again from *The Tale of Uparicara* onward. Learned men elucidate the complex erudition in this Grand Collection; there are those who are experienced in explaining it, others in retaining it" (*vistīryaitan mahaj jñānam ṛṣiḥ saṁkṣepam abravīt / iṣṭam hi viduṣāṁ loke samāsavayāsadhāraṇam // manvādi bhāratam ke cid āstikādi tathāpare / tathoparicarādy anye viprāḥ samyag adhīyate // vividham saṁhitājñānam dīpayanti maṇiṣiṇaḥ / vyākhyātuṁ kuśalāḥ ke cid grantham dhārayitūṁ pare //*; *Mbh* 1.1.49-51).

²⁵ *tad anujāne bhavantam / sarvām eva siddhim prāpsyasi //*; *Mbh* 1.3.92.

²⁶ The link between earrings and hearing (*śravanam*) is suggestive. Further, we may recall that the primary Indian characterization of scriptural or authoritative texts is *śruti* (lit. "that which is heard"), suggesting that Uttāṅka's quest is symbolic of the recovery of sacred meaning or insight. There is another aspect to the story that strengthens the association of earrings with *śruti*. Staal notes that the "Vedic text, the Aitareya Āraṇyaka (5.5.3) states that a pupil should not recite the Veda after he has eaten meat, seen blood or a dead boy, had intercourse or engaged in writing" (1979: 122-3). In the Uttāṅka narrative, Uttāṅka is unable to see Pauṣya's wife because he has eaten food previously and is therefore in a state of pollution. Besides relating the earrings to *śruti*, there are other alternatives: one is to look at the story of Karṇa's earrings, but that is another story.

not hesitate. Your teacher himself has eaten it in his time.”²⁷ Uttānka complies and continues his journey.

He finds Pauṣya and asks for the earrings. The king sends him to his wife who gives him the earrings but warns him that Takāśaka, the king of snakes, may try to steal them.

As Uttānka returns home, the snake indeed steals the earrings. Uttānka pursues him into the netherworld,²⁸ where he sees marvelous sights: two women weaving black and white threads into a cloth, a wheel being turned around by six boys and a handsome man. Uttānka praises them with verses and the man grants him a favor. Uttānka replies: “The Snakes shall be in my power!”²⁹ The man tells him to blow into the horse’s anus (*etam aśvam apāne dhamasveti*; *Mbh* 1.3.56). Uttānka does so and smoke rushes out of its orifices. Fearful of fire, Takāśaka returns the earrings to Uttānka.

Uttānka returns to his teacher and narrates the story. He then says: “I wish to be enlightened by you, sir: what is the significance of this?”³⁰ Veda explains the symbolism to Uttānka:

²⁷ *bhakṣayasvottānka / mā vicāraya / upādhyāyenāpi te bhakṣitaṃ pūrvam iti*; *Mbh* 1.3.104.

²⁸ Snakes in the *Mbh* are a symbol of hermeneutics: 1. The image of a snake looping back on itself provides the most impressive description of the text’s self-reflexive character. 2. The snake cycle in the *Mbh* functions as a hermeneutic that overlays the core narrative. Understanding the fate of the snakes lets us understand the fate of the Kuru dynasty. The snake genocide is a foil for the upcoming human genocide that reveals its underlying logic: although most of the snakes are destroyed, *a remnant escapes*: Takāśaka, who is the sacrificial remainder. 3. The snake realm is the realm of hermeneutics where the inner workings of the universe (fate, time, space and destiny) become visible. This realm requires interpretation in order for its real meaning to become visible. Interestingly, Nāgarjuna, a Buddhist from South India born into a *brahmin* family, is said to have descended into the snake netherworld to obtain *The Hundred Thousand Verse Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra* following which he acquired the name *Nāgarjuna*. The repetition of a descent into the snake realm in pursuit of wisdom is worth noting, as is the fact that the *Mbh* is also traditionally said to be comprised of 100,000 verses.

²⁹ *nāgā me vaśam iṅyur iti* //; *Mbh* 1.3.155.

³⁰ *tad icchāmi bhavatopadiṣṭaṃ kiṃ tad iti* //; *Mbh* 1.3.171.

the two women are *dhātā* and *vidhātā*, the black and white threads night and day. The wheel with twelve spokes is the day, the six boys the seasons, the wheel itself the year. The man is Parjanya (the rain-god) and the horse Agni (the fire-god). The man on the bull was Indra, the bull itself Airāvata, the king of snakes (*nāgarājah*; *Mbh* 1.3.174). Uttaraṅka was able to survive the netherworld because the dung he ate was *amṛta* (the nectar of immortality). Following this education in the art of interpretation, the teacher then gives him leave to go. Uttaraṅka then goes to Hāstinapura, where he triggers the snake sacrifice.

