

The perils of textual transmission: decapitation and recapitulation

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Prologue: Gaṇeśa as Vyāsa’s scribe has found popular but not critical acceptance. Yet, complicated issues regarding the text, its transmission, and its reception are revealed by paying attention to this story. I will first discuss the text-critical issues surrounding the later addition of this narrative to the epic, before turning to its significance. I conclude with some comments on why the popular account of Gaṇeśa’s *amanuensis* helps us understand the nature of the epic.

The 10th century dramatist Rājaśekhara prefaces his play *Pracaṇḍapāṇḍava Nāṭaka* or *Bālabhārata* with a strange vignette.¹ In a prologue, he describes a meeting between the two legendary authors of the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata*. After they compliment each other on their work, Vyāsa recounts how Gaṇeśa transcribed the entire epic at his behest.² Although the encounter between Vālmīki, the author of the

first poem (*ādikāvya*),³ and Vyāsa is Rājaśekhara’s own innovation, the story of Gaṇeśa’s amanuensis of the text is also found in the *Mahābhārata*:⁴ in fact, it is the very first narrative of the Vulgate.

In the *Mahābhārata*’s version of the story, Vyāsa does not invoke Gaṇeśa on his own initiative and austerities (*tapobhiḥ*) but on Brahmā’s advice. Brahmā appears to Vyāsa and recommends Gaṇeśa as a scribe for the massive poem (*kāvya*).⁵ The story, moved to an appendix in the *Critical Edition*,⁶ describes how Brahmā appears to Vyāsa, who describes

1. Rājaśekhara’s dates are uncertain. Prof. Apte sets the end of the 7th century as *terminus a quo* and the middle of the 10th century as *terminus ad quem* for Rājaśekhara; see his *Rājaśekhara: His Life and Writings* (1886) for a survey of the literature.

2. ‘The god Vināyaka [the remover of obstacles], the descendant of Śiva and Pārvatī, half-man and half-elephant, and who has been secured by my austerities is engaged here as my scribe in composing this compendium called *Bhārata*. I was begun to be out-witted by him. “Surely, I shall be your scribe, but it goes without saying, that if you would not compose

* My gratitude to Alf Hiltebeitel, Greg Bailey and Satish Karandikar for reading earlier drafts and for their comments.

his composition. A few, mainly Devanāgarī manuscripts,⁷ insert after line 30, Vyāsa's grievance to Brahmā that 'no writer (*lekhakaḥ*) of this work is to be found on earth.' Brahmā then praises Vyāsa and declares that as he has called his work a *kāvya*, a *kāvya* it shall be.⁸ In a second, later interpolation found in some Northern manuscripts (in the Southern manuscripts, Brahmā returns to his abode and there is no reference to Gaṇeśa), Brahmā suggests Vyāsa think of Gaṇeśa as a scribe.⁹

Vyāsa meditates on Gaṇeśa who appears to him and the sage asks him to be the scribe of the *Bhārata*¹⁰ that he has conceived in his mind.¹¹ Gaṇeśa, however, makes a strange condition: he says he will be the scribe,¹² but only if his pen does not cease writing even for a moment.¹³ Vyāsa assents but not without himself making a condition: Gaṇeśa should not write down anything he has not understood.¹⁴ Gaṇeśa's response is unusual: instead of saying '*tad astu*' or 'so be it,' he says '*om*'¹⁵ and then begins writing. Vyāsa begins composing but knits 'knots'¹⁶ into his composition so that even his omniscient scribe must pause for a

at that speed with which I would write, that would result in an obstacle for you." Then, he was also out-witted by me in response [and he acquiesced] "Om, be it so!" "Needless to say [said I], it should be written by you with understanding." And hence, I am engaged in the labor of this poetic composition.' I have followed the text as given by Winternitz (1898b, 381); my translation.

3. Although the term does not occur in the Baroda Critical Edition, I follow Hildebeitel here; cf. Hildebeitel 2005a, 462.

4. See Winternitz 1898b and 1898c for a discussion of the relation of the two versions.

5. Indeed, this is the first instance in the epic where it is referred to as a *kāvya*, a poetic composition; cf. Hildebeitel 2005a, 465-466.

