John S. Hawley

1. When Blindness Makes for Sight

Abstract. The relationship between poetry and painting can never be entirely direct. One medium proceeds in sound, the other in light; one straightforwardly presumes the evanescent reality of time, the other does not. Kenneth Bryant has shown that many of the most effective poems attributed to the sixteenth-century Brajbhāṣā poet Sūrdās make careful and clever use of time, proceeding rhetorically so as to reveal what is initially forecast in a way that causes surprised recognition in the hearer—what Bryant calls 'epiphany'. In the essay that follows, I study several examples from a set of paintings very likely produced at the court of Amar Singh II of Mewar (r. 1698–1710) to show how the artists involved dealt with the fact that their seemingly static representation of Sūr's poetry might destroy this oral/aural dynamic. The possibility of epiphany is not destroyed in these visual renderings; rather, it is transformed. Perhaps the miracle of the blind poet's vision of Kṛṣṇa's world emerges even more potently in this visual medium than it does in sound.

Keywords. Mewar, Illustrated manuscript, Sūrdās, Amar Singh II, Blind.

Religious poems composed in Brajbhāṣā are filled with words for seeing—*dekhnā*, *nihārnā*, *nirakhnā*, *biloknā*, *avaloknā*, *citavnā*, *bisarnā*—and some poems come right out and ask the listener to 'Look!' Often it is Kṛṣṇa whom we are asked to see, that pinnacle of beauty who functions, among many things, as a near-at-hand yet elusive human distillation of the Viṣṇu who defies every attempt to see him altogether and is therefore represented as Viśvarūp, which means 'having every form'. But how can we really *see* this beautiful, surprising god if our eyes have grown accustomed to his presence? Addressing this problem in its narrative form in his classic book *Poems to the Child-God,* Kenneth Bryant showed how some of the best poems in the *Sūrsāgar* achieved their effect by causing their audiences to forget the narrative sequences they knew so well—this so that those who heard could be reawakened to the wonder of it all; so that they could see as if for the first time. Bryant called this the production (or reproduction, you might say) of epiphany. His rhetorical analysis—an understanding of a poem or song that develops *in time*—involved a fundamental reconsideration of the rasa theory analysis that then reigned in the analysis of Brajbhāṣā poetry, just as it still does today.[1]

1 Bryant (1978), pp. 21–42, 140–141.

As an example of what Bryant achieved, let me recall his analysis of the poem whose first line reads *naiṅku gopālahi mokau dai rī*, which appears in the edition of the Nāgarīpracārinī Sabhā as number 673. This is a poem of elaborate praise describing the beauties of Kṛṣṇa as a child, perhaps a quite new-born child, and it is directed by one female speaker to another. Innocently enough, this seems the sort of cooing plea that could have been addressed by any number of the women who surround Yaśodā, Kṛṣṇa's foster mother, as they admire the wondrous baby boy. 'Just give me a good look at his face/then I'll give him right back, my friend.' As the dialogue continues, with this woman addressing Yaśodā repeatedly as her friend, we fall into a somnolent forgetfulness. Our own minds as listeners are transfixed by the desire to see this beautiful child. All this, Bryant points out, until we come to the last line of the poem. There the poet's name is heard, and there too we are given one of the great titles of this divine child: *pūtanā bairī* (Pūtanā's foe). These are the final syllables in the poem, and they awaken us abruptly, shockingly to the fact that the person who has been uttering these words of praise and longing must be the very subject in that final line—Pūtanā, the enemy! The last two syllables, *bairī*, incorporate the syllable we have been hearing all along, *rī*, but this time, we see that the friend is actually the great foe. It is an epiphany on the part of the hearer, as Bryant so elegantly demonstrates—an old story made new, a familiar narrative made utterly live and present. It is a triumph of the rhetoric of the pada, the form in which Sūrdās almost always composed.[2]

Now here is the puzzle: How might such a poem be illustrated? How could the surprise in the surprise ending be preserved? This poem is not found among those that appear in dated collections of Sūrdās poems that belong to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but it does emerge in an illustrated manuscript of the *Sūrsāgar* that can be approximately dated on stylistic grounds to the mid-eighteenth century. Its contents also connect it to a dated manuscript of that period, and it is currently housed in the collection of Bharat Kala Bhavan, Banaras (Figure 1.1).[3]

In this painting, the artist obviously relishes the task of showing how a huge demoness emerges from the form of a lovely woman. She lies prostrate on the ground as other women in the scene enjoy the prospect of walking on her body. The child is safe in the arms of Yaśodā, it would seem, and the demoness smiles as a result of her physical contact with the child god, who has suckled at her poison-laced breast—suckled her, in fact, to death. But it is a death that simultaneously brings salvation. All this is reported in the general narrative of the conflict between Pūtanā and Kṛṣṇa, but clearly, it is subsequent to what the poem itself conveys.