Uttaraṅka learns the art of interpretation from Veda and interprets the *Mbh* for us, while his interpretation simultaneously triggers its beginning. His encounter with Takṣaka triggers the snake sacrifice, the event that constitutes the point of entry into the *Mbh*'s inner narrative.

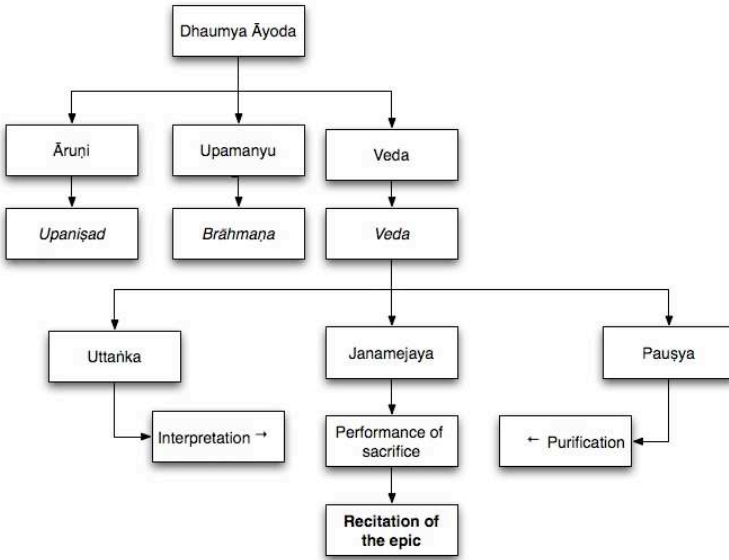


Diagram 1: *Uttānka's genealogy and the enframing of the Mbh's core-narrative*

Let us see how the *Pauṣya* narrative, beginning with Saramā and ending with Uttānka, defines a hermeneutic program. Three 'sacrifices' structure the *Pauṣyaparvan*: Janamejaya's sacrificial session at Kurukṣetra, his conquest of Takṣaśilā, and the snake sacrifice. These three form a series: at the conclusion of every sacrifice, a person appears and interprets the sacrifice, while triggering the next one. Saramā appears at the end of Janamejaya's first sacrifice and warns him that he has not overcome his mortality. Her warning sends him in search of fame and conquest through conquering Takṣaśilā, the next 'sacrifice' in the series. While historical fame grants a limited form of immortality, it cannot lead to true salvation. For this reason, following Janamejaya's conquest of Takṣaśilā, a further interpreter appears. Uttānka criticizes the king for misunderstanding Saramā's warning and urges him to perform

the third sacrifice. Janamejaya finally gains salvation through the third sacrifice with the appearance of Āstika, the savior.³¹ Saramā's warning of an unseen danger (*adrṣtam*), i.e. death, sets in motion a series of events that results in the appearance of being.³²

IV. The Narrative Architecture of the *Ādiparvan*

³¹ As Janamejaya's snake sacrifice unfolds, Āstika arrives at the sacrificial grounds and praises the king. The king offers him a boon and the *brahmin* asks that the sacrifice be stopped. The king implores him to ask for any other boon, but not to demand the sacrifice's interruption. Takṣaka, the intended victim of the sacrifice, has begun his downward fall out of the sky into the sacrificial fire, when Āstika says to him three times "Stay! Stay!" (*tiṣṭha tiṣṭheti*; *Mbh* 1.53.5) and arrests the frightened snake's fall. The king then assents to Āstika's wish and ends the sacrifice.

³² The name Āstika means "he who is possessed of the quality 'there is'." The story Āstika's birth recounted in the fifth Minor Book of the *Mbh* bears important clues to his significance in the narrative. The sage Jaratkāru wanders the earth performing austerities. He is unwilling to marry, until his ancestors request him to do so for the sake of the line. Jaratkāru agrees on condition his wife also bears the same name. The snake, Vāsuki then presents his sister, Jaratkāru, to the sage. Long ago, Kadrū, the mother of the snakes, cursed them to perish in Janamejaya's sacrificial fire. The creator, Brahmā, promised the snakes that a remnant of the snakes would be saved and that Āstika, the son of the sage, Jaratkāru, and a namesake virgin, would bring about their salvation. One evening, as the sage is sleeping with his head on his wife's lap, it turns dusk. Worried that her husband will miss the evening ritual, she awakens him. Incensed, the sage threatens to forsake her at once. The tortured woman begs him not to leave as she had been given to him in marriage in the hope that she would beget a son from him who would save the snakes from destruction. Then the sage says, "There is [*asty*] a child in you, fortunate woman..." (*asty eṣa garbhaḥ subhage tava*; *Mbh* 1.43.38). In time, the woman gives birth to a son. As his father had said of him "There is" [*astīty*], while he was still in his mother's womb, the child became known as "Āstika" [*nāmāstīketi*] (*astīty uktvā gato yasmāt pitā garbhasṭham eva tam / vanam tasmād idam tasya nāmāstīketi viśrutam //*; *Mbh* 1.44.20).