6. The evidence of the manuscript tradition clearly indicates the lateness of the Gaṇeśa episode: of the manuscripts collated for the *Critical Edition*, it occurs only in some late

moment to consider¹⁷ and himself uses these pauses to compose ahead.

Noting that this is the only reference to Gaṇeśa in either Sanskrit epic, Winternitz suggests that the insertion of Gaṇeśa may be indicative of the rise in his worship in later times.¹⁸ The textual and historical evidence for Gaṇeśa's late apotheosis, however, leaves many aspects of this late insertion into the epic unanswered. Why is the Gaṇeśa 'interpolation' restricted to the *Anukramaṇīparvan* rather than occurring throughout the text? If Winternitz's hypothesis is correct, why do the references to Gaṇeśa not increase over time? Moreover, why is the *one* passage that refers to Gaṇeśa placed at the epic's very outset?¹⁹

What is the significance of the fact that the Gaṇeśa story occurs outside of the two frame narratives (Ugraśravas' narration of the epic to

Northern (Devanāgarī) manuscripts; it is completely absent from the Southern recension texts and the Kaśmīri version K₁₂; the text closest to Sukthankar's archetype Ś (the Śārada codex, unfortunately, is incomplete and begins with the *Sabhāparvan*).

7. I.e., K₆, D_n, D_p, D_{2.5}.

8. *tvayā ca kāvyam ity uktam tasmāt kāvyam bhaviṣyati*; App. I, line 34.

9. *sarvajño 'pi gaṇeśo yataḥṣaṇamāste vicārayan*; App. I, apud line 36.

10. *lekhako bhāratasyāsyā bhava tvam gaṇanāyaka*; App. I, apud line 36; Vulgate 1.1.77.

11. *manasā kalpitasya*; App. I, apud line 36; Vulgate 1.1.77.

12. *tadasyāṃ lekhako hyham*; App. I, apud line 36; Vulgate 1.1.78.

13. *yadī me lekhanī kṣaṇam*; App. I, apud line 36; Vulgate 1.1.78.

14. *devamabuddhvā mā likha kacit*; App. I, apud line 36; Vulgate 1.1.79.

15. Cf. *omityuktā*; App. I, apud line 36; Vulgate 1.1.79.

16. *granthagranthim*; App. I, apud line 36; Vulgate 1.1.80.

17. *sarvajño 'pi gaṇeśo yataḥṣaṇamāste vicārayan*; App. I, apud line 36; Vulgate 1.1.83.

the seers of the Naimiṣa forest and Vaiśampāyana's narration of the epic at Janamejaya's snake sacrifice) that frame the core Kuru narrative? The narrative seems to invoke Gaṇeśa to solve some problem. The issue is not simply a matter of dictation. Has Vyāsa already composed the poem or not? If he has, is the difficulty here simply a matter of writing it down? Why does Gaṇeśa impose conditions and why does Vyāsa insist on Gaṇeśa comprehending every detail? From the few details the story gives us, the problem is not one of simple dictation of a ready-to-write composition. Issues of composition and scribing aside, this story can barely contain the anxiety related to transmission.

Orality vs. writing: In his analysis of the mythography of Gaṇeśa, Courtright suggests that the story 'illustrates the obstacles or "knots" involved in the transmission from an oral to a written medium' (2001, 152). Courtright's explanation, however, depends on our accepting the epic's origins as an oral composition, a view that is now increasingly regarded with suspicion. Alf Hildebeitel, one of the main defenders of a 'written Mahābhārata,' writes:

... whatever preceded the Mahābhārata orally, culturally, or

18. '...it is remarkable that our legend is the only legend of Gaṇeśa found in the epic literature. I am not aware that Gaṇeśa is even mentioned in any other passage either of the *Rāmāyaṇa* or of the *Mahābhārata*, and it may well be doubted whether he has any claim to a place in the Epic Pantheon. ...But that a deity who has become so popular in later times should occur in the epic literature only in *one* passage, makes this one passage very suspicious' (1898d, 81).

