



From Poetic Immortality to Salvation: Ruru and Orpheus in Indic and Greek Myth

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Reviewed work(s):

Source: *History of Religions*, Vol. 51, No. 3 (February 2012), pp. 239-261

Published by: [The University of Chicago Press](http://www.uchicago.edu)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/662191>

Accessed: 13/08/2012 11:50

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Can poetry save us or do we need philosophy? In this article, we suggest that the Greek myth of Orpheus and its Indian version, the myth of Ruru, are structured according to a distinction between poetic immortality and salvation. In highlighting the problem of partial or failed resurrection, the myths of Orpheus and Ruru demonstrate that, in these myths, true salvation is an abidance in being rather than relating to the phenomena of becoming. The Orpheus and Ruru myths distinguish two levels of immortality: one, a poetic transcendence that grants a limited immortality, and, two, the unconditioned immortality of salvation.

In ancient Greece, poetry served as one way to confront the oblivion of death.¹ The poet, in singing of the hero, grants him immortal fame (*kleos*

Our thanks to Alf Hiltbeitel and Greg Bailey for reading earlier versions of this article and to the reviewers, who strengthened the article through their suggestions.

¹ See Marcel Detienne, *The Masters of Truth in Archaic Greece* (Cambridge, MA: Zone Books, 1999). The enduring significance of Orpheus to poetry can be seen even today. The first sonnet of Rilke's *Sonnets to Orpheus* begins: "A tree sprang up. O sheer transcendence! / O Orpheus sings! O tall tree in the ear! / And all was still. But even in that silence / a new beginning, hint, and change appeared" (Rainer Maria Rilke, *Duino Elegies and the Sonnets to Orpheus*, trans. A. Poulin Jr. [New York: Mariner, 2005], 85). The relationship between poetry and immortality (or at least a kind of ascendance and resurrection) survives even in this late form of "Orphism." C. Segal writes, "The poet of the *Sonnets* appears in the first person only in the second sonnet. His 'I' is called into being only at the point where the Orphic power of transcendent forms acknowledges and receives its complementary side, its place in the flowing, changing, death-bound world

aphthiton).² However, the immortality one achieves through poetry is a limited form of immortality. Poetic immortality is exoteric as it appeals to the community and is preserved by the bardic tradition. Poetic salvation is beset with many anxieties, for it is a function of something that has been done and remembered. Achilles, for example, is said to be “a speaker of words (*muthōn*) and a doer of deeds (*ergōn*)” (*Iliad* 9.443; our translation). Immortality is thus tied to the past and to the hero who performs the actions. It is also precariously dependent upon future generations remembering the hero’s deeds. In contrast, the remembrance of being operates in a timeless present. When I remember being, I relate neither to past nor future.³

of the maiden, herself the Bride of Death. . . . She is the hidden but necessary side of Orpheus himself . . . [Rilke] brings these two sides of the Orphic poet together. From their interaction, song itself emerges as transience, fragility, the elusive puffing in the wind. . . . ‘Real singing is a different breath. / A breath for nothing. A wafting in the god. A wind.’ . . . The ‘god’ of the last line is the achieved reconciliation of change and permanence that constitutes Being” (*Orpheus: The Myth of the Poet* [Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989], 138).

² In the *Iliad*, *kleos* (fame) is reserved for Achilles, the greatest of the warriors. The other warriors can at best hope for *kudos* (renown).

³ The term “being” is most easily grasped in contrast to “becoming.” Within the ancient Greek tradition, pre-Socratic philosophy always sought to explain the phenomena of becoming via reference to an arché or an inceptive principle; the most striking formulation occurs in Parmenides, who has an unnamed goddess present two speeches: one on being, the other on becoming. Whereas the goddess characterizes being as uncreated, indestructible, complete, immovable, and without end, becoming is described in terms of “coming to be” (*gignesthai*) and “passing away” (*ollusthai*; frag. 8.40). Parmenides applies the principle of noncontradiction to show that being cannot not be, nor can it undergo change; indeed, being and understanding, for him, are linked: *τὸ γὰρ αὐτὸ νοεῖν ἐστίν τε καὶ εἶναι* (frag. 3). Plato continues to develop this ontology in dialogues such as the *Sophist* and *Parmenides*, while preserving the strict separation of being from becoming already instituted in Parmenides’s poem. Aristotle, however, inaugurates a new turn in the history of this concept: in his discussion of the relation of being to becoming in the first book of the *Physics*, he rejects the view that movement and change are impossible (a view he incorrectly attributes to Parmenides; the Parmenidean goddess describes the genesis of the cosmos at length) and introduces the concept of “qualified non-being” to explicate the reality of change. Since then, the question of being has largely been posed in terms of the relation of the unmoved mover or the first cause to the moving universe (concepts Aristotle discusses at length both in his *Physics* and in the *Metaphysics*—see esp. bk. Θ in the former and bk. Λ in the latter), a move that is especially facilitated by the Christian distinction between an *ens increatum* and *ens creatum*. Throughout the Middle Ages, Christian theologians provided sophisticated commentaries on being, drawing on both Greek texts and the Christian experience of salvation. For a discussion of the history of the concept of being, see Etienne Gilson, *Being and Some Philosophers* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1952); Brentano’s *On the Manifold Sense of Being in Aristotle* (*Von der mannigfachen Bedeutung des Seienden nach Aristoteles*) (1862) still offers a good overview of Aristotle’s position on being; for a discussion of the debates surrounding Aristotle’s reception of Plato, see Harold Cherniss, *Aristotle’s Criticism of Plato and the Academy*, vol. 1 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1944). Cherniss argues that Aristotle misinterprets Plato’s views, but see also Lloyd Gerson, *Aristotle and Other Platonists* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005), who presents the opposite view, arguing that Aristotle’s position is in fact closer to Plato’s than it is often made out to be. Being is also a central concept in Indian philosophy: in the Mahābhārata, for example, the poet makes a contrast between being or *brahman* and becoming (*kāla*; lit., “time”) at the very outset (see nn. 14 and 15 below for the citation). For an interesting study of the relationship between Parmenides’ ontology and Indian ontology, see Colin Cole’s *Asparśa-Yoga: A Study of Gauḍapāda’s Māṇḍūkya Kārikā* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1982). Concern with being, how-

Orpheus, master of poets, knows the limits of poetry. His story is the story of this tragic limitation. Orpheus's descent into Hades and the verses he composes in an attempt to confront Hades (death) embody a finite transcendence: although Orpheus wins Eurydice back, her resurrection is short-lived. Orpheus later becomes the mythic founder of a soteriological philosophy known as Orphism.⁴ In the myth of Ruru as well, as we shall see, Ruru wins back his beloved, but only with half a life span. Like Orpheus, Ruru's descent into a *rauravam* (a hell inhabited by fierce serpents) results in his gaining soteriological knowledge.

In contrast to poetic memory, which is limited, there is another type of thinking that is turned inward and has soteriology as its goal. Its aim is salvation (*sōtēria* or *mokṣa*)⁵ rather than poetic immortality (*kleos aphthiton* or

ever, is not just a feature of ancient philosophy; in more recent times, Heidegger poses the "question of being" (*Seinsfrage*) with a renewed sense of urgency (see his *Being and Time*, among other works). Also see Vishwa Adluri, *Parmenides, Plato and Mortal Philosophy: Return from Transcendence* (London: Continuum, 2011) for a discussion of how Parmenidean philosophy is fully aware of and makes place for the phenomenon of change.

⁴ Orpheus, popularly best known for his descent into Hades, was the mythic founder of the Greek religious movement called Orphism that dates back well into the archaic period. Although his original poem is lost, we can deduce from the elements that survive in later sources that it was unmistakably a cosmological-soteriological poem. For example, Plato (*Laws* III, 701b–c; see also Apollonius Rhodes, *Argonautica*, 1, 494–511) notes that the death and resurrection of Dionysus was a central element of Orphic cosmology. Orphic cosmology also contains a genealogy of gods (Aristophanes, *Birds*, 688–702). Orphism was characterized by a belief in a divine aspect to man (*ibid.*, see also Plato, *Timaeus*, 40d), metempsychosis and its related doctrine: justice and retribution (Pindar, *Olympian Odes* II.63–88). Further, Orphism was characterized by a refusal to kill or eat animals. Initiation rites played a central role in Orphic religion. For a good account of Orpheus and Orphic religion, see W. K. C. Guthrie, *Orpheus and Greek Religion: A Study of the Orphic Movement* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993); see also Fritz Graf and Sarah Iles Johnston, *Ritual Texts for the Afterlife: Orpheus and the Bacchic Gold Tablets* (New York: Routledge, 2007). Ritual descent, as exemplified by Orpheus's descent into Hades, becomes a central element in later philosophies from the pre-Socratics to Plato. For a discussion of ritual descent or *katabasis* in Parmenides, see Walter Burkert, "Das Proömium des Parmenides und die Katabasis des Pythagoras," *Phronesis* 14 (1969): 1–30; and Peter Kingsley, *In the Dark Places of Wisdom* (Inverness, CA: Golden Sufi Center, 1999). On *katabasis* in Empedocles, see Peter Kingsley, *Ancient Philosophy, Mystery and Magic: Empedocles and Pythagorean Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995). For a summary of the *katabasis* motif specifically in Plato's *Republic*, see Lars Albinus, "The *Katabasis* of Er. Plato's Use of Myths, exemplified by the Myth of Er," in *Essays on Plato's Republic*, ed. E. N. Ostenfeld (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 1998), 91–105; and Vishwa Adluri, "Initiation into the Mysteries: The Experience of the Irrational in Plato," *Mou-seion*, 3rd ser., 6 (2006): 407–23.