Let us digress and look at the problem of the *Ādiparvan*'s double beginning. Whereas most scholars have argued that the two beginnings cannot both be original (and thus explained them as an historical accident),³³ a closer examination reveals a more complex picture. The *Mbh* contains two *equally* original beginnings:

1. A cosmological beginning in *The List of Contents*,³⁴ and
2. A genealogical beginning in the *Paulomaparvan*.³⁵

Between the two beginnings, however, the redactor created a third 'beginning': a hermeneutic rather than genealogical or cosmological beginning. Thus, by embedding Vyāsa's original narrative in the first level of sacrifice—Janamejaya's *sarpasattra*—and then embedding this sacrifice in a further sacrifice, Śaunaka's *dvādaśavā* sacrifice, he duplicated the outermost level of the text, thereby creating a forked structure in which he then placed the textual apparatus: contents, summary and hermeneutic and pedagogical tools. We thus have the following structure to the *Ādiparvan*:

³³ Cf. Keith 1937: 768. "It is clear that the two beginnings of the Parvan cannot have been original, but it is equally clear from their presence in both the Northern and the Southern recensions that their conflation is anterior to our text tradition."

³⁴ "When all this was without light and unilluminated and on all its sides covered by darkness, there arose one large egg, the inexhaustible seed of all creatures. They say that this was the great divine cause, in the beginning of the eon and that on which it rests is revealed as the True light, the everlasting Brahman" (*niṣprabhe 'smin nirāloke sarvatas tamasāvṛte / bṛhad aṇḍam abhūd ekaṁ prajānām bījam akṣayam // yugasyāḍau nimittam tan mahad divyam pracakṣate / yasmimś tac chrūyate satyam jyotir brahma sanātanam //; Mbh 1.1.27-28*).

³⁵ "Bṛgu begat a child whom he loved very much, a son by the name of Cyavana Bhārgava; and heir to Cyavana again was the law-abiding Pramati. Pramati in turn had a son by Ghṛtācī, named Ruru, and to this Ruru, your own great-grandfather, a son was born by Pramadvarā—Śunaka, perfect in the Veda and abiding by the Law..." (*bṛgoḥ sudayitaḥ putraś cyavano nāma bhārgavaḥ / cyavanasyāpi dāyādaḥ pramatir nāma dhārmikaḥ / pramater apy abhūt putro ghṛtācyām rurur ity uta // rurur api suto jajñe śunako vedapāragah / pramadvarāyām dharmātmā tava pūrvapitāmahāt //; Mbh 1.4.7-8*).

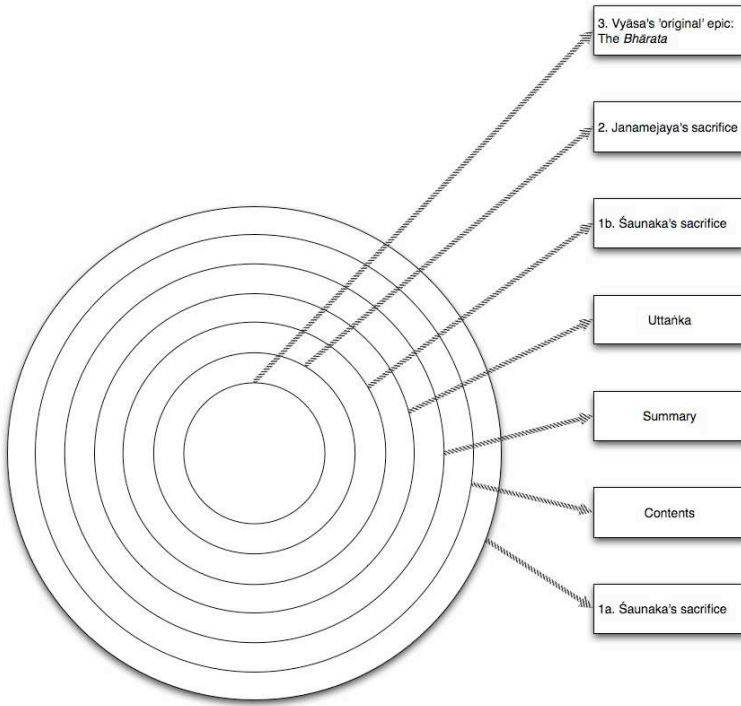


Diagram 2: *The arrangement of the Mbh: The Ādiparvan showing how Vyāsa’s “authoritative narrative” is embedded in two sacrifices representing two narrations, one embedded within the other. The outermost level is duplicated to embed the textual apparatus: contents, summary and hermeneutic tools.*

Why does the Mbh deploy such a sophisticated narrative architecture? To understand this, we have to understand the basic problem it responds to: if becoming (*saṃsāra*)³⁶ is a closed