2 Ibid., pp. 48–51.

3 Hawley (1994).

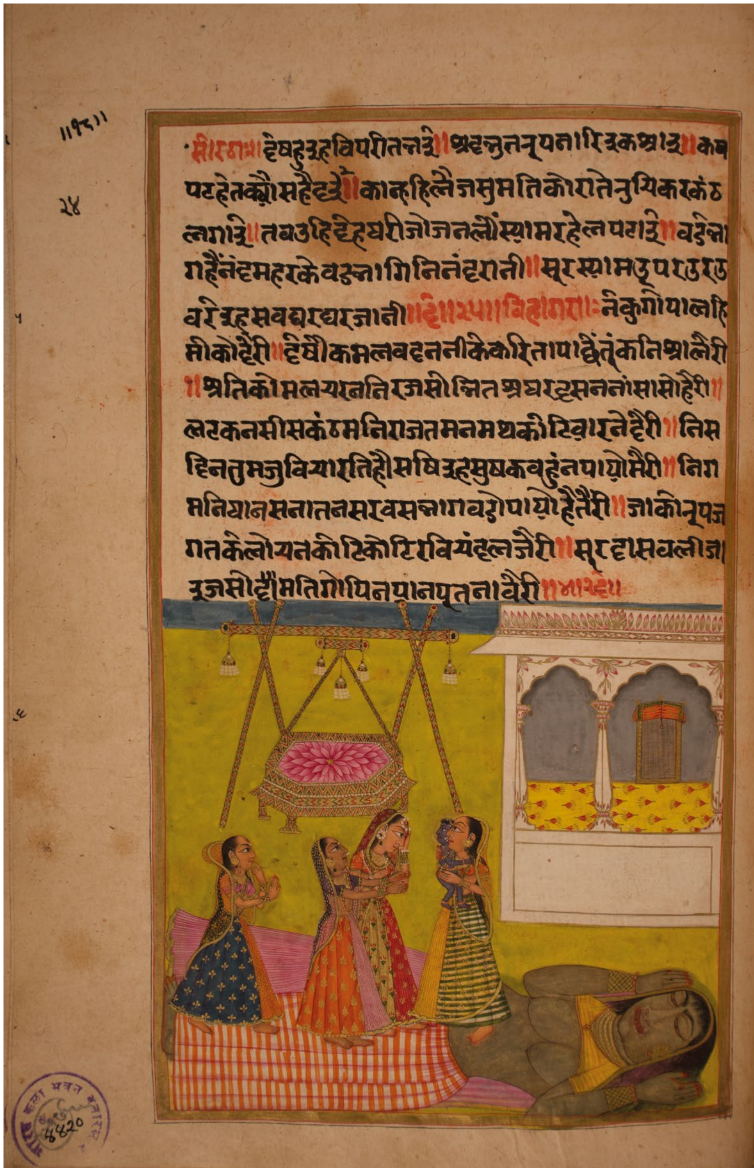

FIGURE 1.1 'Just give me Gopāl for a second, my friend!' Illustration to *naiṇku gopālahiṅ mokau dai rī.* Poem no. 25 in a *Sūrsāgar* from north-central India, *c.* 1750. Bharat Kala Bhavan, Banaras, 4377.

Did the artist throw up his hands and decide he could not convey that drama? We cannot know. All we can certify is that he skipped to the subsequent moment—the consequences. In a certain way, he offers us an epiphany—a vision of the demoness who hid behind the *gopī*. He depicts the shocking apparition that should have come suddenly before our eyes as we heard the last two words of the poem. But he has done so by turning to the next moment in the narration—the happy ending—rather than illustrating the dramatic moment that precedes it, the one that is brought to life in the poem itself. The image powerfully calls to mind the child's great victory, but it is hard to believe that anyone surveying the page could be surprised when the poem comes to its otherwise startling conclusion. Surveying that page, how could one possibly submit to the amnesia that the poem itself manages to spread across the field of memory? If Pūtanā succeeded in insinuating her presence among the *gopī*s as a lovely young woman in such a way that they suspected nothing of her true form and intent, this is a fate that can hardly have befallen anyone who sees this manuscript page. There she is at the bottom of the page, as the poem comes to its conclusion—huge! No one could ever forget.

The question, then, is this: Was this the curse to which an illustrator of the *Sūrsāgar* was inevitably required to submit? Did he have to spoil, with sight, what sound could conceal? And if so, was he able to supply his viewers with equally tantalizing alternative experiences that would compensate for the loss of the aural effect?

In what follows I will consider this question by turning to another manuscript that is devoted exclusively to depictions of Sūrdās poems that concern the child Kṛṣṇa. This beautifully illustrated *Sūrsāgar* (it calls itself that) is clearly done in the Mewari style and must have been produced at the Sisodia court sometime around the turn of the eighteenth century. Amar Singh II ruled then (1698–1710), and for convenience's sake, I will refer to this illustrated manuscript as the Amar Singh *Sūrsāgar*. The general development of Mewari style suggests this placement in time, although there is no mention of a date, painter, or patron on any of the fifty pages that comprise the manuscript itself. There is also the special clue that a particular style of moustache appears in some of these *Sūrsāgar* paintings, a style that is not seen before the time of Amar Singh. By wearing such a moustache himself, Amar Singh II evidently established a new style that became widely popular in his own court.[4]

Figure 1.2 displays the painting that I believe to have originally been the first page of this now widely dispersed set of paintings. One can see that number in the text that appears above the illustration. Like invocatory poems that appear in other manuscripts, it is somewhat different from what follows. This