⁵ Although we tend to translate the term *mokṣa* as "liberation" and to retain the term "salvation" for the Christian experience of salvation through the intercession of Christ, it is important to note that the theistic schools of Indian philosophy such as Rāmānuja's Viśiṣṭādvaita hold that *mokṣa* is conferred by the Lord on his devotees. Indeed, in the famous *caramaśloka* or the "final, summarizing verse" of the Bhagavadgītā, Kṛṣṇa famously instructs Arjuna to abandon all duties and seek shelter in him alone; he will "free [him] from all evils" (*aham tvā sarvapāpēbhyo mokṣayīṣyāmi mā śucaḥ*) (Bhagavadgītā 18.66). The idea of *mokṣa* as an act of grace is central to later bhakti literature, especially the *Bhāgavatam*, which often uses the term in contexts where we might supply "salvation." Note also that although we tend to identify the term "salvation" with Christianity, the term *sōtēria* (from which our "salvation" is derived and with which it is cognate) actually has a

amṛta).⁶ The stories of Orpheus and Ruru clarify this distinction for us.

ORPHIC THEMES: DEATH AND RESURRECTION

The story of Orpheus as we have it is based upon a lost Hellenistic narrative, which in turn drew upon one or more Greek originals.⁷ The lost Greek version

much longer history: it is a central term in Plato's *Republic*, where it has the general sense of "preservation," "deliverance." (The question of how such "preservation" is to be understood is, of course, an important one and one I have addressed in a recent paper; see Vishwa Adluri, "Plato's Saving *Mūthos*: The Language of Salvation in the *Republic*," paper presented at the eighth annual conference of the International Society for Neoplatonic Studies, Miraflores, Spain, 2010.) Thus, it would seem that there are good reasons both for interpreting *mokṣa* in a wider sense (one that includes the meaning "salvation") and for taking the word "salvation" itself in a wider sense (rather than being narrowly restricted to the Christian tradition). Indeed, as I have argued in a number of articles, there existed a deep and extensive tradition of rational soteriology in ancient Greek philosophy—a tradition that preceded and would have been radically opposed to the Lutheran notion of salvation through faith alone. See, in particular, Vishwa Adluri, "Initiation into the Mysteries: Experience of the Irrational in Plato," *Mouseion*, ser. 3, 6 (2006): 407–23, and "Derrida, Textuality, and Sacrifice," *Southwest Philosophical Studies* 29 (2007): 9–19. For a broader discussion of salvation in ancient Greek thought, see the articles in the forthcoming volume *Philosophy and Salvation in Greek Religion*, ed. Vishwa Adluri (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2012). Finally, on the attempt to claim both the term and the experience of "salvation" for Lutheran and post-Lutheran thought alone, see the critique of Heidegger in Vishwa Adluri, "A Theological Deconstruction of Metaphysics: Heidegger, Luther, and Aristotle," *Epoché* 16, no. 2 (Spring 2012), forthcoming.

⁶ We do not mean to suggest that the entire epic is a "poem," for the term *kāvya* is not used to describe the epic until a late "interpolation" (see Vulgate 1.1.61–62; Pune Critical Edition 1, app. 1, lines 13–14). Of course, the question of the Mahābhārata's genre identification is a complex one, as Hildebeitel has shown in a brilliantly comprehensive study; see Alf Hildebeitel, "Not without Subtales: Telling Laws and Truths in the Sanskrit Epics," *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 33 (2005): 455–511. As Hildebeitel notes, the epic uses a variety of genre terms to identify itself, especially, *itihāsa* ("thus it was," often misleadingly translated as "history"), but does not use *kāvya* until the famous Gaṇeśa passage just referred to. Indeed, Hildebeitel suggests that the two Sanskrit epics, the Mahābhārata and the Rāmāyaṇa, seem to be "in early agreement to yield one of these terms [i.e., *kāvya* and *itihāsa*] to the other" (ibid., 476–77). The argument here, however, does not turn upon claiming that the Mahābhārata is a *kāvya*; rather, the argument here suggests that the epic complicates or even in a sense goes beyond *kāvya* as an insufficient response to the problem of mortality. On the associations of the Rāmāyaṇa as *ādikāvya* (the "first" poem) with grief, Hildebeitel is especially persuasive: "In the second *sarga*, once Nārada has left, Vālmiki witnesses the cries of grief of a female Krauñca bird (probably the large monogamous sarus crane (see Leslie, 1998) over the slaying of her mate by a 'cruel hunter,' and is provoked into the spontaneous utterance that creates 'verse' (and thus poetry) out of 'grief' (*śloka* out of *sōka*; 1.2.9–15). As this verse is said to mark the origins of poetry, the Rāmāyaṇa is called the *ādikāvya* or 'first poem'—a term that does not occur in the Baroda Critical Edition, though it probably should since it occurs in a universally attested *sarga* where, after Sītā has vanished into the earth, the god Brahmā encourages Rāma to hear the rest of this *ādikāvya* (7, Appendix I, No. 13, lines 31–39)" (ibid., 462). Hence, we should look for "poetic" components in the Ruru myth in the original sense of the Greek *poiēsis* ("to make"), especially in the story of how a sage is turned into a snake through the poetic quality of language. Our suggestion is that the myth depicts a limit to this poetic function of language—in the Ruru narrative the sage's metamorphosis is short-lived, and he returns to his nature once self-recognition dawns.

⁷ See C. M. Bowra, "Orpheus and Eurydice," *The Classical Quarterly*, n.s. 2, nos. 3/4 (July–October, 1952): 113: "The story [of Orpheus], as we normally think of it, comes from Latin poets, especially Virgil, *Georgic* 4. 454–503 and Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 10. 1–73, to which may be added shorter versions in Culex 268–95, Seneca, *Hercules Furens* 569–91 and *Hercules*

appears to have been explicitly theological and soteriological. "It is clear . . . that though Orpheus's visit to Hades was inspired by love for his dead wife, it resulted in his acquiring knowledge about the afterworld, and from this we may deduce that his descent was connected with Orphic mysteries and that the recovery of his wife did not necessarily have pride of place in it."⁸ Although little can be said about the lost Greek original, the myth of Ruru is a good starting point to discuss some of the theological and soteriological issues of the Greek original, which is either lost or only fragmentarily present in the Latin versions.⁹ In contrast, the myth of Ruru is well preserved and has been included in the critical edition of the Mahābhārata as well. In this article, we are less concerned with the historical link between the two mythic traditions than with a certain shape of thought that emerges through the respective narratives. As the Greek version is only fragmentarily preserved, our analysis will mainly focus on the myth of Ruru.

In the twilight between the accounts of creation and the genealogies that lead from myth to "history," the Mahābhārata preserves a story concerning Ruru and his attempt to resurrect his wife following her death from snakebite. The myth of Ruru is the Indian version of the myth of Orpheus, as Duckworth notes:

Eurydice's death as described by both Vergil and Ovid bears a striking resemblance to the death of Pramadvarā shortly before her marriage to Ruru; cf. *Mhb. [sic]* I. viii.16–19. . . . The passage in Ovid contains several general similarities: the girl with her companions, the mention of the serpent's tooth, and the girl falling senseless, but Vergil's account presents the more exact verbal echoes; e.g., *moritura* (458) is identical with *mumūrṣuḥ*, "about to die," "on the point of death," and *non vidit* (459) reproduces *nāpaśyata*, "she did not see." The tale of Orpheus and Eurydice resembles that of Ruru and Pramadvarā in other respects also: the companions of Pramadvarā mourn her death as do the dryads in Vergil; the names of forest inhabitants grieving for Pramadvarā are balanced by the Thracian regions which weep for Eurydice; both Ruru and Orpheus withdraw and lament in solitude. The great difference is that Orpheus loses Eurydice a second time "through a tragic fault," whereas Ruru regains Pramadvarā by giving to her half of his own life.¹⁰

Oetaeus 1061–89. No doubt Lucan dealt with it in his lost Orpheus, but the scanty remains tell very little. The same story was known to mythographers, notably Conon, *Narrationes* 45. 2 and Apollodorus, *Bibliotheca* I. 3. 3, and is presupposed alike in the rationalistic version of Pausanias 9. 30. 6 and the allegorical interpretation of Fulgentius, *Mitologiae* 3. 10. This form of the story does not survive in Greek poetry, but we cannot doubt that it was told before Virgil, who deals with it allusively as if it were already familiar, and we may assume that it is derived from a Greek poem."

⁸ *Ibid.*, 122.

⁹ See A. N. Marlow, "Orpheus in Ancient Literature," *Music & Letters* 35, no. 4 (October 1954): 361: "Yet the association of Orpheus with Eurydice is due mainly to Vergil; before him Orpheus stands alone as a mysterious figure, the patron not only of music but of religious mysteries, not associated with romantic love but rather with sacred rites."

¹⁰ *Mumūrṣuḥ* actually means "wishing to die," as Greg Bailey points out (personal communication). George E. Duckworth, "Turnus and Duryodhana," in *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association*, ed. Donald W. Prakken (London and Beccles: William

Beyond the literary parallels between the two myths, however, there is also evidence of a deeper affiliation between the Orphic and Indic philosophic traditions, as Marlow notes.¹¹ In this article, we argue that the two mythic traditions are linked through an understanding of loss and the desire to overcome death and that both generate a soteriological philosophy that emphasizes the transformation from mortal becoming to immortal being.

Like Orphic religion, the Mahābhārata also presents a soteriological philosophy of being in response to the horror of becoming. Following the opening invocation (*maṅgalācaraṇa*), the bard Ugraśravas presents a summary of the epic in the form of a song of lamentation. Dhṛtarāṣṭra, whose hundred sons have been killed in war, voices his anguish at fate and time.¹² His lament provokes a sobering rejoinder from Saṁjaya, his charioteer (*sūta*): “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.”¹³

Saṁjaya’s description of the work of time (*kālah*), or “becoming,” as we translate it, is immediately followed by a eulogy of Kṛṣṇa Vāsudeva, who

Clowes & Sons, 1961), 121. The connection between Ruru and Orpheus is also noted in E. Lévy, *Les mythes et les légendes de l’Inde et la Perse dans Aristophane, Platon, Aristote, Virgile, Ovide, Tite Live, Dante, Boccace, Arioste, Rabelais, Perrault, La Fontaine* (Paris: Eugène Belin, 1880), 367ff.; and in J. Lallement, “Une source de l’Énéide: le Mahābhārata,” *Latomus* 18 (1959): 284–5. We thank Fernando Alonso Wulff for the latter citations (personal communication); for an extensive survey of possible parallels between Indic and Greek myth, see Fernando Alonso Wulff, *Grecia en la India: el repertorio griego del Mahabharata* (Madrid: Ediciones Akal, 2008).