³⁶ The epic itself does not use any to one term for “becoming,” but uses a range of terms such as *bhavābhavau* (becoming, literally “being—non-being”), *vṛtti* (disturbance), *saṃsāra* (eternal recurrence), *jayājayau* (victory and defeat), *lābhālābhau* (gain and loss) and *sukhaduḥkha* (pleasure and pain). I translate these with the term “becoming.” The epic also often uses the word *kāla* (time) in place of *bhavābhavau*; in these cases as well, I translate

loop with neither absolute origins nor ends, where do we begin? On a textual level, how do we enter the hermeneutic circle? We are presented with a textual problem as well as a cosmological problem: where to begin? The solution is in both cases the same: begin many times. Yet, how are we to understand all these beginnings? What enables us to understand a beginning if there is no absolute origin? The *Mbh* presents two solutions:

1. The beginning can be understood in terms of a previous beginning, or

2. It can be understood metaphorically.

In the epic, the cosmological and genealogical beginnings defer to the hermeneutic beginning in the *Pauṣyaparvan*, just as the *Pauṣyaparvan* itself defers to a previous beginning in *The List of Contents*.

But unhappy consequences can result for the reader lost in the textuality of the text and bereft of a philosophical hermeneutics. He could miss the point of the text, stated in the *Ādīparvan* where Saṃajaya chastises a lamenting king³⁷ and where the bard describes the glories of Kṛṣṇa Vāsudeva.³⁸ To

with “becoming.” For references to *bhavābhavau*, see: 3.148.9 (in relation to the *yugas* and the *puruṣārthas*), 3.279.10 (in relation to pleasure and pain), 5.36.45 and 12.26.31 (on self-control and salvation), 5.39.1 (in relation to finitude and fate); see also verses 12.137.51, 12.221.94 and 12.233.11.

³⁷ “All this is rooted in Time, to be or not to be, to be happy or not to be happy. Time ripens the creatures. Time rots them. And Time again puts out the Time that burns down the creatures. Time shrinks them and expands them again. Time walks in all creatures, unaverted, impartial. Whatever beings there were in the past will be in the future, whatever are busy now, they are all the creatures of Time - know it and do not lose your sense” (*kālamūlam idaṃ sarvaṃ bhāvābhāvau sukhāsukhe // kālaḥ pacati bhūtāni kālaḥ saṃharati prajāḥ / nirdahantaṃ prajāḥ kālaṃ kālaḥ śamayate punaḥ // kālo vikurute bhāvān sarvāṃl loke śubhāśubhān / kālaḥ saṃkṣipate sarvāḥ prajāḥ visṛjate punaḥ / kālaḥ sarveṣu bhūteṣu caraty avidhṛtaḥ samaḥ // atītānāgatā bhāvā ye ca vartanti sāmpratamātān / kālanirmitān buddhvā na saṃjñān hātum arhasi //; Mbh 1.1.187-190).*

³⁸ The bard’s description of the work of time is immediately followed by a eulogy of Kṛṣṇa Vāsudeva, who represents absolute being or *brahman*. “In this book, Kṛṣṇa Dvaipāyana has uttered the holy Upaniṣad... And Kṛṣṇa

such readers, the text is a monster and in the thrall of this monstrosity, they meet up with their death without hope of salvation through being. The unseen danger arrives as a monster, a cannibal with gore on his beard.

But those who follow Uttānka and are sensitive to the *Mbh*'s hermeneutics understand that the cannibal is becoming and that the text shows us a way to exit becoming. Let us see how Uttānka leads the reader out of the text.

V. Uttānka in the *Āśvamedhikaparvan*

At the end of the great Kurukṣetra battle, when eighteen armies have annihilated themselves, Uttānka suddenly reappears (*Mbh* 14.52.7). Although in the *Pauṣyaparvan* he callously caused innumerable snakes to be burnt alive in a sacrifice, this great ṛṣi is overcome at hearing of the destruction of the Kuru race. Enraged, he threatens to curse Kṛṣṇa Vāsudeva for not preventing the war. Kṛṣṇa then once again manifests his divine cosmic form (*viśvarūpā*) and placates the sage.

Janamejaya wants to know what austerities the sage has performed that he could have had the power to curse Kṛṣṇa himself, and Vaiśampayana replies by launching into the tale of Uttānka's pedagogy.