4 Further, see Hawley (2018), pp. 205–303.

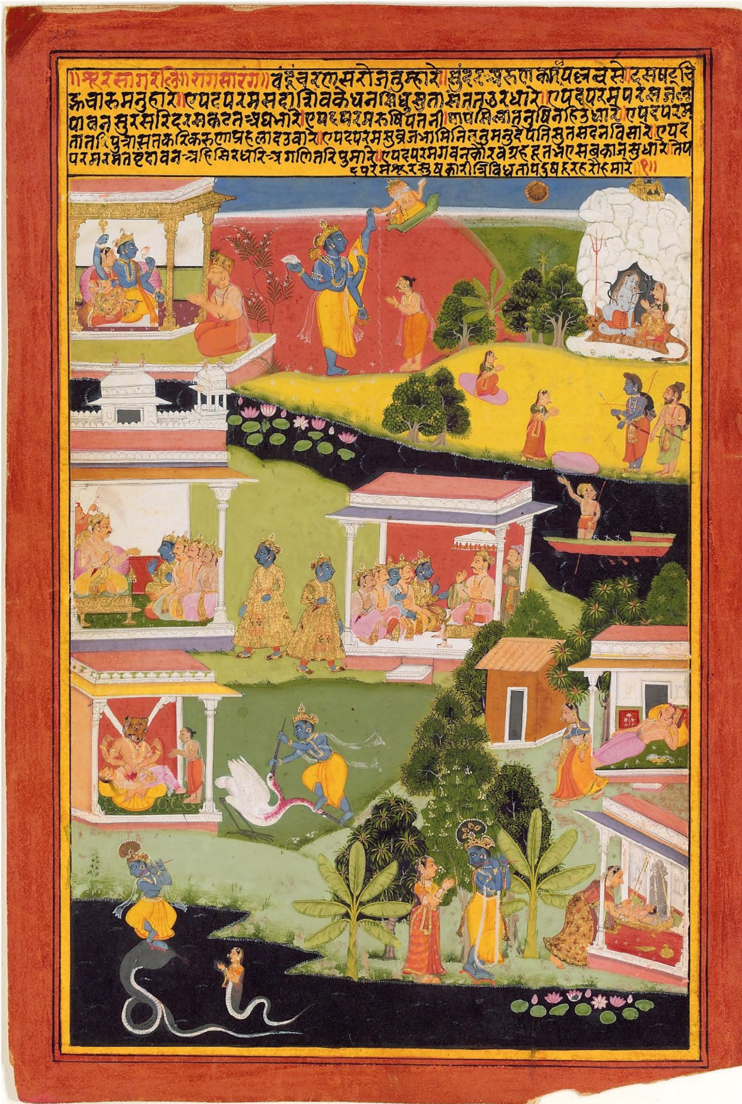

Figure 1.2 'I bow in praise before your lotus feet.' Illustration to *vandoṅ carana saroja tumhāre,* or as here spelled, *vaṅdũ caraṇ saroj tumhāre* (compare NPS 94). Poem no. 1 in the Amar Singh *Sūrsāgar*, raga *sāraṅg*, *c.* 1700, 36.9 × 24.7 cm. Edwin Binney 3rd Collection, San Diego Museum of Art, 1990.610.

is the only illustration in the entire set that we have available to us in which the poet, who is clearly understood to have been blind, takes a position outside the little hut or pavilion (*jhoṅpaḍī*) where he is normally shown to dwell. We see him at the upper left, paying obeisance to Kṛṣṇa and his consort. Why has he been allowed out—and so far up on the page? I believe it is because he speaks this poem, as it were, in the first person. From the get-go, he is directly a part of the action—not, as is typical, its reporter. The poem, a well-known one, proceeds as follows:

वंदूं चरण सरोज तूम्हारे
सुंदर अरुण कमल पल्लव से, दसषट चिन्ह चारु मनुहारे
ए पद परम सदा शिव के धन, सिंधु सुता सँतत उर धारे
ए पद परम परस जल पावन, सुरसरि दरस कटत अघ भारे
ए पद परम रुषि पतनी, आप सिला तनु षिनहि उधारे
ए पद परम तात रिपु त्रासत, करि करुणा प्रहलाद उवारे
ए पद परम सु व्रज भामिनि, तनु मनु दे पति सुत सदन विसारे
ए पद परम रमत वृंदावन, अहि सिर धरि अगणित रिपु मारे
ए पद परम गवन कौरव ग्रह, दूत भए सब काज सुधारे
ते पद परम शूर सुषकारी, त्रिविध ताप दुष दूर हरौ हमारे

1 I bow in praise before your lotus feet—
2 Lovely as the blossoms of a pink water lily,
    beguiling, bearing the sixteen marks of beauty.
3 Those peerless feet—the wealth of eternal Śiva,
    breast to which the daughter of the ocean ever clings;
4 Those peerless feet—their touch made pure the River of the Gods,
    the very sight of whose waters cuts away the weight of sin;
5 Those peerless feet—by merely touching a stone
    they instantly freed the sage's wife whose body it had become;
6 Those peerless feet—in their compassion to Prahlād
    they rescued him from the terror of having an enemy father;
7 Those peerless feet—they caused the women of Braj
    to give up body and soul, forgetting husbands, sons, and homes;
8 Those peerless feet—through Brindavan they wandered,
    planting themselves on the cobra's head, killing countless foes.
9 Those peerless feet—they approached the Kauravas' house
    and made themselves messengers, saving the fate of us all.
10 These peerless feet—these joyful feet, says Sūr—
    let them steal away our pain, our threefold suffering.