¹¹ “Again, at the end of the ‘Republic’ there is a famous scene depicting the heroes of the past choosing new bodies in order to come to earth again (this scene owes a very great deal to Hindu views of reincarnation, and there can no longer be any reasonable doubt that there are traces of Hinduism in Plato). Orpheus is depicted among them as choosing the life of a swan through hatred of the feminine sex because he met his death at their hands: no motive is suggested. . . . The curious thing is that in these Orphic mysteries there was a prohibition against the eating of flesh or beans. Now we know that Pythagoras was the leader of a school of thought based probably on Hinduism, which believed in the transmigration of souls and therefore abstained from flesh and beans” (Marlow, “Orpheus in Ancient Literature,” 364, 367).

¹² Mahābhārata 1.1.95–1.1.161. All Mahābhārata citations are from the *The Mahābhārata for the First Time Critically Edited*, 19 vols., ed. Vishnu Sitaram Sukthankar (Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1933–66). All translations, except where noted, are from *The Mahābhārata*, vol. 1, trans. J. A. B. van Buitenen (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973). See also Emily Hudson, “Listen but Do Not Grieve: Grief, Paternity, and Time in the Laments of Dhṛtarāṣṭra,” in *Gender and Narrative in Mahābhārata*, ed. Simon Brodbeck and Brian Black (New York: Routledge, 2007), 35–52.

¹³ “kālamūlam idaṁ sarvaṁ bhāvābhāvau sukhāsukhe // kālah pacati bhūtāni kālah saṁharati prajāḥ / nirdahantaṁ prajāḥ kālaṁ kālah śamayate punaḥ // kālo vikurute bhāvān sarvaṁ loka śubhāśubhān / kālah saṁkṣipate sarvaḥ prajā viśjate punaḥ / kālah sarveṣu bhūteṣu caraty avidhṛtaḥ samaḥ // atītānāgatā bhāvā ye ca vartanti sāmpratamtān / kālanirmitān buddhvā na saṁjñān hātum arhasi //”; Mahābhārata 1.1.187–190.

represents absolute being or *brahman*: “In this book, Kṛṣṇa Dvaipāyana has uttered a holy Upaniṣad. . . . And Kṛṣṇa 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.”¹⁴ This distinction between the work of time or “becoming” and being is central to the epic, which unfolds as a universal meditation on the human condition presented in the form of a lament at the horror of becoming.¹⁵ The Mahābhārata is a response to this extreme anguish: just as in the myth of Ruru, Āstika represents the hope of salvation through being, so too in the epic, Kṛṣṇa¹⁶ embodies salvation through being or *brahman*.¹⁷ This distinction between becoming and being, which is set up in the

¹⁴ “atropaniṣadaṁ puṇyāṁ kṛṣṇadvaipāyano ’bravīt / . . . bhagavān vāsudevaś ca kīrtyate ’tra sanātanaḥ / sa hi satyam ītaṁ caiva pavitraṁ puṇyam eva ca // śāśvataṁ brahma paramaṁ dhruvaṁ jyotiḥ sanātanaṁ / yasya divyāni karmāṇi kathayanti maṇiṣiṇaḥ // asat sat sad asac caiva yasmād devāt pravartate / saṁtatiś ca pravṛttiś ca janma mṛtyuḥ punarbhavaḥ //”; Mahābhārata 1.1.191, 1.1.193–195.

¹⁵ The epic itself does not use any one term for “becoming” but uses a range of terms such as *bhavābhavau* (becoming, literally “being—non-being”), *vṛtti* (disturbance), *saṁsāra* (eternal recurrence), *jayājayau* (victory and defeat), *lābhālābhau* (gain and loss), and *sukhaduḥkha* (pleasure and pain). We translate these as the term “becoming.” The epic also often uses the word *kāla* (time) in place of *bhavābhavau*; in these cases as well, we translate as “becoming.” For references to *bhavābhavau*, see Mahābhārata 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.

¹⁶ Hence, as V. S. Sukthankar stated definitively in 1942, there can be “no question whatsoever of an ‘epic core’ that had become gradually incrustated with didactic accretions, an idea which is nothing more than a phantasy, just an obsession of the modern critic. The poem is, as Indian tradition has always implied, a conscious product of literary art (*kāvya*) of the highest order, with a pronounced unity of conception, aim, and treatment” (*On the Meaning of the Mahābhārata* [Bombay: Asiatic Society, 1957], 20). Since the contrast between time or becoming and the eternity of being constitutes the basic structural principle of the epic, theories of a so-called Krishnification of the epic are problematic: not only is there no evidence that the Kṛṣṇa narratives are late, but the thesis of Kṛṣṇa’s progressive deification (from a cowherd or folk-chieftain to a hero and then to a god) is a fiction of nineteenth-century historicism. The thesis is characteristic of the work of Garbe, who first introduced the expression, and of Jacobi and Oldenberg. Oldenberg, for example, imagines Kṛṣṇa as “a victorious hero [Siegernatur], equally irresistible to enemies and women alike” (Hermann Oldenberg, *Das Mahābhārata: Seine Entstehung, sein Inhalt, seine Form* [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1922], 40). Unfortunately the thesis continues to live on in the work of contemporary Indologists such as Angelika Malinar. The progressive development of Kṛṣṇa’s divinity must rather be seen as a kind of ontological apotheosis in a text that begins with a description of the suffering of becoming (in Dhṛtarāṣṭra’s lament) and progresses toward the eternity of being.

¹⁷ An etymological analysis of Kṛṣṇa’s several names provides further evidence that the epic’s main concern is with giving an account of being, as these names all relate to being in some way: (1) *Viśvam* is “the All,” “the universe,” or “Brahman or the Supreme Being.” (2) *Viṣṇuḥ* is traditionally derived from the root *viś*, which means “to settle,” “to enter,” and “to pervade,” and the suffix *nuk* and is translated as “the All-Pervading One.” Yāska in his *Nirukta* defines Viṣṇu as follows: “that which is free from fetters and bondages is Viṣṇu” (*atha yad viṣito bhavati tad viṣnur-*

first *upaparvan* or “minor book” of the Mahābhārata, also allows us to interpret the Ruru narrative from the fourth minor book of the epic. Let us see how the Ruru narrative further clarifies this distinction for us.

THE MYTH OF RURU

The myth of Ruru occurs as part of the Bhṛgu cycle of myths in the *Pauloma-parvan*, the fourth minor book from the *Adiparvan* of the Mahābhārata.¹⁸ The first of the myths in the cycle recounts the mythic birth of Cyavana, the son of the legendary ṛṣi Bhṛgu.¹⁹ The *rākṣasa* Puloman abducts Pulomā, Cyavana’s mother and Bhṛgu’s wife, while the sage is away.²⁰ As Puloman is carrying her away, her son falls from her womb and burns the demon to ashes through his radiance. Cyavana later fathers Pramati, who in turn fathers Ruru.

The narrative then recounts the story of Ruru and his war on the snakes, following his wife Pramadvārā’s death from snakebite. The daughter of a celestial dancer and the king of the Gandharvas or divine musicians, Pramadvārā steps on a snake (*bhujāṅgam*; Mahābhārata 1.8.15) on her wedding day and dies of its venom. Although Ruru is able to resurrect her through offering her half his

bhavati) (*Nirukta* 12.18), and “one who enters everywhere” (viṣṇur viṣvater vā vyaśnoter vā) (*Nirukta* 12.18). In the Mahābhārata, Viṣṇu is interpreted to mean “one who pervades everything” (5.68.13). (3) *Kṛṣṇaḥ* means existence-bliss (5.68.5). (4) *Vāsudevaḥ* is “[He who] covers the whole world with rays . . . [and] is resident in all beings” or “[He who] covers all beings . . . [and] is the source of all Divinities” (5.68.3). (5) *Sarvaḥ* means “he who is all” (5.68.11). Significantly, these etymologies occur in the Mahābhārata itself.

¹⁸ The Bhṛgus are a group of Brahmin seers or ṛṣis generally thought to be the redactors of the Mahābhārata. See V. S. Sukthankar, “The Bhṛgus and the Bhārata: A Text-Historical Study,” *Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute* 18 (1937): 1–76; see also R. P. Goldman, *Gods, Priests, and Warriors: The Bhṛgus of the Mahābhārata* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977). Goldman’s observations are significant here: “The mythology of the Bhārgavas [i.e., the Bhṛgus] is to an extraordinary degree concerned with the themes of death and resurrection. The distribution of these themes in the cycle suggests that the myths may be separated into two major groups concerned chiefly with violent death and with resurrection, respectively. In the myths of the former group, epitomized in the stories of Āruva and Rāma, conflict is established between the Bhṛgus and *kṣatriyas*. Violence is genocidal, and the motif of the revival of the dead is absent or of peripheral significance. Myths of the latter group are chiefly concerned with the figure of Uśanas Kāvya, the great Śukra. In these myths conflict is established between the Bhṛgus and the gods. Violence is less pronounced and involves individuals. Those who die are invariably restored to life by one means or another” (Goldman, *Gods, Priests, and Warriors*, 92).