Unlike the first, metaphorical narrative (in the *Pauṣyaparvan*),³⁹ Vaiśampāyana presents Uttānka's biographical

Vāsudeva is glorified here, the self-eternal Blessed Lord—for He is the truth and the right and the pure and the holy. He is the eternal Brahman—the supreme Surety, the Everlasting light of whose divine exploits the wise tell tales. From Him begins existence that is not yet and the non-existent that becomes. His is the continuity and the activity. His is birth, death and rebirth” (*atropaniśadam puṇyāṁ kṛṣṇadvaipāyano 'bravīt /... bhagavān vāsudevaś ca kīryate 'tra sanātanaḥ / sa hi satyam ṛtaṁ caiva pavitraṁ puṇyam eva ca // śāśvataṁ brahma paramaṁ dhruvaṁ jyotiḥ sanātanam / yasya divyāni karmāṇi kathayanti maṇiṣiṇaḥ // asat sat sad asac caiva yasmād devāt pravartate / saṁtatiś ca pravṛttiś ca janma mṛtyuḥ punarbhavaḥ //; Mbh 1.1.191, 1.1.193-195*).

³⁹ Wilhelm notes that the hymn to the snakes and the symbols of the loom and wheel of time are missing in the later version. His assertion that these

narrative. Utaṅka originally appears within the narrative, i.e. as a character in it. Through his pedagogy, he then gains a knowledge of becoming and thus masters the text, before completing the circle to reappear at the text's head as its interpreter in the *Pauṣyaparvan*. By having Utaṅka circle around to reappear at its head as its interpreter, the *Mbh* establishes itself as a self-contained, self-encircling text.⁴⁰ Utaṅka is thus the link that forges the end of the narrative with its beginning. He completes Vyāsa's poem by transforming it⁴¹ and personifies the enormous hermeneutic and philosophical challenges faced by the redactor.

Utaṅka struggles to bring together the narrative with the interpretive apparatus through his two biographies. He brings the text full-circle at a personal/literary level by connecting its end to its beginning, but the hermeneutic and narrative levels still remain disjointed. In the brilliant motif of the snake sacrifice these two levels are then fused together at last through

were seen as unnecessary extraneous elements that retarded the narrative is untenable for three reasons: 1. The first version is, in fact, the later one, both chronologically and narratologically; 2. These are central elements of the later version; and, 3. They are absent from the *earlier* version, because the earlier narrative is a biographical narrative that is followed by a *later* hermeneutic narrative. Utaṅka's pedagogy proceeds in stages: in the first narrative, he is not as yet prepared to interpret these symbols.

⁴⁰ Minkowski notes as well, that the *Mbh* avoids the problem of infinite regression by positing a final level of meaning. "Returning to the frame story, it is now possible to see the rationale behind the choice of its setting. But it is also true that in an ideological system that includes an absolute transcendent reality, nothing can regress indefinitely. It must always end up striking bottom. It appears to me that the attribution of the story to Vyāsa, and setting the story in the Naimiṣa forest, serve the purpose of fixing the text at a level beyond which, as the texts say, one cannot go further" (1989: 420).

⁴¹ Utaṅka transforms Vyāsa's poem through putting together what Vyāsa, whose name literally means "the divider," had separated. Vyāsa, as we already saw, initiates action at two levels: creative and procreative. But whereas Vyāsa creates and fathers the epic's principal characters, Utaṅka brings together the interpretive and narrative levels.

embedding the main narrative (Vaiśampāyana’s narration to Janamejaya) in the hermeneutic level (Janamejaya’s snake sacrifice), narrated to Śaunaka in the Naimiṣa setting.

VI. Uttāṅka’s Education in Becoming

I provide an overview of Uttāṅka’s two biographies in the table below:

	<i>Pauṣyaparvan</i>	<i>Āśvamedhikaparvan</i>
Genealogy	No Bhṛgu reference	Multiple explicit references
Biography	Brief, barely mentioned (1.3.86)	Lengthy and over a span of time (14.55.2-19)
Teacher’s name	Veda (1.3.85)	Gautama (14.55.4)
Wife’s name	Not mentioned, although he is asked to inseminate her (1.3.89)	Ahalya (14.55.27)
Sent to	Pauṣya (1.3.100)	Saudāsa (14.55.29)
Wife’s name	Not mentioned, she is initially invisible	Madayantī (14.56.19)
Earrings	Not described	Described in detail (14.56.22-28)
Danger	Takṣaka covets earrings (1.3.119)	Coveted by Nāgas, Yakṣas, celestials, and Rākṣasas (14.56.23-24)
Pedagogy ⁴²	-	Is warned that if he returns, he will surely meet with death (14.57.15)
Earrings are	Not protected (1.3.136)	Uttāṅka takes precautions (14.57.18)

⁴² Note that the *Pauṣyaparvan* has no pedagogy, but an exercise in interpretation, while the situation in the *Āśvamedhikaparvan* is exactly the opposite.

Stolen by	Takṣaka (1.3.137)	Snake of Airāvata's line (14.57.22)
Uttaṅka	Follows easily (1.3.138)	Aided by Indra, digs his way (14.57.31-32)
Praise	Utters verses (1.3.139-146)	Does not utter verses
Sees	Loom and wheel (1.3.147-148)	Horse (14.57.38); horse explains that it is fire (14.57.42)
Interpretation	Asks teacher, who explains (1.3.166-171)	-

Let us note a few important differences:

1. In the *Pauṣyaparvan*, Uttāṅka is introduced abruptly and we are given no biographical details. Surprisingly, the book does not refer to this Bhṛgu ancestry, although the *Ādīparvan* is otherwise rich with references to the Bhṛgu.