19. The Gaṇeśa episode is not, however, simply an invocatory *mantra* to the lord of beginnings for it follows both the invocation to Nara and Nārāyaṇa (*nārāyaṇam namaskṛtya naraṃ caiva narottamam*; 1.1.0) and that to the goddess Sarasvatī (*devīm sarasvatīm caiva tato jayam udīrayet*; 1.1.0).

in other unknown forms, the Poona Critical Edition of the Mahābhārata shows that for *about* two millennia the work that has moved people is a book, and that in that sense one must speak of all its audiences – oral ones included – as *readers*. Indeed, the text created a ‘reading community’. One cannot posit a pre-written Mahābhārata simply using the analogy of other oral epics. Nowhere has an oral epic been found to have emerged in a literary vacuum, such as is now posited for Vedic India and, by and large, for pre-classical Hinduism (2005b, 86).

I will return to the question of orality vs. literacy below as this question is intimately connected with the epic’s frame narratives. In fact, as Hildebeitel has argued, ‘The clearest evidence for writing would come not from this “main Mahābhārata”, ...but from the enlarged “Gupta text”, where a definite reference to writing and likely allusions to books can be found in didactic material and in connection with the Mahābhārata’s three interwoven frame stories’ (2004, 206). My aim in this article is to develop this relation between the epic’s outer narratives and its literary, written, and philosophical character further. I will argue that this ‘late interpolation’ is a *last and necessary* addition to the text: once the reader (as its scribe, Gaṇeśa is also the first reader of the text) is added to the text, the logic of expansion is complete and there are no further interpolations outside of this ‘fantastic story’ (Sukthankar 1933a, LXXV) of the text’s transcription by Gaṇeśa.

Even if we were to accept Courtright’s hypothesis of a transition from orality to literacy, the problem with this otherwise neat interpretation is that the relationship between

orality and writing in the Mahābhārata is much more complex. Hildebeitel, for example, suggests that the epic, although written, self-consciously imitates orality.²⁰ The embedding framework set in the Naimiṣa forest, for example, which even scholars of the ‘oral epic’ hypothesis concede must belong to the stage of a written epic, manifestly imitates orality as it depicts the bard Ugraśravas *narrating* the epic to an audience.

This inversion is not the only one. One would expect a god, especially one known for a keen intellect such as Gaṇeśa to undertake the composition of the text and a human to write it down. However, our expectations of a creative god and a mimetic mortal are inverted in the Gaṇeśa story. Viewing the Gaṇeśa episode as a fable of orality struggling to become writing does not work. The situation is further complicated by the role of memory in preserving and transmitting texts, since writing, by eliminating the need for recollection, undermines that paramount philosophical faculty: memory.²¹

Before we turn to the issue of writing and memory, let us first consider the strange conditions Vyāsa and Gaṇeśa, mortal poet and divine scribe, mutually impose upon each other. Courtright analyzes this double condition as ‘a battle of wits’ in which Vyāsa tries ‘to stay ahead of Gaṇeśa, who will only write as long as Vyāsa does

20. See Hildebeitel 2005b, 89 and *passim*.

21. That the epic belongs to the literary genre of *smṛti* (that which is remembered) rather than *śruti* (that which is heard) is significant. Note also that at the end of the *Bhagavadgītā*, Arjuna says that his delusion is destroyed and he has regained his memory (*naṣṭo mohaḥ smṛtir labdhā; BhG 18.73*), underscoring the ontological and philosophical significance of memory; compare, however, *BhG 2.63 (smṛtibhramśād buddhināšo buddhināśāt pranaśyati)*, where the loss of *smṛti*, i.e., forgetting, oblivion, are linked to utter destruction.

not stop talking; Gaṇeśa attempting to befuddle Vyāsa as he recites under the pressure of Gaṇeśa’s non-stop pen’ (2001, 152-153). But this interpretation does not work for three reasons:

1. What is the significance of Gaṇeśa’s condition that he must write uninterruptedly? If writing is seen as a merely mechanical activity, this makes no sense, because the effort itself introduces interruptions in the form of punctuation. Rather, what is uninterrupted in writing can only be understanding or consciousness.²²