¹⁹ The Sanskrit term *ṛṣi* is translated as “seer,” but its semantic field includes insight, focus, poetic vision, and inspiration. On the term *ṛṣi*, see Jan Gonda, *Vision of the Vedic Poets* (The Hague: Mouton, 1963), 40–42. See also Mahābhārata 1.1.2, where the sages are referred to as *brahmaṛṣis*. This compound term (*tatpuruṣa samāsa*) begins to appear prominently in the epics, in contrast to the *Vedas*. The story of King Viṣvāmītra’s rise to *brahmaṛṣi* status is preserved in Mahābhārata 1.64–72. These comments should draw our attention to the self-awareness of these seers of their poetic insight, genius, and creativity, and, by extension, of their text. A separate study is required to show how the king and *brahmaṛṣi* transformation provides a key to understanding the composition of the text itself.

²⁰ The term *rākṣasa* refers to a type of antidog or demon.

life,²¹ he vows vengeance on all snakes, clubbing to death any snake he sees. One day, he sees a “snake” (*ḍuṇḍubham*; 1.9.20) on a rock. Raising his stick “like the staff of Time” (*kāladanḍopamaṁ*; 1.9.21), he strikes it. Astonishingly, the “snake” turns around and asks why Ruru has struck him. When Ruru explains his vow, the “snake” protests that it is not a snake but a lizard.²² He asks Ruru to desist from harming lizards, who are like snakes in that they share their misfortunes but unlike them in that they do not share their joys. Frightened at meeting a talking lizard, Ruru asks the speaking reptile his name and why he has taken on this form. The lizard then relates his story: he was formerly the seer Sahasrapāda Ruru (*aham purā ruro nāmnā ṛṣir*; 1.10.7). One day, he startled his friend Khagama with a snake made of grass. The terrified sage promptly fainted but, on coming to, cursed Sahasrapāda Ruru: “As you have made a powerless snake [*avīryas . . . sarpaḥ*] in order to frighten me, so by my anger you shall become a powerless reptile [*avīryo . . . bhujamṅas*]” (1.11.4). Fearful of the power of Khagama’s austerities, Ruru begged his short-tempered friend to forgive him. Seeing his agitation, the sage relented. Although the curse cannot be undone, he says that he will be relieved of his curse (*śāpamokṣas*; 1.11.10) on seeing Ruru.

²¹ The parallel to the myth of Orpheus is suggestive: in both cases, there is a partial resurrection; Pramadvārā rises up with half a life, Eurydice undertakes the journey out of Hades but must return halfway. Both Pramadvārā and Eurydice die a second death. This form of temporary resurrection, akin to the transmigration of the soul, stands in contrast to true salvation achieved as a return to being.

²² The term *ḍuṇḍubha* has been variously translated. Apte glosses it as “a kind of snake not poisonous.” Vaman Shivaram Apte, *The Practical Sanskrit-English Dictionary* (Kyoto: Rinsen Book Company, 2003), 751. Monier-Williams glosses it as “a kind of lizard” (Sir Monier Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1899]; all references hereafter to this edition). Van Buitenen’s translation relies upon the latter interpretation. Although both could be correct in context, we prefer the use of “lizard,” as it avoids confusion in the narrative that is over-full with snakes. The essential point, however, as becomes clear from the seer’s words and from Khagama’s curse, is that he resembles a snake but is without its power to inflict a mortal bite. Perhaps the best translation would be “non-poisonous reptile.” See also Alf Hiltebeitel, *Rethinking the Mahābhārata: A Reader’s Guide to the Education of the Dharma King* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 196: “As may be evident already, this brief, playful passage offers a serio-comic glance at the problem of category-formation in relation to the laws of karma and the lessons of the evidence of perception. In his former life when the speaking lizard (*ḍuṇḍubha*) was a human child (*bālya*), he made a straw snake (*tārnam . . . uragam*) that frightened an irascible snake. The sage cursed the boy: Having scared me with a ‘powerless snake’ (*sarpa*), you will become a ‘powerless *bhujamṅa*’ (11.1–4). Van Buitenen sensibly translates *bhujamṅa* as ‘reptile’ (1973, 62), and, noting that his translation of ‘lizard’ for *ḍuṇḍubha* ‘is merely approximate,’ finds ‘a kind of legless lizard’ as a meaning that meets his expectation that this lizard would look, at least to a crazed sage, like a snake (62, 442). But *bhujamṅa* itself just means ‘snake,’ not ‘reptile.’ Somehow the sage’s curse has bent the karmic mechanism and the Sanskrit language a little out of shape. But then it was the cursing sage’s twisted perception itself, this perceptual error of mistaking a ‘kind of rope’ for a snake that caught the boy up on the philosophically loaded trap that turned him into this strange ‘kind of snake.’”

Regaining his true form, Sahasrapāda Ruru discourses to Ruru on the nature of the law and on nonviolence. He proclaims the law of nonviolence as the highest law for a brahmin (Mahābhārata 1.12.14), while to wield the stick and protect the people is the law of the *kṣatriya*. Indeed, he tells Ruru, the *kṣatriya* king Janamejaya once undertook a great massacre of the snakes who were only saved by the arrival of the brahmin Āstīka. Curious, Ruru asks about the story. The seer tells him that he will hear the entire story of Āstīka from a brahmin who will tell it and then promptly vanishes. Ruru runs through the forest looking for the vanished seer and then falls down exhausted. On regaining consciousness (*labdhasamjño*; 1.12.5),²³ he returns to his father and demands the story, which Pramati then recounts.

METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES

The themes of death, fate, resurrection, and salvation play a central role in both the Indian and the Greek myths. Both myths say something about the ultimate concerns of humans—the inevitability of death and the consequent concern with salvation. But beyond this basic concern, we suggest that the myth of Ruru is perhaps best understood in the context of the soteriological philosophy of the epic, as Doniger notes as well.²⁴ Hence, a further level of analysis recommends itself; following a textual clue, we propose an etymological investigation as the proper means for a better understanding of the Ruru myth.

We may distinguish two classes of etymology, a historically attested etymology and a semantic etymology in which a word is claimed to derive from another based on similarity of form or meaning but without historical evi-

²³ See Bhagavadgītā 18.73: “The delusion is gone, Acyuta, and by your grace I have recovered my wits. Here I stand with no more doubts. I shall do as you say” (*naṣṭo mohaḥ smṛtir labdhā tvatprasādān mayācyuta / sthito ’smi gatasamdehaḥ kariṣye vacanaṁ tava //*). All Bhagavadgītā translations are from J. A. B. van Buitenen, trans., *The Bhagavadgītā in the Mahābhārata: A Bilingual Edition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).

²⁴ “The story of Ruru, a multiform of the tale of Parikṣit, is told as a part of the extended preface to that story. As usual, there is a rather loose official thread to tie the story to the central theme: at the end of the episode, we discover that the tale of Ruru is part (a nonessential part) of the story of the telling of the Mahābhārata. But the tale of Ruru is more closely related to the tale of Parikṣit through its symbolic themes: the death and resurrection from snake-bite, the fight between snakes and someone named ‘Bird,’ the artificial snake that leads to the creation of a real snake (just as a harmless worm turned into Takṣaka and Nala’s tiny snake turned into the great Karkoṭaka), the auspicious meeting between two people with the same name [Jaratkāru, who fathers Āstīka, the savior of the snakes], and the inauspicious presence of a snake at a fire offering. The lizard’s sermon is reminiscent of the sermon of the sage upon whom Parikṣit drapes the snake: it is all right for kings (but not Brahmins) to commit certain violent acts. Finally, there is the liminality of the lizard, who is a reptile but not a snake, as he himself eloquently points out; he is a mediator between good reptiles and bad reptiles.” Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty, “Horses and Snakes in the Adi Parvan of the Mahābhārata,” in *Aspects of Essays in Honor of Edward Cameron Dimock, Jr.*, ed. Margaret Case and N. Gerald Barrier (New Delhi: American Institute of Indian Studies and Manohar, 1986), 24–25.

dence attesting to this derivation. The distinction between historic and semantic etymology, however, is too narrow to fully express the Mahābhārata's use of etymology.²⁵ As we demonstrate, the epic poets make use of the nonliteral functions of *nirukti* (etymology) to construct a narrative relating to the epic's central themes of pedagogy, self-knowledge, and salvation. Hence, we shall speak of a "soteriological use of etymology" or of "soteriological etymology" to characterize the epic's use of *nirukti*.

Although modern scholars typically reject the use of semantic etymologies,²⁶ the technique has been widely accepted among Indo-European languages and cultures.²⁷ In the Vedic tradition, etymology or *nirukti* was assigned canonical status as a method in the interpretation of texts. In the *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad*, for example, Śaunaka approaches the seer Aṅgiras and asks him: "O adorable sir, (which is that thing) which having been known, all this becomes known?" In his reply, Aṅgiras distinguishes between "two kinds of knowledge": "the higher and the lower." "The lower," says Aṅgiras, "comprises the Rg-Veda, Yajur-Veda, Sāma-Veda, Atharva-Veda, the science of pronunciation etc., the code of rituals, grammar, etymology (*niruktam*), metre and astrology. Then there is the higher (knowledge) by which is attained that Imperishable."²⁸ Together with *śikṣā* (pronunciation), *kalpa* (code of rituals), *vyākaraṇa* (grammar), *chandas* (prosody), and *jyotiṣa* (astrology), *nirukti*

²⁵ For the terms "semantic etymology" and "historical etymology," see Johannes Bronkhorst, "Etymology and Magic: Yāska's Nirukta, Plato's Cratylus, and the Riddle of Semantic Etymologies," *Numen* 48, no. 2 (2001): 147–48. However, the analysis proposed here goes beyond Bronkhorst's in many ways; we especially disagree with his comparison of semantic etymologies to "acts of so-called sympathetic magic" or the further claim that semantic etymologies are based on a naïve belief that "similar things can be related to, or even identical with, each other" (*ibid.*, 191). Bronkhorst trivializes the logic of semantic etymologies, claiming that the belief underlying semantic etymologies "is not normally systematized (with some rare exceptions), and indeed it is rarely formulated. It is for this reason perhaps better to speak of it as an intuition rather than as a consciously held belief" (*ibid.*). The alleged contrast between the naïveté of "intuition" in ancient thought versus the explicitly theoretical reflection of modern scholarship is a favorite trope of Orientalist scholarship, but Bronkhorst's views here are more reflective of his standpoint than the system of *nirukti* in Indian texts.