2. The *Āśvamedhikaparvan* contains a long description of Uttāṅka's period of tutelage (*Mbh* 14.55.2-14.55.19). Uttāṅka grows infirm (*jarā*; *Mbh* 14.55.7) with time and one day, seeing a lock of his silver hair, cries out aloud (*rurodārtasvaram*; *Mbh* 14.55.11).

3. Uttāṅka's teacher in the *Pauṣyaparvan* is called Veda. The name suggests that he is not a real person, but a metaphorical teacher.

4. But most importantly, Uttāṅka receives two different types of education in the two narratives: an education in becoming in the *Āśvamedhikaparvan* and an education in hermeneutics in the *Pauṣyaparvan*.

Pleased with Uttāṅka's devotion, Gautama gives him permission to go, but Uttāṅka asks what he should give him as teacher's fee (*gurvartham*; *Mbh* 14.55.20). Gautama's wife, Ahalya asks for the earrings worn by Saudāsa's wife and Uttāṅka leaves in search of them. But though Ahalya is unaware of it, Saudāsa is a cannibal (*puruṣādāmi*; *Mbh* 14.55.31). Arriving there, Uttāṅka sees a horrific sight: the king presents a fearful aspect

(*ghoradarśanam*), his long bearded is smeared with blood (*dirghaśmaśrudharam*; *Mbh* 14.56.1). Rising up like a second Yama (*yamopamaḥ*; *Mbh* 14.56.2), the king says that the sage has come to him just in time for his meal. Uttanka says that as he has come there on his teacher's behalf, he may not be injured, but agrees to return (*punar eṣyāmi te vaśam*; *Mbh* 14.56.6, 9) once he has fulfilled his task.

Saudāsa sends him to his queen to ask for the earrings, but she demands a sign (*abhijñānam*; *Mbh* 14.56.21; lit. a “recollection or remembrance,” “knowledge”) from her husband. Madayantī then glorifies the earrings, which are desired by celestials, Yakṣas, and serpents and which produce radiance (*rukmaṁ*; *Mbh* 14.56.25) night and day. They free their wearer from hunger, thirst, fear, and from the fear of poison, fire or any other kind of danger.

Uttanka returns to the king, who tells him to say to his wife: “Neither this situation [*gatiḥ*] is conducive to my welfare [*kṣemya*] nor is there another way, having understood my meaning, hand over the bejewelled earrings”⁴³ (my translation). On hearing these words, the queen gives the sage her earrings. Uttanka asks the king what these words meant and the king replies that, possessed of Madayantī (*madayantīśahāyavān*) he

⁴³ *na caivaiṣā gatiḥ kṣemyā na cānyā vidyate gatiḥ / etan me matam ājñāya prayaccha maṇikuṇḍale //; Mbh* 14.57.2.

In Nīlakaṇṭha's gloss, the present state (*gatiḥ*) refers to Saudāsa's condition as a cannibal (*rakṣoyonirūpā*), while *na cānyā vidyate gatiḥ* is interpreted as referring to *muktirūpā* (“*eṣā rakṣoyonirūpā anyā ito muktirūpā ato mama itogatermuktyartha prayaccha dehi maṇimaye kuṇḍale*” (1979: 87)). Knowing the king's desire for *mukti*, and the impossibility of gaining it without giving up the earrings, Madayantī should hand them over to the *brahmin*. Indeed, at least textually, the king is liberated: the cannibal becomes a “nourisher” (Pauṣya) in the *Pauṣyaparvan*! In a sense, by yielding the earrings, Saudāsa sets in train a series of events culminating with the *sarpasattra*, thus enabling Vaiśampāyana's narration of the epic. Saudāsa's salvation corresponds implicitly to the narration of the epic, yet another way in which the text self-consciously presents itself as conducive to *mukti* (cf. also *Mbh* 1.1.209).

does not see (*na paśyāmi*) any refuge (*gatim*; *Mbh* 14.57.6). Saudāsa then asks Uttānka to fulfill his promise.

Uttānka asks the king whether it is proper for him, having obtained his goal (*avāptārtho 'ham*), to return to him or not (*āgantum... na veti vā*) given that he is a cannibal (*puruṣādakaḥ*; *Mbh* 14.57.13). Saudāsa replies that he should never return (*nāgantavyam*; *Mbh* 14.57.14) to him. Doing so, he will obtain what is good (*śreyo*), for if he returns, he will undoubtedly meet his death (*mṛtyur asaṁśayam*; *Mbh* 14.57.15). Uttānka then bids the king farewell and continues on his way home.