2. The transition between orality and writing is a red-herring that distracts from the serious philosophical issue of the connection between language and reality. This is clarified by Gaṇeśa’s bizarre assent to Vyāsa’s condition: instead of saying ‘*tad astu*’ or ‘so be it’, Gaṇeśa simply utters ‘*om*’. *Om* is the primordial symbol where reality and meaning are thrown together as the symbol.²³

3. Vyāsa’s condition that Gaṇeśa understand what he writes is not to test Gaṇeśa or to outwit the god, which would be futile in relation to the god and foolish in relation to Vyāsa. Vyāsa’s requirement that Gaṇeśa understand the text is, in fact, Gaṇeśa’s guarantee of the noetic value of the text.

Let us briefly return to Rājaśekhara. Rājaśekhara’s reference to Gaṇeśa in his drama cannot be anything but deliberate thus allowing us to reflect upon its function without the ballast of text-critical dogmas. The Gaṇeśa episode in Bālābhārata is not an interpolation but part of a conscious poetic composition, a *kāvya*, and thus confronts us with the task of understanding it in relation to its authorial and poetic function. In further pushing the Rājaśekhara story for clues, we should note that the Pracaṇḍapāṇḍava as a whole answers to a precise question

raised by Janamejaya in the frame narrative.

Janamejaya asks Ugraśravas, ‘How did this *bheda* arise?’²⁴ Many scholars have considered this *bheda* narrative and its climax in the great war to be the ‘kernel’ of the epic.²⁵ Rājaśekhara’s preface caps that very core with the Gaṇeśa episode and thus supplies a ‘battle of wits’ as a gloss on the ‘battle of warriors’.²⁶ By 900 A.D. then, the Mahābhārata was not merely a historical legend, but rather a text of a very different nature and Rājaśekhara’s art must be seen as a comment on a reading of the Mahābhārata acceptable to the aesthetic and popular understanding of the epic. Rājaśekhara’s narrative and the Mahābhārata narrative also underscore the deeper significance of the story of the Kuru family, the hidden *artha* or meaning.²⁷ It is precisely this *artha* that requires Gaṇeśa to pause.

Interpolations vs. addition: Rājaśekhara’s conscious addition of a ‘head’ to the *bheda* narrative in *Pracaṇḍapāṇḍava* suggests that the Gaṇeśa episode in the Mahābhārata

22. Cf. *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* 2.1.1: *jñānāmanantaṃ brahma*; note the word *anantaṃ* (= infinite, uninterrupted).

23. Greek *symballō* = to throw together, bring together, unite.

24. *katham samabhavad bhedas*; 1.54.19.

25. By ‘kernel’ I do not mean to imply that some original form of ‘*Urepos*’ can be indentified, but the crux of the genealogical narrative.

26. Gray notes that Rājaśekhara presents a genealogy at the beginning of the *Bālabhārata* (also repeated in the poet’s *Bālarāmāyaṇa*) that makes him a reincarnation of the poets Vālmīki and Bhavabhūti (see *Pracaṇḍapāṇḍava* 1.12 = *Bālarāmāyaṇa* 1.16; cf. Gray 1906, 2). In a sense, then, Rājaśekhara has written himself into his play (recalling Kālidāsa’s *Abhijñānaśākuntala*) and he shows himself, the composer and writer of his own work, entering into a conversation with Vyāsa about how Vyāsa’s own composition came to be written!

is not a random ‘interpolation’ but the work of a redactor who wished to clarify the epic’s meaning. To understand the meaning of the Gaṇeśa episode then, we should look for themes that link the mythology of Gaṇeśa to the other opening narratives of the *Ādiparvan*. I will consider this episode from three perspectives: (i) Its significance in relation to the other opening narratives of the epic, especially the sacrificial, initiatory, and matutinal themes of the *Pauṣyaparvan*. (ii) Its metaphorical significance in relation to the semantic field of *dhī* and cognate terms. (iii) And, finally, in relation to the problem of transmitting a transcendent meaning through the written word, which is a different issue than the problem of textual transmission Courtwright raises.