We can learn a fair amount about the manuscript as a whole from this poem, and it would be well to do so before we proceed. Among the early dated manuscripts bearing Sūrdās poems that Bryant and I searched out in the 1970s and 1980s, this poem appears for the first time in the manuscript we have labelled J4, so called because it is the fourth oldest among those now to be found in the City Palace

Museum in Jaipur.[5] That manuscript was written in 1675 (VS 1733) by a scribe living in Gokul, and the location may well suggest the sponsorship of the Vallabha *sampradāya*, which long had a substantial presence there. Unlike the illustrated Mewar manuscript we are studying, however, this poem does not appear anywhere near the beginning of the J4 manuscript, but rather on folio 297. By the time it shows up in a Mewar manuscript, however—in U2, written at Udaipur in 1706 (VS 1763)—it had indeed been advanced to the position of first among 170 padas. Indeed, the versions of the poems found in our illustrated Mewari manuscript tend closely to resemble either U2 or two other manuscripts—undated ones—that have come down to us from the royal collection in Udaipur, U3 and U4. A1, dated 1686 (VS 1743) but of unknown provenance, also tends to be pretty close, and does indeed contain this poem. Finally, it's worth noting that this poem also appears in the first position in the earliest Sūrdās manuscript we have from Kankarauli—another Vallabhite seat, this one not far from Udaipur. That manuscript dates to 1719 (VS 1776).

I do not think it's an open-and-shut case that our illustrated *Sūrsāgar* was produced under the influence of the Vallabha *sampradāya*. True, the Vallabhite community had become a presence nearby. Following Dvarkādhīś in Asodiya (later Kankarauli), Śrīnāthjī was installed in Sinhar (later called Nathdvara) in the early 1670s, and certainly this happened thanks to sponsorship from the Mewar throne. But it is not until we come to a painting that presumes a substantial history of earlier Mewari paintings (Fig. 1.3) that we know we are seeing a Vallabhite theme. This is a painting that depicts a poem of Caturbhujdās, one of the Vallabhite *aṣṭachāp* (eight seals), which is set off from earlier paintings in which Mount Govardhan appears not only by virtue of the fact that it builds on artistic conventions established there but because of its large and unusually square size (35.8 × 31.8 cm). This painting, I believe, dates to a decade or two after the Amar Singh *Sūrsāgar* on which we are focusing.

We can get a clearer sense of the scope of this group of illustrated poems by skipping to the last painting in the set. This is page number 50 (Fig. 1.4), the highest number to appear in the set as a whole.

Like all the other paintings that precede it, this poem depicts a *bāl kṛṣṇa* theme, but we can see that its special focus—Kṛṣṇa's wondrous feet—relates to the point from which the set begins (painting no. 1, Fig. 1.2). So there is symmetry there, and we can see that the artist recapitulates one of the visual themes he had featured in his first painting: the descent of the Ganges. Again we see it up top. Here the toe that reaches up to the source of the river comes from the right; before, it came from the left. But in other respects the images are practically identical.

5 Further on old manuscripts of the *Sūrsāgar*, see Bryant and Hawley (2015), pp. xii–xxx, xliii–xlviii.

Figure 1.3 'Everyone's drenched in the mood of Govardhan Pūjā.' Illustration to *govardhan pūji sabe ras bhīnẽ,* a poem by Caturbhujdās, raga *sāraṅg*, *c.* 1720, 35.8 × 31.8 cm. Government Museum, Udaipur 1097/26, number obscured by its present mounting.