²⁶ Bronkhorst is a good example here; he writes: "For us, modern researchers, the validity of semantic etymologies is no longer an issue: semantic etymologies are not generally valid" ("Etymology and Magic," 170).

²⁷ See M. L. West on the use of etymology in Indo-European poetics in calling up certain effects: "In certain cases the god's name or one of his titles—at least, as understood by the worshipper—itself implies this power to act in the manner desired, and this is pointed out by making an etymological play on it. RV 10.36.14 *Savitā' naḥ suvatu sarvātātīm*, 'Savitṛ [= Stimulator], stimulate well-being for us'; 10.112.10 *rāṇam kṛdhi raṇakṛt*, 'create joy (of battle), O joy-creator'; Archil. 26 *ὄναξ Ἀπολλων . . . καὶ σφραγὸν ὄλλυεις*, 'O lord Apollo [understood as "destroyer"] . . . destroy them (*ollye*) as you do destroy'; Aesch. *Sept.* 146 *καὶ σύ, Λύκει' ὄναξ, Λύκειος γένου στρατῶν δαί,* 'and thou, lord Lykeios [understood as "wolflike"], be *lykeios* towards the enemy horde'" (*Indo-European Poetry and Myth* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007], 324–25).

²⁸ *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* 1.1.3–5, in *Eight Upaniṣads: With the Commentary of Śaṅkarācārya*, vol. 2, trans. Swāmī Gambhīrānanda (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 2006).

constitutes one of the *vedāṅgas* (“limbs of the *Veda*”) or the auxiliary sciences employed in interpreting the *Veda*.

The epic clearly takes *nirukti* seriously, as a vignette from the *Āstikā-parvan*, the fifth minor book of the *Mahābhārata*, illustrates. Following the bard’s initial narration of the story of a wandering ascetic named Jaratkāru, Śaunaka asks the bard: “This I wish to hear. Pray tell me the etymology of *jaratkāru*.” The bard resolves the word into *jarā* and *kāru* and interprets the word as “monstrous destruction” (*Mahābhārata* 1.36.2–3). The bard’s creative use of etymology has a deeper significance: Jaratkāru is married to a snake-woman, also named Jaratkāru, with whom he begets a son named Āstika, or “possessed of the quality ‘it is.’”²⁹ Shortly before Āstika’s birth, Jaratkāru threatens to abandon his wife. The helpless woman begs the sage to beget a son with her to fulfill Brahmā’s promise that a savior to the snakes would be born from her union with him. The sage turns and replies that there is a son in her womb. The son who is born acquires the name “Āstika.” As the bard clarifies: “Since his father before departing for the forest had said of him, ‘There is’ [*astīty uktvā*] while he was still in his mother’s womb, his name was known as ‘Āstika’” (1.44.21). The bard’s astute response thus demonstrates that he has correctly grasped the logic of the Āstika narrative: when “monstrous destruction” encounters “monstrous destruction” it gives rise to self-recognition and this self-recognition leads to salvation through engendering a knowledge of being (i.e., Āstika). Āstika thus represents the soteriological power of being, that is, the philosophical wisdom born of a philosophical discrimination between becoming and being. Hearing the bard’s profound explanation of the meanings of the names of the Āstika narrative, Śaunaka, that wise and learned seer, begins to laugh and compliments the bard, saying: “That fits!” (1.36.5). The text thus provides unambiguous evidence supporting an etymological reading, since the mythic characters Jaratkāru and Āstika both embody ontological concepts, namely, “becoming” and “being.”

The significance of this passage is highlighted through a previous occurrence of etymology in the text, in which the words *mahā bhāratam* are etymologically linked to salvation: “Once the divine seers foregathered, and on one scale they hung the four *Vedas* in the balance, and on the other scale *The Bhārata*; and both in size and weight it was the heavier. Therefore, because of its size and weight, it is called *The Mahābhārata*—he who knows this etymology is freed from all sins” (1.1.208–209). Thus etymology functions not merely accidentally as poetic rhetoric but as an index for what is of ultimate concern to humans: destruction and salvation.³⁰

²⁹ I thank Gregory Bailey for this translation (personal communication).

³⁰ Salvation can only be of moment to creatures for whom destruction is an imminent and inescapable possibility; it is its essential precondition, we might say.

These various examples suggest that the idea of a “strictly correct” etymology is misleading: etymology in these narratives is subjected to the demands of meaning rather than the other way around. But the significance of *nirukti* is not restricted to the outermost frame narrative alone. In the *Śāntiparvan*, one of the most philosophically significant texts of the Mahābhārata, *nirukti* links the outer frame narratives to the text’s central narrative, and especially to the text’s secret import: Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa’s identities as Nara and Nārāyaṇa. Janamejaya asks Vaiśampāyana (12.138.1) for the various names used by ṛṣi Vyāsa and his disciples to glorify Madhusūdana, along with their etymological significances (*nāmabhir vividhair eṣām niruktam*). In response, the text connects the Vaiśampāyana frame with the innermost narrative, the Kuru narrative. Vaiśampāyana responds by relating a dialogue between Arjuna and Bhagavān. In 12.328.6–7, Arjuna asks the Lord, Keśava, not only to recount the divine names (*yāni nāmāni*) but also for their secret (*guhyaṇi*) etymological significance (*teṣām niruktam tvatto ’ham śrotum icchāmi keśava*).

Two other narrations need to be mentioned. In response to Janamejaya’s question, Vaiśampāyana declares that he will repeat what he heard from Vyāsa (*hanta te kathayiṣyāmi yan me pṛṣṭaḥ purā guruḥ*; 12.327.15), thus referring to the most original narration the epic mentions of itself (Vyāsa’s narration to his five disciples). And as soon as the Arjuna-Bhagavān dialogue ends, the Nārāyaṇīya returns to the epic’s outermost frame, the Śaunaka-Sauti frame. There, Śaunaka will test Ugraśravas on his knowledge of etymology (*jaratkāruniruktam tvam yathāvad vaktum arhasi*; 1.36.2b). *Nirukti* thus forms a guiding thread that goes through the two frames (Śaunaka-Ugraśravas, Janamejaya-Vaiśampāyana) as well as that previous narration which Vaiśampāyana narrates to Janamejaya and the interior dialogue between Arjuna and the Lord. Thus, between the etymology of Jaratkāru narrated in the Ādiparvan and the etymologies of the names of Nārāyaṇa in the Nārāyaṇīya, the full unrolling of the epic occurs, proceeding from the monstrous destruction of becoming to that being which is unfallen.

Given the omnipresence of semantic etymologies in the Ruru narrative and also in the Mahābhārata as a whole, semantic etymology is an indispensable tool in understanding the text’s meaning. As we shall see, the Ruru narrative, too, makes use of semantic etymology as a means of elucidating the epic’s soteriological project. Thus, not only is etymology a widely used device in poetic composition,³¹ but it becomes a key tool in excavating an inter-

³¹ Smith’s observation that “resemblance” constitutes the “philosophical center around which all Vedic thought revolves” and that “universal resemblance” can be a means toward “reform[ing] our understanding of the Vedic preoccupation with making and finding connections” is especially insightful here, as the Mahābhārata’s opening books are rich in conscious “doublings,” not least in the fact that the epic has two nearly identical beginnings. Brian K. Smith, *Reflections on Resemblance, Ritual and Religion* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 47. For an

nal logic of motifs that bear out the claim above that the Ruru and Orpheus narratives share more than just a superficial literary resemblance.

ETYMOLOGICAL CLUES

The names of the protagonists in the Ruru narrative are highly significant. Let us begin by examining their etymological and semantic resonances, before elucidating their function in the narrative. To begin with one of the earliest figures in the lineage, the name Cyavana means: “moving, the being deprived of, falling from any divine existence for being re-born as a man.”³² It derives from \sqrt{cyu} , which means: “to come forth from, to drop from, to fall down, to die, to be deprived of, to perish.”³³ The Mahābhārata itself makes use of this etymology in elucidating Cyavana’s name: “And the child she bore alive in her womb, O descendant of the Bhṛgu, angrily fell [*cyutah*] from his mother’s womb and thus became known as Cyavana” (1.6.2).³⁴

Ruru’s father’s name, Pramati, signifies “care, providence or protection.”³⁵ Pramati is derived from *pra* \sqrt{man} , which has several meanings, all of them related to thought. *Pra* \sqrt{man} means “to think upon, excogitate.”³⁶ The related root \sqrt{manth} means “to produce fire by rapidly whirling round or rotating a dry stick in another dry stick prepared to receive it, to rotate the stick for producing fire, to use friction upon any part of the body with the object of producing offspring from it, to churn (milk into butter), agitate.”³⁷

The name Pramadvarā means “inattentive, careless.”³⁸ It is cognate with *pramāda*, which means: “intoxication, madness, mistake.”³⁹ It derives from \sqrt{mad} , which means: “to rejoice, be glad, exult, be drunk (also fig.) with.”⁴⁰ The Mahābhārata justifies her name by referring to her intoxicating beauty:⁴¹ “She grew up a shapely woman, radiant in that hermitage of his, surpassing

interpretation of the double beginning of the Mahābhārata, see Vishwa Adluri, “Frame Narratives and Forked Beginnings: Or, How to Read the *Ādiparvan*,” *Journal of Vaishnava Studies* 19, no. 2 (Spring): 143–210.

³² Monier-Williams, *Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. “Cyavana.”

³³ *Ibid.*, s.v. “ \sqrt{cyu} .”