The story of Gaṇeśa’s birth from his mother’s scrubbings (*mala*) is so well-known that it is hardly necessary to recount it again.²⁸ Rather, I would like to point out four aspects of this story that bear upon the epic’s narratives: (a) Gaṇeśa symbolizes renewal and auspicious beginnings; (b) He is associated with initiation; indeed, the story of his creation by Pārvaṭī is a powerful symbol of death, rebirth, and apotheosis; (c) As the god propitiated before study and writing, the god has especial resonances with intellect; his massive elephantine head is the most obvious symbol of this association;²⁹ (d) Further, we may note that, analogous to Gaṇeśa’s

27. Cf. *rthasya gūḍhatvāt*; App. I, apud line 36.

28. The story of Gaṇeśa’s birth from Pārvaṭī’s *mala* occurs in *Skāṇḍapurāṇa* 2.2.27.4, 3.2.12.11, 6.214.47, *Vāyupurāṇa* 28.58, *Śivapurāṇa* 2.4.13-20, *Matsyapurāṇa* 153.501-503 and *Padmapurāṇa* 5.40.453-457. Bailey considers this version to be “overwhelmingly the most common...” (2008, 67). See Krishan 1981-82, 286 for a useful summary.

decapitation, the written word is dead unless it receives a ‘head’ in the form of the reader: writing is resurrected in reading and transformed in philosophical understanding, that is to say, it *becomes divine when understood philosophically*.³⁰

Interestingly, following the *Anukramaṇīparvan* and the *Parvasamgraha*, the *Pauṣyaparvan*, the first narrative book of the Mahābhārata also contains three stories involving near-death, initiatory experiences.³¹ As in the story of Gaṇeśa, these stories also end with the initiate gaining either knowledge, or divine illumination, or immortality, that is, with a ‘rebirth’ into a new, ‘divine’ state.

In the first story, Āruṇi is sent by his teacher Dhaumya Āyoda to repair a breach in the dike. Unable to do so at first, he finally lies down in the breach, thus stopping it with his body. When his teacher comes looking for him, he stands up and presents himself to him. Pleased with his obedience, Āyoda says he will obtain the highest good;³² both the *Vedas* and the *Dharmaśāstras* will become manifest to him.³³

In the second story, Āyoda asks another student, Upamanyu, to desist from eating. Tormented by hunger and unable to comply, Upamanyu eats the leaves of the *arka* plant, whereupon he goes blind and falls into a well. Āyoda goes looking for his student and, realizing that he has fallen into a well, advises him to praise the Aśvins with verses.³⁴ Pleased with his verses, the

29. See Krishan 1981-82, 285 for a discussion of Gaṇeśa’s various associations, especially with religious rites and learning.

30. For a philosophy that is aware of the absence of myth, the necessity of sacrifice, and decapitation as representing the ensuing anxiety, see Georges Bataille, especially *The Absence of Myth* (1994) and *Visions of Excess* (1985).

31. See lines 1.3.19-176.

32. *chreyo vāpsyasīti*; 1.3.30.

divine healers draw near and offer him a cake.³⁵ Upamanyu, however, refuses to eat the cake unless his teacher partakes of it first. Pleased with his devotion to his teacher, the Aśvins bestow him with golden teeth.³⁶ They promise that he will see again and attain well-being.³⁷ Once again, Āyoda promises his student that the knowledge of the Vedas will become manifest to him.³⁸

There follows a further story about Uttāṅka, a student of Dhaumya Āyoda's in the second generation. Uttāṅka is sent to fetch the earrings worn by Pauṣya's wife as a *guru* gift.³⁹ However, as he is returning with the earrings, they are stolen by Takṣaka, the king of snakes, who takes them to his underground realm. Uttāṅka pursues him into the netherworld and recovers the earrings by smoking the snakes out of their homes.⁴⁰ Once again, this quest leads to the conquest of mortality: Uttāṅka is only able to survive the descent into the snakes' realm because he has unknowingly received *amṛta* from Indra.⁴¹

While each of these stories manifests a pattern that has clear resonances with the story of Gaṇeśa's apotheosis, the story of Upamanyu with its references to the Aśvins provides especially rich contextualization. Frequently worshipped as

33. *sarve ca te vedāḥ pratibhāsyanti sarvāṇi ca dharmasāstrāṇīti*; 1.3.30.