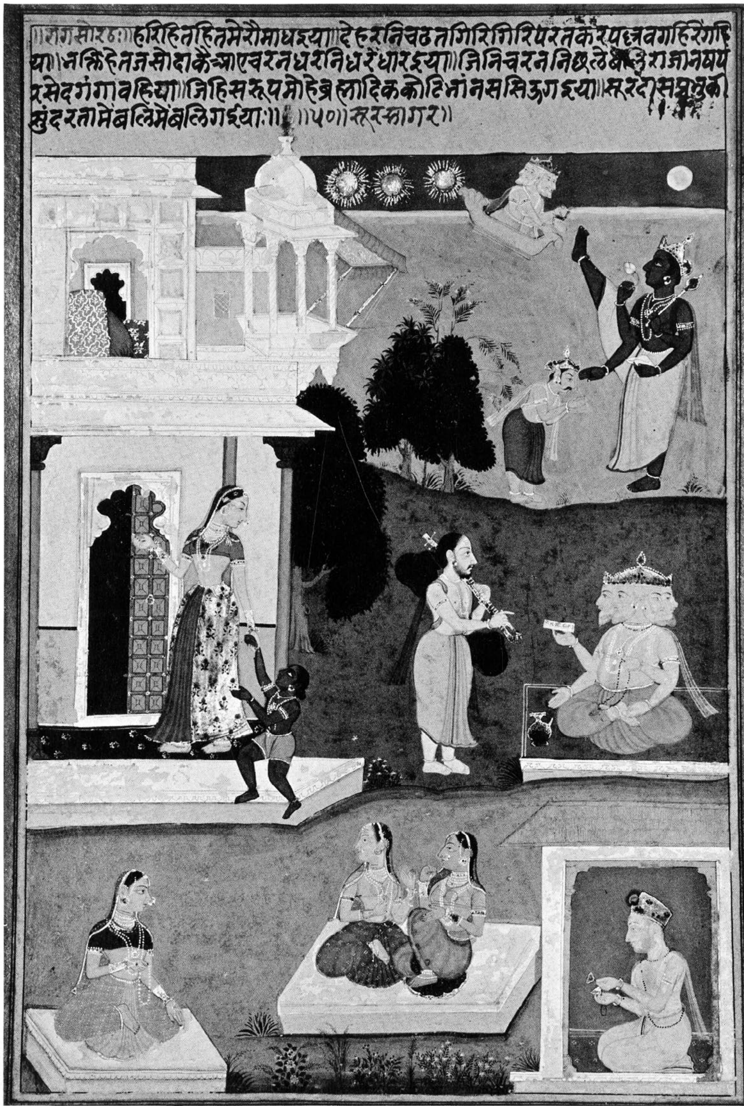

Figure 1.4 ‘Hari—how I love, love my little Mādhav.’ Illustration to *hari hit hit merau mādhaiyā* (compare Bryant 10, NPS 749). Poem no. 50 in the Amar Singh *Sūrsāgar*, raga *soraṭh, c.* 1700. Present location unknown. Reproduced in University of Minnesota Gallery, *Art of India: Sculpture and Miniature Paintings, June 23–August 23, 1969*, p. 46, fig. 32, which is the basis for this image.

There is another important fact, too. The inscription ends with the term *sūrsāgar*, which was also announced in the beginning, as if to signal that the work was now complete. One intervening poem (#22) also carries this citation, but otherwise this privilege is reserved for the first and last poems in the set. Here, then, is the poem with which the manuscript ends, as critically reconstructed by Bryant:

हरि हित हित मेरौ माधइया
देहरि चढत परत गिरि गिरि कर
पल्लव गहि रेंगाइया
भक्ति हेत जसुदा कै आए
चरन धरनि पर धारइया
जिन चरननि चलियौ बलि राजा
नष प्रस्वेद गंगा बहिया
जिहि सरूप मोहे ब्रह्मादिक
कोटि भान ससि ऊगाइया
सूरदास इन चरननि ऊपरि
मैं बलि मैं बलि मैं गइया

1 Hari—how I love, love my little Mādhav.
2 He clambers over a threshold and tumbles, tumbles,
    but grasps with his lotus-petal palm and crawls on.
3 He has come to Yaśodā on account of love
    and placed his feet upon this earth, the ground—
4 The feet that he used to outwit King Bali,
    the feet from which the Ganges flowed
        as the merest sweat from beneath the toenails,
5 The feet whose visage captivated Brahmā and the gods,
    generating millions of moons and suns:
6 The beauty of Sūrdās's Lord has inspired me
    to offer,
        offer up my all. (Bryant and Hawley (2015), pp. 22–23)

My way of reading verse 2 is rather different from what our artist hears—and therefore causes us to see. He interprets the hand mentioned there (*kar*) as reaching toward his mother's, so that the child can be steadied as he crosses the threshold. But I think it's his own hand, not ambiguously Yaśodā's as well, even though she's the narrator of the poem. My evidence is simple: he's crawling (*raiṅgaiyā*), so he's on all fours. But never mind; I like it that the artist adds his own touch. And as we will see, this helping hand motif is one that he features and plays with in other poems. So by stretching it a little, he makes it do something it doesn't seem to do in the written or oral version: it becomes part of his cumulative composition. In creating a connected text thus—a particular 'book' that has, in effect, been made out of a collection of fifty thematically related poems—our artist has added value to this particular poem.

Indeed, there is an even stronger bond between poems 1 and 50 than we have so far implied. These are the only two in the whole extant set that feature Kṛṣṇa's feet in such a deliberate way. By choosing to put no. 50 where he did, then, the artist seems to have been reaching for closure by returning to where he started—his *vandanā*. He does this without leaving behind the narrative context he has been developing all along—just the kind of firm sequential narrative connection that Bryant was trying to liberate us from with his analysis of the Pūtanā pada. The artist produces an entirely different epiphany—an epiphany of cumulative recognition. In attributing the agency that produced this wonderful effect to the artist himself, I am following the lead provided by Vidya Dehejia in her study of a set of somewhat earlier Mewari illustrated manuscripts.[6] She too is cautious, and indeed the hand of the patron may be here involved, but the visual cues are so powerful that it is hard to overlook the artist himself. At some level, certainly, he was powerfully involved.

But to return to our central query: How can a visual artist deal with the matter of *oral* epiphany? Is it a lost cause, considering that all the evidence has to be presented at once—on a single canvas that's there to be seen from the start? We have seen how the artist may compensate by producing rather a different sort of epiphanic realization—cumulative epiphany—but what about the sort that was accomplished by the Pūtanā poet?

To pursue this point, let us consider poem no. 45 in the Amar Singh series (Fig. 1.5). This is a poem that belongs to a rather well-known subset of childhood poems depicting the moment when Yaśodā wakes Kṛṣṇa up in the morning. Why should this be such a prized moment? Not just because it's one that is observed in temple practice—*mangalāratī*, the first *darśan* of the day—but because this is precisely the time when the god opens his own eyes, becoming fully, visually available to devotees. Familiarly, we also have here a brief meditation on the amazing fact that eyes can see this gorgeous vision at all (verse 6). It outranks thinking (*vicāri*). We also have a lotus positioned in the crucial concluding position (verse 7)—the lotus of his face, *vadanārabind*. Lotuses are a familiar term of comparison for hands too, not just faces, and when this happens in an early morning setting, you can especially see why: upon awakening, the child's hand unfolds like a lotus opening to the sun. But here it's the face: the lotus fully open and blooming. Except it's not: those eyes won't open. The conceit of the poem is that the blinding vision of the beauty of Kṛṣṇa's face, even with eyes closed, is such that his mother cannot bear to break the visual spell and wake him. This is what she reports to the friend who asks why he's not yet shown up for the day.