³⁴ Cyavana’s fall can obviously be seen on two levels: (1) literal, and (2) metaphorical. At a literal level, the passage recounts a physical fall from the womb; at a metaphorical level, it represents a metaphysical “fall into becoming,” as we have argued. We reject the former interpretation, as it neither elucidates the passage nor is it possible to remain on the level of strict literalism: a child that fell physically from the womb might be expected to bawl rather than burn down *rākṣasas* with its radiance.

³⁵ Monier-Williams, *Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. “Pramati.”

³⁶ *Ibid.*, s.v. “*pra* \sqrt{man} .”

³⁷ *Ibid.*, s.v. “ \sqrt{manth} .”

³⁸ *Ibid.*, s.v. “Pramadvarā.”

³⁹ *Ibid.*, s.v. “*pramāda*.”

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, s.v. “ \sqrt{mad} .”

⁴¹ Her beauty is conveyed by the word *varā* (= “choice, beauty”). *Pramat* is a present participle, whereas *vara* is an adjective or a noun.

all temptresses in all the virtues of her beauty. Therefore, the great seer gave her the name of Pramadvārā” (1.8.9–10). Further, in a conversation between the seer Sanatsujāta and king Dhṛtarāṣṭra in the *Sanatsujātīyaparvan* from the fifth major book of the epic, the seer links the cognate *pramāda* to mortality: “Some hold non-death comes about by the rite, / While some maintain that there is no death. / Now listen to me, king, while I explain . . . The death that the seers believe in is *folly*. / I say to you distraction is death [*pramādam vai mṛtyum*]: / To be never distraught is to live forever.”⁴²

The name Ruru refers to “a species of antelope” or “a kind of savage animal.”⁴³ It derives from \sqrt{ru} , which means “to roar; howl; break or dash to pieces; to go; to kill; to be angry; to speak.”⁴⁴ *Ruru* is also cognate with *raurava*, which means “fearful; one of the hells; a savage monster.”⁴⁵ The characteristic feature of this hell is that it is peopled by *rurus*, “a kind of dreadful serpent.”⁴⁶

As for the story within the Ruru story, Sahasrapāda means “thousand-footed” or “thousand-rayed.”⁴⁷ Khagama means “moving in the air,” “flying (said of *gandharvas* and of missile weapons),” and “a bird.”⁴⁸ While any of these meanings is possible,⁴⁹ as they map a spatial contrast (aerial vs. terrestrial) on to the temporal contrast we have discussed here (eternity vs. time), we argue that the primary meaning intended here is “a bird,” as the snake-bird opposition foreshadows the rivalry between Garuḍa and the serpents in the next book. Indeed, one can rule out the alternative meanings “missile” or “*gandharva*” based on the context.

Finally, as we saw above, Āstika has the meaning: “possessed of the quality ‘there is’.”⁵⁰ Again, the text itself provides this etymology: “Since his father before departing for the forest had said of him, ‘There is’ [*asīty uktvā*], while he was still in his mother’s womb, his name was known as ‘Āstika’” (Mahābhārata 1.44.20).

RECONSTRUCTING THE MYTH

The myth of Ruru appears to articulate three distinct stages: forgetting or heedlessness, danger, and recognition. Let us see how the etymological mean-

⁴² Mahābhārata 5.42.3–4. *The Mahābhārata*, vol. 3, trans. J. A. B. van Buitenen (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978).

⁴³ Monier-Williams, *Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. “Ruru.”

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, s.v. “ \sqrt{ru} .”

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, s.v. “*raurava*.”

⁴⁶ Mani Vettam, *Purāṇic Encyclopedia: A Comprehensive Dictionary with Special Reference to the Epic and Purāṇic Literature* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1975), 368.

⁴⁷ Monier-Williams, *Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. “Sahasrapāda.”

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, s.v. “Khagama.”

⁴⁹ We thank an anonymous reviewer for raising this important point.

⁵⁰ I gratefully acknowledge Gregory Bailey for the translation (personal communication).

ings derived above articulate a comprehensive narrative of a fall from being: the first level, forgetting, is represented through the names Cyavana, Pramati, and Ruru and, in particular, through Pramadvarā's tragic fate. Cyavana's name suggests that on one level he represents a fall into becoming (compare the name Acyuta or "the unfallen one" as one of the names of Viṣṇu/Kṛṣṇa). In contrast, his son Pramati could be seen as representing the agitation or churning of creative thought (*cogito, co-agitatio*).⁵¹ Ruru, whose name suggests a duplication of \sqrt{ru} , can be seen as embodying the multiplicity of becoming in contrast to the oneness of being. The Bṛghu genealogy thus can be seen as articulating a progressive fall away from being.

Multiplication as an explanation for cosmogenesis is also attested to in the *Nārāyaṇīya*,⁵² where the One Being, Hari, first becomes fourfold, creating the four *vyūhas*. These *vyūhas* precede the creation of the universe. Narratologically, the epic places the Nara-Nārāyaṇa pair and the Śvetadvīpa beings between the *vyūha* narratives and the One Being.⁵³ Thus, the epic is fully aware of duplication as an explanation of how the One Being became many.

⁵¹ On churning as a metaphor for cosmogony, see Mahābhārata 1.15.1–1.16.40. According to Kuiper, one of the primordial cosmogonic theories is "that the earth was the result of a process of coagulation, an idea also found in Semitic mythology. This can be compared with *Jaiminīya Brāhmaṇa* III.360, line 11, *Bṛhad-Araṇyaka Upaniṣad* 1.2.2., and *Aitareya Upaniṣad* I.13. The best-known variant of this theory is the "Churning of the Ocean," which may be called a creation myth insofar as the coagulation is here the result of the joined efforts of the Devas and the Asuras" (F. B. J. Kuiper, "Cosmogony and Conception: A Query," *History of Religions* 10, no. 2 [November 1970]: 100).

⁵² The *Nārāyaṇīya* occurs in bk. 12 of the Mahābhārata, titled *Śāntiparvan*. The *Śāntiparvan* contains three sections (*Rājadharmā, Āpadharmā, and Mokṣadharmā parvans*), with the *Nārāyaṇīya* appearing in the last of these sections. Like the Bhagavadgītā, it contains eighteen chapters (chaps. 321–339) and is, alongside the *Ādiparvan, Sanatsujātīyaparvan, and the Anugītā*, one of the key hermeneutic texts for understanding the Mahābhārata. The immediate context of the text is an extended dialogue between the fallen Kuru patriarch Bhīṣma and the victorious king Yudhiṣṭhira regarding the various forms of dharma. This text is distinguished by the glorification of Nārāyaṇa as the supreme reality. It includes the divine sage Nārada's visit to the mystical island Śvetadvīpa, where Nārāyaṇa reveals himself in his universal form. The text is interesting, as it provides not only a well-developed theology but also philosophical discussions on ontology, cosmology, etymology, divinity, and ritual. A summary of the various incarnations of Nārāyaṇa in his various soteriological forms occurs here—a theme that is richly developed in the *Purāṇas*.

⁵³ Sage Nārada realizes that the highest Being has become *four*. So, he goes to seek out *two* of these four, the *ṛsis* Nara and Nārāyaṇa. These two are a pair. When he reaches their retreat, he is surprised to find them engaged in worship. "You are glorified as the unborn, the eternal, the creator, considered to be immortal and insuperable. . . . To whom today do you sacrifice?—which god or which ancestor—we know not!" (Mahābhārata 12.321.24–26; Adluri's trans.). Learning that the One is higher than the four, he sets out to behold that highest Being. He travels to Śvetadvīpa or the "White Island," a luminous abode inhabited by beings that lack senses and appear to live off of the radiance of the sun. But the most interesting thing about these beings is that they are dyadic. For example, each of these radiant beings is endowed with four testicles, sixty-four teeth, and one hundred lines on the soles of their feet. A clear numerology is being worked out here. The text then tells us how, before Nārada arrived there, three "sons of the Creator," Ekata, Dvita, and Trita had previously come there to view the One Being. In spite of their *askesis* they failed, because they

Ruru is captivated by the sensory beauty of Pramadvarā. The narrative presents both an etymological justification of her name (she is named for her intoxicating beauty) and a dramatic justification: in the narrative she blindly⁵⁴ steps on a snake on the ground and dies⁵⁵ as a consequence of its bite.⁵⁶ When Ruru turns to an ontic, empirical object,⁵⁷ he falls away from “providence” or Pramati.

The process of his fall follows a definite series of stages, which can perhaps best be understood through turning to the Bhagavadgītā, which occurs in the sixth book of the Mahābhārata, the *Bhīṣmaparvan*. Bhagavadgītā 2.62–63 describes the stages involved in the fall from being into becoming: “When a man thinks about sense objects, an interest in them develops. From this interest grows desire, from desire anger; from anger arises delusion, from delusion loss of memory, from loss of memory the death of the spirit, and from the death of the spirit one perishes.”⁵⁸ The Ruru narrative appears to follow these stages. The first stage is depicted through Ruru’s interest in the sensuous and desirable young maiden, Pramadvarā. This interest blossoms into desire, and Ruru

lacked intense love or *bhakti*. Literally translated, the names Ekata, Dvita, and Trita mean Unity, Duality, and Trinity. Nārada is luckier, but the vision he is granted of the One is a unity, a vision of the “form of all beings”: *viśvarūpa*. This One Being surprisingly shimmers in various colors and is glorified with numerous names. The *simple One*, he is told, is beyond this cosmic form and is ineffable and incomprehensible. But the discourse that follows insists that cosmology and soteriology are intimately linked and that the One Being is to be experienced (rather than viewed) through exclusive and unwavering love, and a philosophical system for this is expounded. Remarkably, when Nārada returns to Badarī *āśrama*, the abode of Nara and Nārāyaṇa, the two appear to be like the inhabitants of Śvetadvīpa: the pair has become a dyad.