34. *aśvinau stuhī*; 1.3.58.

35. *apūpam*; 1.3.71.

36. *dantāḥ ... hiraṇmayā*; 1.3.75.

37. *caḥṣuśmāṁś ca bhaviṣyasi / śreyas cāvāpsyasīti*; 1.3.75.

38. *sarve ca te vedāḥ pratibhāsyantīti*; 1.3.77.

39. *gurvartham*; 1.3.95.

40. Besides the amplification of the initiatory descent, disorientation, near-death and rebirth pattern in these vignettes from the *Pauṣyaparvan*, there are also a number of stories with explicitly soteriological motifs

bringers of light in the *Ṛg Veda*,⁴² the Dioscuri or divine twins are also invoked to bring healing, nourishing food, and salvation.⁴³ However, two aspects make them especially significant for our study here: (i) The twin gods belong neither to the earth nor the heavens, but are shown in a number of hymns as constantly moving between the two.⁴⁴ (ii) They are associated with light, poetic vision, and salvation.⁴⁵

Thus, this *Ṛg Vedic* background lets us establish several points that connect the Pauṣyaparvan narratives to the Gaṇeśa episode. We can summarize these points as follows: (a) The Gaṇeśa episode in the *Mahābhārata* has important resonances with the opening narratives, especially the themes of sacrifice, initiation, and rebirth. (b) Gaṇeśa is the first in a series of sacrificial and matutinal figures such as Saramā and the Aśvins.⁴⁶ Indeed, like the Aśvins, Gaṇeśa may also be considered a god of an inter-

in the *Ādiparvan*. To mention but three, the *Āstikaparvan* recounts the story of how Garuḍa frees his mother from slavery by fetching *amṛta* for the snakes (1.30.15-17), the story of the churning of the ocean from the same book depicts Nārāyaṇa coming to the gods' rescue in their conflict with the *asuras* (1.17.1-30), while the final narrative in the book refers to Janamejaya's snake sacrifice, in which a remnant of the snakes is saved by Āstika (1.53.1-8).

41. See lines 1.3.174-175.

42. Although the Aśvins are not very prominent in the epic (cf. Feller 2004, 207), the *Ṛg Veda* contains many hymns devoted to them; see the index to the Griffith edition for a full listing (1999, 681); see also Keith 1998, 113 on the Aśvins.

43. Besides being related to healing and salvation, the Aśvins also provide a prosthetic head to sage Dadhīci. Gaṇeśa's own head is also a prosthesis and the decapitation/recapitulation theme recurs throughout the *Mahābhārata*. See Hildebeitel 1999 on the cult of Kūttāṅṭavar/Arāvaṇ; in this south Indian retelling, the entire epic is witnessed by the decapitated head of the sacrificed Arāvaṇ.

mediary realm. (c) The twin gods also establish a link between understanding, especially poetic creativity, and light.⁴⁷

As a symbol then, the Gaṇeśa episode is *over-determined*: the main obstacle to interpretation is not that it is a late and meaningless 'interpolation' into the text but that it offers us a manifold of *hermeneutic guidelines* on *how* to read the text. Let us see how the Gaṇeśa narrative sets up the hermeneutic task in relation to the text.

Writing vs. memory: In invoking motifs of initiation, rebirth, and salvation, the Gaṇeśa episode serves a two-fold function: (i) It highlights the reader of the epic in his 'ultimate concern', that is to say, his mortal and tragic existence and his hope of salvation, and (ii) It underscores the epic's claim to being a *soteriological* text that is not only on par with the Upaniṣads⁴⁸ and the Vedas but *exceeds* them in both size and weight.⁴⁹ Indeed, the epic claims that he who knows this etymology is saved from all sins.⁵⁰

While scholars such as Wilhelm and Feller have already noted that the motif of initiation structures the Pauṣyaparvan,⁵¹ they overlook the most significant aspect of these stories: because the reader is the only

44. Cf. Oberlies 1993, *passim*: 'gods of intermediary realms' (*Götter der Zwischenbereiche*).

45. In his masterful *Vision of the Vedic Poets* (1963), Gonda provides extensive evidence of this link; see esp. p. 79, 165-166.