Here, as in the Bharat Kala Bhavan rendition of the Pūtanā poem, we find that a conversation set *in medias res* has been transformed into a narrative. In the

6 Dehejia (1996), pp. 303–324.

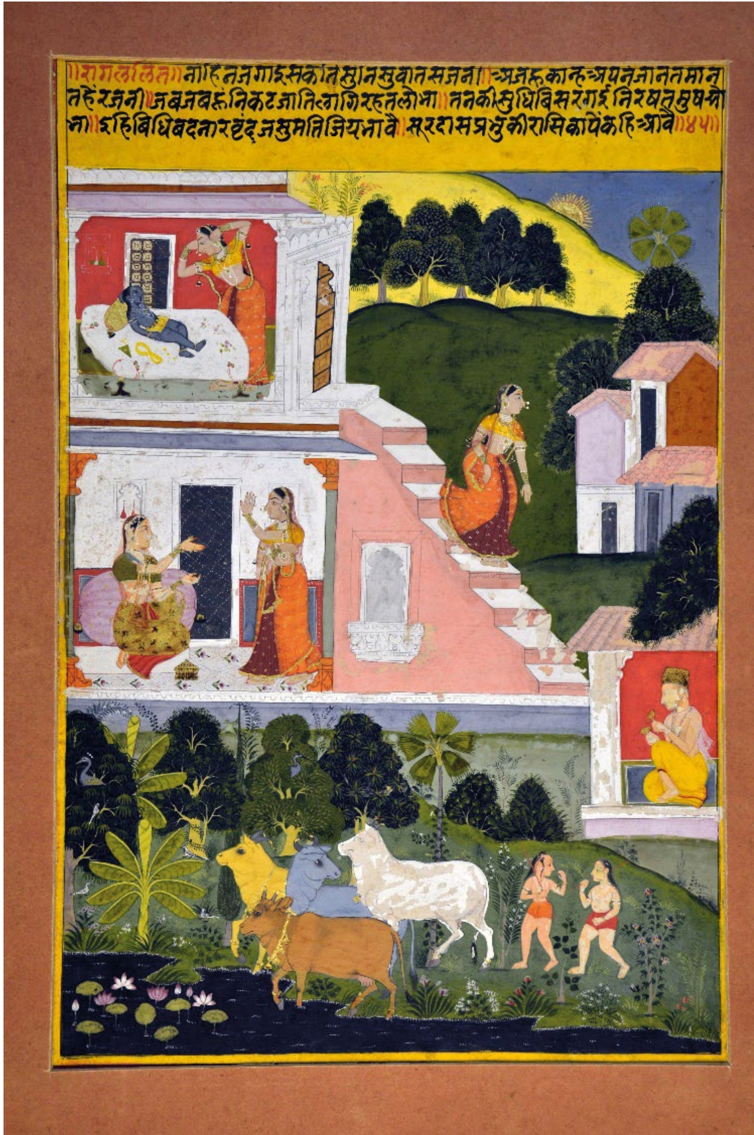

Figure 1.5 'I just can't wake him up, good woman.' Illustration to *nāhin jagāi sakati, suni suvāt sajanī* (compare NPS 819). Poem no. 45 in the Amar Singh *Sūrsāgar*, raga *lalit*, *c*. 1700. Bharat Kala Bhavan, Banaras, 1799.

poem, Yaśodā replies to the implied question of an equally anonymous female guest, who must have inquired, 'Where's Kṛṣṇa?' The visual artist lets us actually *see* this conversation—in the middle register—and he lets us also see what has transpired before it occurred: the aborted act of attempted awakening in the upper register, then the mother descending to the ground floor of the house in its aftermath. (Did she hear her friend ring the doorbell?) We are also shown, in the bottom register, that other cowherds have already gotten up and are about the day's business—a fact that, in other Sūrdās poems, Yaśodā sometimes tries to use to persuade her son to shake off his drowsiness.

And what about the final verse? What about the poet's signature—his presence in this scene? There we see him singing away as he holds his canonical little hand-cymbals. In the poem, formulaically, he asks how he can possibly speak of his great happiness—when, in fact, he has just done so. Nicely, the artist goes beyond formulae: he places Sūrdās at the bottom of the stairs as if he too had called Yaśodā to account through the implied voice of this other visitor on the scene. And I like it that the artist positions the poet's little pavilion between registers as if further to dramatize his position at the borderline of the poem. Usually we see him in the bottom corner, but here he is at a bottom (of the stairs) that is not ultimately a bottom. It opens onto the wider world that we see in the third register—the most public register, our register. His is the mediating voice, just as his visual placement suggests. Vallabhite interpreters could go even further, since it came to be believed in their community that Sūrdās, like each of the eight poets central to the *sampradāya*, had a perennial presence in Kṛṣṇa's world that was sometimes male, sometimes female, which explains how he could see everything. We find him perched between those two gender registers here—the cowherd women just above, the cowherds just below.