⁵⁴ Following Śaṅkara, the eighth-century CE philosopher, Vedānta makes use of the metaphor of the snake upon the rope as a way of expressing the relation of being to becoming. In this metaphor, being is likened to a rope, while becoming is likened to an illusory snake seen on not-perceiving or misperceiving the rope. “Overpowered by ignorance, a deluded one mistakes one thing for another. Due to the absence of discrimination, the idea of a rope arises in the snake. One who mistakes it thus falls into great calamities. Hence, listen my friend, mistaking the unreal for the real is, indeed, bondage” (*Vivekacūḍāmaṇi*, 138; all translations are the authors’). Failing to realize the deadliness of becoming, one steps into its violent cycle and succumbs repeatedly to death. Paradoxically, in this particular verse, the Vedāntic interpretation of the snake-on-the-rope metaphor is inverted. It is thus closer to the Mahābhārata than to classical Vedānta. It seems to be the epic’s view that becoming is deadlier than it appears to be.

⁵⁵ On inadvertence in relation to mortality, see *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi*, 329: “To a discriminative knower of *brahman* there is no greater death than not being assiduously established in *brahman*. One who is thoroughly established in *brahman* attains liberation. Therefore, be diligently established in *brahman*.”

⁵⁶ See *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi*, 61: “Excepting the knowledge of *brahman*, there is no other remedy for one who is bitten by the serpent of ignorance. What can the *Vedas*, *śāstras*, mantras, or medicine accomplish?”

⁵⁷ See *Kaṭha Upaniṣad*, 2.1.1: “The self-existent Lord pierced the senses outward. Therefore, one sees the external things and not the inner self. A rare discriminating man, desiring immortality, turns his eyes inward and beholds the indwelling self” (authors’ trans.).

⁵⁸ “*dhyāyato viṣayān puṁsaḥ saṅgas teṣūpajāyate / saṅgāt saṁjāyate kāmaḥ kāmāt krodho bhijāyate // krodhād bhavati saṁmohāḥ saṁmohāt smṛtīvibhramāḥ / smṛtībhrāṁśād buddhinaśo buddhinaśāt praṇāyati //*”

wishes to marry her and be with her. The narrative then moves to the next stage of this process, that is, from elucidating forgetfulness to danger. When Ruru's desire to be with Pramadvārā is frustrated, it turns into anger and anger then clouds his judgment. He indiscriminately attacks the snakes, even those that have not harmed him in any way. Ruru's delusion is indeed so great that he has forgotten himself: not only in the metaphorical sense but even in a deep ontological sense. He forgets that he is a brahmin, one whose primary duty is to study and remember brahman,⁵⁹ or true being, and not to perpetrate violence, whether justified or unjustified.⁶⁰ More seriously, he forgets his true nature as the son of Pramati or true being and identifies himself with the temporality of a life span. This process of becoming finite continues in his commerce with the finite: he gives up half the measure of his finite life span for his beloved.

At this point, the narrative takes a curious turn: it introduces a talking lizard who is also called Ruru, who informs the dumbfounded brahmin: "I was once the thousand-footed seer Ruru—and here I am reduced to a reptile [*bhujagatvam*] by the curse of a brahmin" (Mahābhārata 1.10.7). Indeed, the talking lizard shares not only Ruru's name but also his fate. Both Rurus have fallen to the level of a lower creature: the seer has become a reptile; the young son of Pramati has forgotten his brahmin nature and has become a brutal killer. Further, the seer Sahasrapāda Ruru embodies yet another level of duplication: he is cursed to become a powerless reptile for frightening the seer Khagama with a snake made of grass. Like Ruru, he has fallen through the power of images or fallen prey to images. The narrative of the two Rurus can be best explained as follows: the two Rurus are not distinct from each other, and Ruru does not meet some other being in the forest—he encounters himself as in a mirror. The danger becomes apparent once it is mirrored.

Once the seer's name is revealed, the narrative moves on to the third stage: recognition. Ruru heeds the warning articulated by the lizard: on seeing himself reflected in the object of his hate, he is awakened once more to his true nature. He recalls his name and his own history: he has fallen to the level of a rep-

⁵⁹ See Mahābhārata 5.43.29, 5.43.37: "only one who does not stray from the truth should be known as a brahmin. . . . The brahmin who stands on the truth sees *brahman*." *The Mahābhārata*, vol. 3, trans. J. A. B. van Buitenen (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978). In the third major book of the Mahābhārata, the Yudhiṣṭhira is asked who a brahmin is (3.177.15) and he answers thus: "He is known as a brahmin, king of Snakes, in whom truthfulness, liberality, patience, deportment, mildness, self-control, and compassion are found. And he may gain knowledge of the supreme Brahman, beyond happiness and unhappiness, Snake, on reaching which they grieve no more" (3.177.16–17). *The Mahābhārata*, vol. 2, trans. J. A. B. van Buitenen (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975). For other references to the link between the brahmin and remembering brahman, see *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 4.4.22 and 2.4.6.

⁶⁰ Ruru's confusion of roles has parallels to both Arjuna and Paraśurāma. Arjuna is a *ksatriya* who receives philosophical instruction (*jñāna*), while Paraśurāma is a brahmin who takes up arms against the *ksatriyas*.

tile that desires to harm others but cannot.⁶¹ His violence is ultimately directed against himself, in that he is both oppressor and oppressed.⁶² The duplication of Rurus mirrors the morphological duplication of the name itself—Ruru is formed through a duplication of \sqrt{ru} , meaning, “to howl.” Ruru’s name refers to the nature of existence as a repeated howl at becoming. Indeed, becoming, forever prey to death, is inscribed into the very language at its most basic grammatical level as a painful howl.⁶³ Further, *ruru* is also the name of a terrible serpent. The young brahmin is himself a snake, a denizen of a *rauravam*: a hell inhabited by *rurus*. The two Rurus share the same fate in more ways than one.

Let us come to the name of the final protagonist in this narrative, the seer whose curse transforms a young boy into a snake—Khagama. Khagama means “a bird.” The antagonism between the bird and the reptile foreshadows the story of Garuḍa and his cousins the snakes at Mahābhārata 1.21.1–1.30.25. In 1.30.15–20, Garuḍa fetches the nectar of immortality (*amṛta*) and places it on *kuśa* grass but Indra steals it before the snakes can partake of it. The snakes, in a futile attempt to gain immortality, lick the grass and the sharp grass causes them to become fork-tongued.

In the myth, Khagama’s words have a transformative power: they turn the young Sahasrapāda Ruru into a reptile and hold out the prospect that he will regain his original form on meeting Ruru, the son of Pramati. However, this poetic power of transformation is limited in its effect and thus akin to the stolen *amṛta* placed on the grass, which cannot bring the snakes the salvation they seek. Indeed, Khagama says that the young Sahasrapāda will be relieved of his curse on meeting Ruru, son of Pramati or the son of “providence.” Thus,

⁶¹ The lizard too has been cursed to become a powerless reptile: “As you made a powerless snake [*sarpahī*] to frighten me, so by my anger you shall become a powerless reptile [*bhujamgas*]” (Mahābhārata 1.11.4).

⁶² Oppressor and oppressed exchange places in the narrative. Similarly, Empedocles, who subscribed to Orphism and its belief in metempsychosis, asserts an equivalence between the eater of meat and the food he eats. “Will you not desist from harsh-sounding bloodshed? Do you not see / That you are devouring each other in the heedlessness of your understanding? / For indeed, mad with harsh evils / you will never relieve your heart from wretched griefs. / A father lifts up his dear son, who has changed his form, / and prays and slaughters him, in great folly, and they are at a loss / as they sacrifice the suppliant. But he, on the other hand, deaf to the rebukes, / sacrificed him in his halls, and prepared himself an evil meal. / In the same way, a son seizes his father and children their mother, / and tearing out their life-breath devour their own dear flesh” (Empedocles, frags. 136, 145, 137; the arrangement of fragments follows Inwood: *The Poem of Empedocles: A Text and Translation with an Introduction*, trans. Brad Inwood [Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001], 271).

⁶³ For the notion of creation as a fearful event, see Stella Kramrisch, *The Presence of Śiva* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981), 1–2: “It is when time is about to begin. In the dawn of the world, when the black cow of cosmic night lies with the ruddy cows of morning (RV. 10.61.14), two figures appear, the Father and the virgin daughter, his own daughter. They are the two actors in the primordial scene. The father makes love to the daughter. Suddenly he pulls back, his seed falls to earth, the place of sacrifice (RV. 10.61.7). . . . In spite of this mishap or on account of it, soon the patter was heard on earth of the progeny of the Father (RV. 10.61.9). . . . Creation is an act of violence that infringes upon the Uncreate, the undifferentiated wholeness that is before the beginning of things.”

in this myth, the claims of poetic immortality are made to give way to a salvation of a different order, namely, ontological salvation.

The amplification of two Rurus is not restricted merely to a doubling of characters or fates. The lizard's proper name is Sahasrapāda Ruru, or the thousand-footed Ruru. But a lizard has four feet, while a human only has two. The name cannot refer to real feet. It is rather an etymological clue for Ruru's multiple past lives. Feet are a metaphor for walking in becoming in contrast to abidance in being.⁶⁴ Sahasrapāda is to be understood as a multiplication of lives or embodiments rather than a grotesque multiplication of a body part.

These several multiplications—a snake that turns out to be a lizard, a seer who was turned into a lizard for making a snake of grass, a lizard that turns out to be a seer, and a seer who is the nominal image of the sage Ruru—highlight the fact that becoming is a series of images without an original.⁶⁵ On the verge of destroying himself, the distraught Ruru discovers the mind-boggling multiplicity of becoming. An etymological understanding of the lizard's name awakens ontological memory in Ruru. He is the myriad beings signified by the word Sahasrapāda. In a flash he realizes that he is that one being. The return of the memory of the oneness of true being is Ruru's salvation.⁶⁶

Once the mimetic nature of the universe becomes apparent, the narratives of the two Rurus begin to converge. The snake first reveals itself to be a lizard, the lizard then becomes a man, and, finally, the man vanishes. His disappearance symbolizes a return to his true nature as the young brahmin Ruru as well as a reabsorption into being. This first reabsorption then continues into a second reabsorption once Ruru returns to his father, Pramati. Note that Ruru does not return to Pramadvārā. In keeping with the meaning of her name "inattentive" or "careless," she is quite appropriately forgotten. Her role in the narrative appears to be no more than that of a temporary distraction.