46. The themes of dawning light and understanding are also foregrounded in the first of the narratives of the *Pauṣyaparvan*, which tells the tale of Saramā's son, one of the Sarameyau, who is beaten for approaching a sacrifice. See my article 'Hermeneutics and Narrative Architecture in the *Mahābhārata*' (forthcoming) for a fuller discussion.

47. In Hinduism, divinity is associated with understanding and intelligence and with light: the terms *deva* (god) and *divya* (light) are

‘thing’ that can be saved here, the initiatory structure of the Pausyaparvan ultimately points to the reader as a significant component of the epic. The Gaṇeśa episode thematizes this very problem by explicitly adding the elephant-headed god to the epic. As its scribe, Gaṇeśa is also the first reader of the Mahābhārata. Indeed, the problem of writing is the problem of consciousness which is the *sine qua non* of life. Without an explicit addition of consciousness, the text is decapitated and it is fit only for autopsy. Further, because the head as the abode of consciousness is divine, the head of the Mahābhārata *corpus* is Gaṇeśa. Who better to understand the politics of the head and its connection to the corpus than the god with the transplanted head? The Gaṇeśa story is neither an interpolation nor about transcription, it is the transplantation of consciousness onto the corpus of the epic.

As a symbol for the reader, the Gaṇeśa narrative occurs not only outside the main Kuru narrative, but outside the two outer frame narratives as well. While the latter constitute a response to the problem of how a text can relate its own narration,⁵² the Gaṇeśa story is not concerned with the narration of the text and is not counted

cognates deriving from the same root (\sqrt{div} = to shine). Indeed, as Gonda notes, ‘the Skt. noun *dhīḥ* is like *vision* closely associated with a verb expressing the idea of “seeing”. By “vision” is, in the following pages, to be understood the exceptional and supranormal faculty, proper to “seers”, of “seeing”, in the mind, things, causes, connections as they really are, the faculty of acquiring a sudden knowledge of the truth, of the functions and influences of the divine powers, of man’s relation to them etc.’ (1963, 68-69).

48. Cf. *atropaniśadam puṇyāṃ kṛṣṇadvaiṇyaṃ bravūt*; 1.1.191.

49. *mahatve cagurutve*; 1.1.208.

50. *niruktam asya yo veda sarvapāpaiḥ pracrucyate*; 1.1.209.

51. Cf. Wilhelm 1965, Feller 2004.

among its frame devices. Indeed, it remains self-consciously outside the text’s limits. Situated between Vyāsa and the reader, Gaṇeśa *bridges* the semantic space between poetic inspiration and the process of transference of meaning from the poet to his audience. It is thus both an acknowledgment of the difficulties of semantic transmission and an explicit reference to the reader’s understanding in which the text fulfills itself.

Hence, rather than dismissing this central and well-loved episode on superficial text-historical grounds, Gaṇeśa’s presence at the text’s beginning should be seen as a response to the anxiety of poetic creation, which has to communicate the truth in addition to ‘seeing’ it. That this anxiety already haunts the very framework of the Mahābhārata can be seen from the fact that the outermost level of narration is set in the *Naimiṣāranya*, a name that can be translated as ‘forest of the moment’.⁵³ How to preserve the seer’s flash of insight? How to preserve and transmit this insight over millennia? How to ensure that the ancient tales in their *entirety*⁵⁴ are communicated to the reader beyond the Naimiṣa forest?

Courtright’s thesis of orality becoming writing does not work because it would not be in the humans’ interest to transform an oral epic into a written one, since writing, by obviating the need for memory, leads to its decline.⁵⁵ Because philosophy is defined as a return of memory, the Gaṇeśa fable cannot be about writing *alone*.⁵⁶ Given these philosophical

52. Minkowski 1989 provides a useful analysis; see also Oberlies 2008 who considers the frame narratives to be evidence of careful arrangement in the epic.