Looking back, then, we see that a great deal has been added in the artist's visual commentary on the poem—things that will fill out the viewer's appreciation for the full range of experience implied in the composition itself. But one thing he does not exposit—or rather, destroys by expositing visually what he does. He destroys our doubt about whether Yaśodā really did try to wake her little boy—or did she only pretend to have done so, so that she would have the pleasure of his company for as long as she might, before he went outside for the day, before departing for the realm of those other women so eager to lavish their attention on him? Is the drawing of the scene in the upper room sufficiently ambiguous to leave that question open, as it is in the oral poem? This dawning epiphany of ours—that Yaśodā might be trying to pull the wool over her visitor's eyes—is hard to maintain once we see the actual bedroom scene. We have to take her at her word. And maybe the poem is constructed in such a way that follows what the narrator himself says—in the two concluding verses. If so, that sense of pre-

mature closure sets this apart from other confrontations between Yaśodā and the *gopī*s —times when it's hard to determine who's telling the truth. This ambiguity, carefully cultivated in poems that make their appearance in early *Sūrsāgar* manuscripts, serves as an invitation for us to join the dramatic action and try to decide. It's not quite epiphany in the Pūtanā sense, but it's that same act of being drawn into the dramatic action, positioning us for epiphany. Does the visual artist blot this out?

Let's recall the 'complaint' poems I just mentioned. In Figure 1.6 we have one that comes from the very earliest registers of the *Sūrsāgar* to which we have access—together with the painting that gives it visual form. It is no. 42 in the Amar Singh manuscript, and as it begins, Yaśodā speaks:

कत हौ काहू कै जात
ए सब ढीठ गरव गोरस कै
मुष संभारि बोलति नहि बात
जोइ जोइ रुचै सोइ सोइ तब तब
मो पहि मागि लेहु किन तात
ज्यौं ज्यौं बचन सुनत अम्रित मुष
त्यौं त्यौं सुष उपजत मैरै गात
कौनै प्रकृति परी इनि ग्वालिनि
उरहन कै मिस आवति प्रात
सूर सकति हठि दोसु लगावति
घरहू कौ माषनु नहि षात

1 Why, why go off to somebody else?
2 They're all such rascals, so butter-smug;
they ought to shush and hold their tongues.
3 Dearest son: this thing, that thing, anything
at any time is yours if you ask me,
4 For each word that pours from your mouth as deathless nectar
brings joy when I hear it, inside.
5 But they: whatever has possessed these herder girls
to come around pretending, complaining each dawn?
6 How can they insist on blaming him, says Sūr,
when he never even touches his butter here at home?
(Bryant and Hawley (2015), pp. 46–49)

Note how beautifully the artist captures the scene—with Yaśodā offering Kṛṣṇa a cup of butter with one hand while trying to restrain him with the other. But ah, the invitations of all those other *gopī* women are just too tempting for the little boy, as we can imagine from all the other dwellings that are depicted in the village that appears in the upper right, and as is emphasized by the graceful pathway that the *gopī*'s positioning within the frame seems to suggest. Visually, they lead him out without anyone's having to take him by the hand. To me, this is a lovely translation

Figure 1.6 'Why, why go off to somebody else?' Illustration to *kat ho kāhu kai tum jāt* (compare Bryant 26, NPS 926). Poem no. 42 in the Amar Singh *Sūrsāgar*, raga *gauḍī*, *c.* 1700. Kanoria Collection, Patna, GKK 89. Photo © Asian Art Archives, University of Michigan: ACSAA 4368.

of the textual moment, an instance in which the artist does not constrain or foreclose our vision but enhances it. Eyelessly, again, the poet watches, impartial in the tug of war between maternal attraction and the beginning of something quite else.

Now let us consider a further example, our last (Fig. 1.7). This is page no. 11 in the manuscript, now preserved in the Yale University Art Gallery. It features a poem whose textual pedigree is not as old as the poem we just 'saw'. This composition surfaces in the textual record in 1638 in a manuscript (B3) now found in the Anup Sanskrit Library at Bikaner. Its colophon, however, neglects to state the place where it was actually written. The poem picks up some of the resonances we have just been hearing—that tender zone between Kṛṣṇa's own mother and his other *gopī* 'mothers'—and frames them in these words:

सूछम चरन चलावति बल करि
अटपटात कर देत अंगुरी, तब उठत जननी सुष मन धरि
मृदु पद धरत धरनि नहि लागत, इत उत लै लै भुज जुग भरि भरि
विथकित भई प्रेम अति व्रज तिय, ज्यों जल काची गागरि
सूरदास सिसुता सुष जल निधि, कहां लों कहों नहि को समसरि
बिबुधन मुनि नर नाग रमा सिव, जसोमति की छिनु पल भरि

1 His tiny little feet—she supports them, helps him walk.
2 He falters for a moment, she offers him a finger,
then he's up again—joy to his mother's heart.
3 Those tender little feet, so tentative on the earth,
lead him here and there till there he is in someone's arms.
4 The women of Braj are exhausted by their love
like earthen pots soaked by the water they contain.
5 The sea of childhood's happinesses, Sūrdās says—
how can I express it? There's no shore.
6 Gods, sages, humans, snakes, Lakṣmī, and Śiva
covet the enlightenment Yaśodā has this instant.