The introduction of Āstika into the narrative is also significant. Āstika, whose name means "possessed of the quality 'there is,'" represents salvation through being. The epic indicates this by showing how Sahasrapāda Ruru disappears once he introduces the motif of Āstika. Further, with the arrival of the

⁶⁴ Being, in contrast to becoming, is always described as immovable. "This primeval [being] is eternal, all-pervading, fixed, immovable" (nityaḥ sarvagataḥ sthāṇur acalo 'yaṃ sanatanaḥ) (Bhagavadgītā 2.24).

⁶⁵ Within Indian philosophy, the doctrine of the universe as an image achieves its full articulation in the philosophy of Śaṅkara, especially his nondualistic followers. In the Greek paradigm, this Orphic message reaches its fulfillment in Socratic philosophy; Socrates describes the universe as a *mimēsis* of something that is ontologically more real, that is, the Forms. For examples of this, see the allegory of the cave in Plato's *Republic* (514a–517c). A detailed analysis of the Orphic elements in Plato's *Republic* is provided in F. M. Cornford, "Plato and Orpheus," *The Classical Review* 17, no. 9 (December 1903): 433–45.

⁶⁶ On salvation through the return of discrimination, see *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi*, 387: "Upon discrimination, that which is superimposed through delusion is found to be what it really is and not something else. The falsely perceived snake becomes only the rope when delusion vanishes. Likewise, the universe, in its true nature, is the *ātman* alone."

Āstika motif, even Ruru returns to his father in a symbolic reabsorption into being and the story ends. In addition, this theme of undoing the work of genealogy and mortality extends into the outer frame of the story. The myth with which the Bhṛgu cycle begins (the myth of Cyavana) relates the story of a fall from being into becoming. That narrative cycle then ends once being arrives in the form of Āstika. There is a further proof of Āstika's function as a savior: in the next book, the *Āstikaparvan*, a snake sacrifice unfolds on a cosmic scale. King Janamejaya sacrifices the snakes by the thousands. As the snakes fall helpless into the fire, only the arrival of Āstika brings the sacrifice to an end and saves a remnant of the snakes. The snake cycle provides the necessary hermeneutic apparatus to understand the work of time on a human, mortal plane: the field of becoming or the Kuru field. Two types of activity happen on that field: the destruction of war and the ontological education of Arjuna contained in the *Bhagavadgītā*. Like Ruru who must undo Ruru, the Kuru field is the field of activity where one must undo action through "giving up" of the fruit of action.

POETIC IMMORTALITY AND SALVATION

With this overview of the myth of Ruru, let us return to our original thesis, namely, that the myths of Orpheus and Ruru present two distinct possibilities of transcendence: poetic immortality and salvation through being. In the myth of Ruru it is evident that the transformative power of words—Khagama's curse and later promise of redemption—cannot grant real immortality. The lizard lives toward an event in the future, but he can attain salvation only through a recollection of the self that engenders being. Moreover, in the case of Pramadvarā, too, we see how the words of the envoy of the gods and the king of the Gandharvas to Yama, the god of death, can only bring about a finite resurrection. Although Yama's words have the power to bring her back to life,⁶⁷ she will nonetheless have to die some day. Her situation parallels that of Eurydice: although Orpheus's music succeeds in winning her life, it is only a partial resurrection and she must return to Hades a second time. A certain shape of thought is revealed in these two myths: the transformative power of poetry encounters its limit—poetry can only grant a limited form of immortality.⁶⁸

The myth of Ruru elucidates this limit in relation to four distinct cycles—genealogical (his birth from Pramati), cosmological (Pramati as churning),⁶⁹

⁶⁷ "No sooner had he spoken than Pramadvarā arose to life with half the life of Ruru" (*Mahābhārata* 1.9.15).

⁶⁸ Shulman has shown something similar of Bhavabhūti's *Uttara-Rāma-Carita*, but this article does not extend the claim to Vyāsa's epic as a whole. This remains a topic for a longer study. We merely suggest that the poetic function of language exhibited through memory and metamorphosis (and through resurrection) is clearly made to give way to a different form of salvation, namely, salvation through self-knowledge, in the Ruru narrative.

⁶⁹ The next book, *Āstikaparvan*, presents a cosmogonic account in the story of the churning of the ocean at 1.16.30–40.

agonal (conflict with snakes), and sacrificial (the upcoming snake sacrifice). Each of these cycles begins with the fall from being into becoming and ends only through a reabsorption into being. Becoming is an endless cycle of creation and destruction—the prime index of this endlessness is the name Sahasrapāda or “thousand-fold.” Because becoming is an endless cycle, action that is directed outward cannot bring the cycle to a close.⁷⁰ Ruru, for example, cannot end becoming irrespective of how many creatures he kills. There is always a remainder that escapes to continue the cycle. This logic of the endlessness of becoming implies that salvation is possible only through turning inward to being.⁷¹

Poetry cannot reach the ultimate transcendence of being which also transcends language. Every other form of overcoming mortality, such as giving up half one’s life (in the myth of Ruru) or following one’s beloved into Hades (in the myth of Orpheus), is limited and cannot save one’s beloved for good.⁷² Segal too notes the limits of poetry in what he terms the “double aspect of Orphic power.”

[The] double aspect of Orphic power in turn corresponds to a double aspect of the power of language itself: the means to a more vibrant contact with the world or a screen between us and the world, distorting rather than focusing or clarifying reality. The myth oscillates between the power of form to master intense passion and the power of the intense passion to engulf form. Whereas the success of Orpheus reflects the power of language, raised to its furthest limits, to cross the boundaries between opposing realms of existence, matter and consciousness, and finally life and death, his failure represents the inability of the language of art to empty itself beyond the subjectivity of the artist, to reach beyond emotion and obey the laws of an objective reality outside, in this case the conditions that the gods of the underworld impose for Eurydice’s return.⁷³

Given the limitation of poetic immortality (*kleos aphthitos* or *amṛta*), a second soteriological possibility must be sought (*sōtēria* or *mokṣa*). Indeed, both the Ruru narrative and the Orpheus narrative have a sequel in their respective

⁷⁰ As Hildebeitel notes, this is a motif common to both Greek and Indian myth: “As one cycle of violence builds upon and reverts back to another, as different species feed off each other in the cauldron of time, is there no appeasement? It forces the question of the *Eumenides*: have the Furies no end? And of course the answer is always yes, although the resolutions always leave ambiguous remainders” (*Rethinking the Mahābhārata*, 115).

⁷¹ On turning inward and ending becoming from within, see *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi*, 302: “The thesaurus of *brahman* bliss is guarded by the very strong and dreadful serpent of ego coiled around it, with its three fierce heads made up of the three *guṇas*. Only a wise man, having cut off the three heads with the mighty sword of wisdom, destroys the serpent completely and becomes able to experience this bliss bestowing treasure.”

⁷² See *The Story of Yayāti* (Mahābhārata 1.79.1–1.80.10), where a king exchanges his decrepitude for his son’s youthfulness but still has to die at the end of this second youth.

⁷³ Segal, *Orpheus*, 8.

traditions. Orpheus is said to have composed verses, which inaugurate a transformative and soteriological philosophy that continues through Pythagoras down to the Neoplatonists. One can also find a similar concern with the limitations of poetic immortality in Plato's *Republic*: in the dialogue's concluding myth of Er, Plato presents a new saving myth (see *mūthos esōthē*; 621b) in place of Homer's *nostos* myth of the *Odyssey*. In this new myth, the Homeric concept of *nostos* of a homecoming from the sea is replaced by a new form of soteriology, namely, the transcendence possible through philosophy. Plato does not merely adopt the structure and language of Homer's *Odyssey* but articulates a profound critique of Homer as the "poet of becoming," by contrasting the reflowing or "backward-turning" character of the sea as a metaphor for the nature of becoming with the transcendence of being. Thus, although Odysseus has a successful *nostos* in the *Odyssey*, he is shown as setting forth again on the sea. Picking up on this motif, the *Republic's* concluding myth of Er presents Odysseus as choosing a new life at the lot of lives and thus choosing to return to becoming (620c). In contrast, the Platonic hero Er does not participate in the lot of lives and hence represents a higher transcendence: that of the noetic salvation of philosophy. Er goes "beyond" the Homeric hero Odysseus. In capping the story of the souls' cycle of continuous reincarnation with Er's nonparticipative theoretical viewing (see *theāsthai*; *Republic* 614d) of the cosmos as a whole, Plato makes a new form of salvation possible: it is no longer the return to rocky Ithaca implicit in the Homeric "*nostos*" but a return to being and, ultimately, to the Good itself of which Socrates says that it "is not being, but superior to it in rank and power [*epekeina tēs ousias*]" (509b). This pedagogic journey constitutes the core of the Platonic *epanodos* or ascent (521c, 532b).⁷⁴ The distinction between being and becoming is thus a central principle not just of Orphic or pre-Socratic cosmologies but continues to structure even Platonic and post-Platonic philosophy.

In the Mahābhārata, the Ruru narrative continues into the Āstika narrative, which addresses the need for salvation through being. Moreover, just as Ruru's lamentation gives rise to salvation in the form of Āstika, Dhṛtarāṣṭra's lamentation at the beginning of the Mahābhārata is answered in the soteriological philosophy of the Bhagavadgītā. The myths of Orpheus and Ruru establish that only the desire for self-knowledge and self-realization can lead to a permanent overcoming of mortality.

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⁷⁴ For a fuller discussion, see Adluri, "Plato's Saving *Mūthos*." This section has been adapted from my paper.