I will skip the description of the theft of the earrings and Uttānka's subsequent recovery of them, which are described in Wilhelm 1965 and Feller 2004 and which roughly duplicate the incidents in the *Paṣyaparvan*. The main point of interest here is that Uttānka does not ask his teacher for an explanation of the symbolism of the snake realm and nor is he given one: there is no education in hermeneutics here.

Let us instead return to the Saudāsa narrative. What do Saudāsa's mysterious words mean?

Following his first brush with the horror of becoming (he grows infirm), Uttānka now gains a deeper understanding of the horrific nature of becoming: becoming is like Yama (*yamopamaḥ*; *Mbh* 14.56.2), it feeds on itself (*puruṣādakaḥ*; *Mbh* 14.57.13) and it brings certain destruction (*mṛtyur asaṁśayam*; *Mbh* 14.57.15) to those who return to it.⁴⁴ Uttānka's education at the biographical

⁴⁴ The link between becoming and cannibalism reaches its apotheosis in Arjuna's vision of the *viśvarūpā* on the Kurukṣetra. Once his beloved Kṛṣṇa is forced to manifest as time (*kāla*), he takes on his most dreadful form: as a cannibal. "And yonder all sons of Dhṛtarāṣṭra / Along with all the hosts of the kings of the earth, / Like Bhīṣma, Droṇa, that son of a sūta, / Along with our own chief warriors too / Are hastening into your numerous mouths / That are spiky with tusks and horrifying - / There are some who are dangling between your teeth, / Their heads already crushed to bits. (*amī ca tvān dhṛtarāṣṭrasya putrāḥ; sarve sahaivāvanipālasaṅghaiḥ / bhīṣmo droṇaḥ sūtaputras tathāsau; sahāsmadiyair api yodhamukhyaiḥ // vaktrāṇi te tvaramānā viśanti; daṁṣṭrākaraḷāni bhayānakāni / ke cid vilagnā daśanāntareṣu; samdṛśyante cūrṇitair uttamāṅgaiḥ //*; BhG 11.26-27).

(Gautama) and allegorical (Saudāsa) levels, now prepares him for the final stage of his education: a hermeneutic education in the *Pauṣya* parvan.

VII. Conclusion: The Mahābhārata's Narrative Architecture

The analysis of the Uttara narratives lets us now distinguish the text's multiple levels:

1. Narrative (Vaiśampāyana).
2. Allegorical-sacrificial (*sarpasattra*).
3. Interpretive (Uttara cycle).

The Uttara cycle constitutes the outermost level of the text and provides the basic key to *how* this text must be read. Uttara's two biographies demonstrate that the text's task is to ensure that the reader never returns (*nāgantavyam*; *Mbh* 14.57.14) to the cycle of becoming. By actualizing the text's meaning, he transcends the text and thus becoming itself.

Once Uttara understands becoming, it ceases to be a cannibal and becomes a "nourisher" (*Pauṣya*; *puṣyati* = "he nourishes"). Between the first and the second version, the cannibal has been transformed into a nourisher!⁴⁵ In other words, the intra-textual narrative of becoming has given way to a meta-textual narrative⁴⁶ of the transformation of becoming into being.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Textual evidence for the link between Saudāsa and Pauṣya can be found in the *Ādiparvan* (1.166.1-1.168.25). Vaiśiṣṭha frees Saudāsa from the cannibalistic monster inhabiting him by sprinkling holy water on him and uttering the incantation *hūm*. As they return together to the city, the citizens are said to set eye upon their king "as upon the sun that arises in the sign of Puṣya" (*dadṛśus tam tato rājann ayodhyāvāsino janāḥ / puṣyeṇa sahitaṁ kāle divākaram ivoditam //*; *Mbh* 1.168.17).

⁴⁶ The *Mbh* itself explicitly indicates that the later narrative is a meta-text: it refers to Uttara's teacher, Veda, as the *upādhyāya* (teacher), a possible play on "*upa-adhyāya*." *Upa* means *above* or *meta*, *adhyāya* means *chapter*.

⁴⁷ The Upaniṣadic background to the *Mbh* is key to understanding how an understanding of becoming lets the reader transcend becoming to being. In the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad*, Vājaśravasa offers his son Naciketas to Yama, the god of

In a sense, the Uttara cycle provides the text's clearest statement on *how it wishes to be read*:

1. It presents itself as a living being, a *guru*⁴⁸ that provides a saving pedagogy, a nourisher when read hermeneutically-

death (*mṛtyave tvā dadāmi*; *K. Up.* 1.1.4). Considering the ubiquity of death (*sasyabhiv martyaḥ pacyate sasymivājāyate punaḥ*; *K. Up.* 1.1.6), the boy goes undaunted to Yama. When the god offers the boy three boons, Naciketas asks for ontological wisdom: "This doubt that arises, consequent on the death of a man—some saying, 'It exists', and others saying 'It does not exist'—I would know this, under your instruction" (*yeyam prete vicikitsā manuṣye'stītyeke nāyamastīti caike / etadvidyāmanuṣiṣṭastvayā'haṁ... //*; *K. Up.* 1.1.20). Yama initially refuses to impart this wisdom but as Naciketas remains steadfast, he finally instructs him in *brahman*. Through meditating (*jñātvā*) on the letter *om* as *brahman*, one attains (*tat tasya*) what one desires (*icchati*; *K. Up.* 1.2.16). The *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* describes death as co-eval with creation: "There was nothing whatsoever here in the beginning. It was covered only by Death (Hiranyagarbha), or Hunger, for hunger is death" (*naiveha kiṃcanāgra āsīt mṛtyunaivedamāvṛtamāsīta - aśanāyayā, aśanāyayā hi mṛtyuḥ //*; *Bṛ Up.* 1.2.1). However, through *understanding* the nature of death, i.e. through implicitly discriminating between being and non-being, one overcomes death. "So these two (fire and the sun) are Arka and the horse sacrifice. These two again become the same god, Death. He (who knows thus) conquers further death, death cannot overtake him, it becomes his self and he becomes one with these deities" (... *tāvetāvarkāśvamedho / so punarekaiva devatā bhavati mṛtyureva; apa punarmṛtyum jayati, nainam mṛtyurāpnoti, mṛtyurasyātmā bhavati, etāsām devatānāmeko bhavati //*; *Bṛ Up.* 1.2.7). In both *Upaniṣads*, the encounter with one's mortality ultimately engenders philosophy in the form of a discrimination between being and non-being. The hermeneutic analysis or interpretation of becoming saves us through engendering an understanding of the underlying being.

⁴⁸ Both Wilhelm and Feller observe that the teacher Dhaumya Āyoda is referred to only as an *upādhyāya* rather than as a *guru* or *ācārya* in the text. "As Wilhelm notes (1965: 12, note ad 95), in the *Pauṣyaparvan*, the teacher is mostly called *upādhyāya*, seldom *guru* and never *ācārya*. Usually, the *ācārya* is the real teacher of the *Vedas* and the *upādhyāya* is the real teacher. But, as Wilhelm, in my opinion, rightly remarks: 'Es ist zu bezweifeln, ob im Buche Pauṣya diese Bedeutungs-differenz gemacht wird'" (Feller 2004: 208, fn. 3). However, a more suggestive interpretation is that the *Mbh*'s redactors were aware of this distinction and refer to Dhaumya Āyoda merely as an

pedagogically and a monstrous cannibal who underscores our mortality when read literally.

2. The text appears to be saying: read without this philosophical hermeneutics, on the existential level there is a degree of grief that not even the earth can bear (*na hi tāt āsrupātān vai śaktā dhārayitum mahī; Mbh 14.56.13*), on the textual level: bullshit (*purīṣam; Mbh 1.3.102*). But if one reads it philosophically, then it is the work of time that is discussed on the human level (Vaiśampāyana's narrative) and the method of thinking on the level of the *sarpasattra* and the reader's ultimate hope of salvation through understanding and transforming the cycle of becoming on the level of the Uttara cycle.

I close by drawing some conclusions about the *Mbh's* narrative architecture:

1. *Pauṣyaparvan*

We have seen that the stories of Saramā, Dhaumya Āyoda and his students, and Uttara constitute an integrated interpretative program providing initiatory and hermeneutic models for reading the epic.

2. *Ādiparvan*

In spite of the double beginning, the *Pauṣyaparvan* shows that the *Ādiparvan* is carefully organized not only according to ritual structure as Minkowski shows, but also in providing an access to the text. This access is nothing external, but self-consciously presented within the text.

3. *Mahābhārata*

The double episodes of Uttara are often taken to be proof of the text's inchoate expansion. Such a view, no matter how subtle, presents the *Mbh* as a monstrous text. However, the double narrative of Uttara shows that such monstrosity is a

upādhyāya and never as a *guru* or *ācārya* because the text itself functions as the *ācārya* or *guru*. It is perhaps not purely coincidental that the adjective *guru* also means *heavy, great, long* (Apte, sv) and that the text preserves a story of its being weighed against the four *Vedas* and being found to be greater in both size and weight (*mahattve ca gurutve ca dhriyamāṇam tato dhikam; Mbh 1.1.208*).

result of an inappropriate approach to the text. Indeed, the text is a monstrous image of the monstrous work of time and yet, it provides directions for how to extricate oneself from this intolerable situation.

Besides the two embedding frameworks, the epic itself is unified with respect to understanding (*dhīḥ*). No wonder then, that Indians felt it necessary to have the first reader endowed with the massive task of understanding: Gaṇeśa.