What does the artist do with this? First of all, the feet that create the contract for this poem—*sūcchama carana*—are front and centre, their position accentuated by the little step just below, which creates a connection between the level on which the main action is played out and the grassy realm beneath. We saw such a step in the last painting, used to a similarly dramatic effect. Then it is worth noting that the finger extended toward the child to steady him seems to come more from the attending *gopī* than from his own mother, whatever the poem itself may say. Thereby the artist creates a seemingly deliberate connection between the two visual realms—his mother's on the left, the *gopī*'s on the right—just as the poem does in the transition between the third verse and the fourth. And then, in a lovely act of suggestion (the word *dhvani* comes to mind, the Sanskrit term that designates a whole school of literary criticism), the artist seems to pick up the

Figure 1.7 ‘His tiny little feet—she supports them, helps him walk.’ Illustration to *sūcham caran calāvati bal kari* (compare NPS 738). Poem no. 11 in the Amar Singh *Sūrsāgar*, raga *devagaṅdhār*, *c*. 1700, 28.6 × 20.4 cm. Yale University Art Gallery, the Vera M. and John D. MacDonald, B.A. 1927, Collection, 2001.138.28.

metaphor of 'the sea of childhood's happinesses' *(sisutā sukha jalanidhi*, v. 5) by giving us a little sea to look at, just beneath or before the action's platform. And are you looking for the 'earthen pots soaked by the water they contain' (*jyoṅ jal kācī gāgari*, v. 4)? Maybe we see a single one, at least, at the far left between the platform and the 'sea' just beneath (v. 5). To me, this is all a very creative visual use of verbal detail—something one could never have anticipated simply by hearing the poem itself.

Who are all these other creatures that fill the rest of the painting? Yes, they are the persons mentioned in the final verse, the one that comes, rather uncharacteristically, after the verse in which the poet's signature appears. Perhaps the artist takes this special position as licence to be so expansive. Gods and sages: we see them at the upper right. The gods are represented by Brahmā, who rides his vehicle, the *haṃsa* bird, and the sages by the ascetic who sits on a tiger skin just below. Humans and snakes: to see them, we need only scroll down beneath the gods and sages along the right-hand border. Lakṣmī and Śiva: alas, my translation may be misleading. For the sake of euphony, I reversed their actual position in the final verse. It is actually Śiva who comes first, and we see him in his mountain cave at the top. Lakṣmī is at the bottom, borne upon a lotus as she was at the moment of her birth from the primordial Milk Ocean. She seems to be the special object of the poet's veneration here—he casts his eyes (or would, if he had them) in her direction. Perhaps the artist thinks she is indeed an appropriate focus of attention since so much motherhood is at the centre of the poem.

And that's where the centre remains—motherhood focused on those feet, on this little child's act of walking, just as the poem says it should be. We are seeing a specific moment in childhood, one treasured by parents and grandparents throughout the world. But the connoisseur here, the archetypal *rasik*, is Yaśodā. In rendering the poem into English, I have used the word enlightenment as a point of reference for whatever Yaśodā 'has' in this instant. The original does not actually say. Yet one thing is clear: everything else is at the periphery. In the act of accounting for that periphery—the full range of the final verse—the painter draws us back visually to the centre, those tiny little, delicate, or as the original also says, 'subtle' feet. I like to think that as viewers gazed at this painting while hearing a sung performance of the poem that gave it rise, they might have been wondering what all those figures are doing in the painting. After all, it is not until the final verse that they are mentioned in the poem. If so, the mystery unravels only as that last verse is recited. At that point, both in sound and sight, these 'subtle' feet take their place at the centre of the known world, making its meanings cohere. Our artist is eager to reveal precisely that fact from the way he has arranged his composition. For the viewer, it all comes clear in a rush as word after word of the final verse is revealed.

To be sure, then, as the example just prior (poem no. 42, Fig. 1.6), we have one-to-one correspondences between what we see on the page and what we hear in the ear. What the poem says is *represented*, including the parts that the poem in its oral version tries to hide until the proper time, when they can produce, as Bryant has said, epiphany. But in the act of providing this visual record, the artist often also adds something, producing a correspondence that is not just isomorphic but complementary. And part of that complementarity is rhetorical. As in the last example, the full value of the painting depends upon the fact that the connoisseur who observes it is simultaneously listening to how the poem unfolds.

Figure 1.8 Sūrdās singing. Detail from Figure 1.7.

That, I think, is what ought to be implied by the ubiquitous presence of the poet himself (Fig. 1.8). He is allowed to be there—to play a part in the scene that is displayed—because, in his blindness, he cannot intrude. In that, he is a sign to all viewers that what they are seeing is not something given to the naked eye, something natural or, in the familiar term, *laukik* (worldly). No wonder he is allowed to be there when so few other poets have been given that honour. But he is there not just to see but to sing, as our artist almost always makes clear by showing us those little hand cymbals. The implication is that he sees in the course of singing, or to put it a bit more strongly, he sees *by* singing. By keeping that image before our eyes, the painter of Mewar creates an implicit analogy for himself. This Sūrdās, typically tucked into the painting at its lower corner, just as the poet usually tucks his own signature into a corner of his poem's final verse, serves as the artist's *bhaṇitā* or *chāp*. This musical Sūrdās is his visual seal.

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