53. The word *naimiṣa*, deriving from *nimiṣ* (winking or twinkling of the eye), is translated as ‘momentary’ or ‘transient’. Monier-Williams, sv.

54. Cf. *purāṇam akhilaṃ*; 1.5.1.

considerations regarding memory, we must conclude that the problem with a written text is not the loss of ‘the vital breath of the poet and the immediacy of response between poet and audience’ (Courtright 2001, 152) but the pedagogic issues related to the role of memory in philosophical education. Gaṇeśa cannot represent a mere technical skill. Indeed, divinity, which in Hinduism is associated with understanding and intelligence (*div* = to shine) cannot be reduced to a dead mechanism.⁵⁷

As the god placed at the head of the text, Gaṇeśa symbolizes the reader’s understanding (*dhīḥ*) and receptivity.⁵⁸ The composite god, whose creation and apotheosis embody the limit

55. The relationship of writing to memory is also the subject of Plato’s myth of writing in the *Phaedrus* (see esp. lines 274e-275a). For a contemporary analysis of some of these issues see Derrida’s ‘Plato’s Pharmacy’ in *Dissemination* (1983). For some of the problems with Derrida’s interpretation, see my article ‘Derrida, Textuality, and Sacrifice’, in *Southwest Philosophical Studies*, vol. 29, Spring 2007.

56. Gaṇeśa’s function in the epic exceeds that of a mere scribe. As the epic’s first ‘reader’ or ‘hearer’, he highlights elements essential to the reception of the text such as a keen understanding, intellect, etc. Gaṇeśa symbolizes receptivity rather than the skill of writing. His function is to underscore the light of intellect that is present in the reader which thus appears as a reflection or exteriorization of divine intellect. As we saw, the semantic field of *dhīḥ* and cognate terms encompasses physical as well as noetic ‘light’, i.e., both the light that illuminates the landscape as well as the intellect that apprehends what is thereby illuminated. Thus, what is at stake in the story of Gaṇeśa’s writing down the epic is ultimately a certain noetic receptivity *on the reader’s part* that illumines the text.

57. Cf. also *Gaṇeśapurāṇa* 1.10.2-4 and 1.10.24-27. By doing away with the encumbrance of writing, the *Gaṇeśapurāṇa*’s narrative lets us see that the problem here does not concern writing in terms of the mechanics of inscription but the noetic connection of memory.

58. See Gonda 1963, 79 on a similar function with regard to the Aśvins.

between divine, anthropomorphic, theriomorphic and material categories, symbolizes the various gaps in any literary undertaking: inspiration, poetic creation, and the transference of transcendent meaning through material word. Thus, though only attested to in late manuscripts, this fantastic story of Vyāsa's dictation highlights the vicissitudes of *smṛti* literature, as well as the redactors' awareness of the problem.

The foregoing interpretation demonstrates that the Gaṇeśa episode in the Mahābhārata cannot be satisfactorily explained as either an interpolation or the forced entry of a later god into a previously existing epic. Lacking data, we cannot answer questions of who put the Gaṇeśa story there, and when or why, because these issues bring positivistic research into unknowable territory. Rather, we must appreciate the genius of this episode and its significance to the epic as a whole. By adding a battle of wits between Vyāsa and Gaṇeśa to the battle of warriors, the epic becomes more than battleground journalism: it becomes a philosophical text capable of accommodating cosmological, genealogical, sacrificial, and philosophical material.

Rather than being overturned by Vyāsa's condition that he understand what he writes, the respective conditions of god and mortal work *together* to highlight the presence of divinity in the text: Gaṇeśa's condition that the writing be uninterrupted signifies that for writing to do justice to reality, it must, like reality, be comprehensive and uninterrupted. Vyāsa's response signifies that it is only when one adds *the wholeness of understanding* to the finitude of words that this continuity is guaranteed. That is perhaps why, when enjoined to understand (and only then write) this epic by Vyāsa, Gaṇeśa simply utters: om.

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