The Girl in the Rock: A Telangana Tale and Vasiṣṭha's Retelling

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Abstract: The rock in the Telengana tale narrated in this article is friendly, allows transitions, shelters, nurtures and can accommodate two people quite comfortably within it. The literal power of the spoken word and the cultural anxieties around the maternal act of feeding a child are also touched upon in the analysis of the tale. The rock in another Indian tale, told by Vasistha in Sanskrit, then is taken up for scrutiny—again, it is an elastic, expansive space that possibly contains worlds within. The composite and porous rock brings to view a similar 'self', the authors note, underlining the role of imagination as a recalcitrant force that has the potential to create moments of wonder in both tales.

Can a woman live inside a rock? Why would she want to? How could she get inside it? Once inside, under what conditions might she want to leave it? Why would a popular tale insist on this theme? Or, more basically: Just what is a rock? What is a woman?

In northern Andhra Pradesh, on the high, dry plateau of Telangana, impressive boulders abound. Geologists tell us they are among the oldest rock formations on the planet. Daily life proceeds amidst these visually compelling scenes. The great boulders seem to take you into themselves, to overwhelm, to generate a feeling of wonder. Such rocks are gods or goddesses, like the small stones that mark the presence of a deity under a tree or on the corner of street or in the center of a crossroads. And there are many other kinds of rocks. Village boundaries are marked

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by stones (*bodrāyi*). Women use large, round stones (*guṇḍrāyi*) in their daily routines— for preparing spices, cracking nuts, and so on. Another kind of stone—*kaluvarāyi*—is used for making medicines. The grinding stone (*visurrāyi*) is used to make flour. In Telangana, a rich literature of women's songs is linked to the grinding stone, which serves as a cultural node and image of creativity.

Rocks are everywhere in this region—the essence of the landscape, and a familiar, intimate presence in village and home. A stubborn, strong person is said to be "like a *guṇḍrāyi*." Yet these Telangana rocks are often seen as surprisingly soft, delicate as babies. On the day a new-born child is given its name (*nāmakaraṇam*), a rock, usually the *guṇḍrāyi*, is decorated—perhaps a golden chain will circle it—and then placed in the child's cradle (*tŏṭṭĕ*). Two elderly, married women stand on either side and very carefully pass the rock from one to another—three times. Only then can the baby be put in the cradle. This is the cradle ceremony (*tŏṭṭĕ kaṭṭaḍam*), with the rock clearly an initial substitute for the child. One sees how, in such contexts, the rock is, in fact, a living person, interactive, requiring great attention and care.

Rocks figure prominently in many other rituals. On the eighth day after childbirth, the impurity of both mother and child, *puruḍu*, is treated by offerings, *naivedyam*, to three small pebbles, *gulaka rāḷḷu*, in the backyard of the house. The offerings are taken away by the washerman (Cakali). The baby, newly bathed, is placed on the winnowing fan (*ceṭa*) which is already filled with raw rice. He or she is then left for a while, so that Brahmā can come and write the child's fate, *tala-rāta*, on his or her forehead. At other times, a tin container is filled with pebbles which are rattled around the mother's bed, to chase away the evil eye.

Women worship rocks, use rock tools and utensils, and play with rocks: a series of young girls' games depend upon small rocks. At the wedding ceremony, the mother of the bride gives her a stone, *sānarāyi*, for grinding sandal paste. The groom's party gives *sāna*, the sandal stick. This *sānarāyi* is a necessary presence in most rituals. It serves as a seat, *pīṭham*, to welcome the god or goddess (for example, Gauri at the time of Gauri-puja, or the ancestors on *petaramāvāsya = pitṛlu amāvāsya*, the no-moon day prescribed for this ritual). And we should not forget the *guṇḍrāyi* that is kept at the threshold of the house at the time of a girl's first menstruation. We will see in a moment how this moment of maturation is deeply linked to a certain big rock.

A complex story from Kŏllāpuram speaks of a princess who lived inside a rock. We give the text as heard by Vimala in the village, several times, in the course of her childhood. We translate from the original Telugu.

The Princess in the Big Rock

Once upon a time.....There was a king. For a long time he had no children. At last a daughter was born. She was rather stubborn and naughty. Her mother, the queen, didn't give her over to the care of the servant women. Why is that? Because this child was born after a very long time. She was very loving to the girl. Many days passed. The queen wanted the child to eat well, to be healthy. But feeding her every day was a big deal. There were many hurdles. The queen would tell her stories—this story, that story. But even after listening to the stories, the girl wouldn't eat her food. So, in order to frighten her, the queen would sometimes say: "I'll give you to the tiger." The child was scared and would obey her mother's words; she would eat a little.

One day, a tiger overheard these words. "Oh," thought the tiger, "they'll give me the princess. I wonder when they'll give her." He was waiting, expectant. The girl knew nothing of this; nor did her mother. For that matter, neither did the king.

Day by day, the tiger waited. Nobody gave him any princess. The queen didn't give him the child. So one day the tiger walked straight into the king's court. The king was holding court with his ministers. There were many people there. Everyone was terrified. They all stood there, looking pale. The king got up from his throne and welcomed the tiger courteously. "Tiger Maharaja, Tiger Maharaja, what business has brought you here?" he asked. Whatever may be the reason, it's best to ask.

The tiger said, "Nothing very special. I was just wondering if you'd keep your word or not."

The king didn't understand. "I don't remember having given you any word," he said.

The tiger said, "If not you, your queen will have given her word."

"What word?" asked the king.

'She said she'd give me your child," said the tiger.

"*My* child? To *you*? Who said that?"

"The queen said it. I heard her say it many times. Every day she would say it, but she never gave me the girl. That's why I came here today."

The king summoned the queen. She came to the court and stood behind a screen. The king said, "What is this? I hear you said you would give away our girl. This great Tiger King says so. The queen said, "Oh. It's true. I said it but I didn't mean it. I said it just like that. An empty

word. The girl wouldn't listen to me, so I said it. But I didn't mean that I would give away my child. I didn't want to give her away." She was very afraid, she was crying, "No! No!" But unfortunately, she had said the word. What could they do? The tiger said, "You see? She admitted it. That's why I am here. If you don't give her to me, I'll come back with all my relatives and we will destroy your kingdom completely."

The king had no idea what to do. Even though the queen was crying, even though he felt sad, he gave away the child. The tiger took her to the forest. In the kingdom, everyone felt bad, but there was no choice.

The tiger didn't eat the girl. He put her in his cave; he fed her every day and gave her whatever she needed. He cared for her well, and she grew into an astonishingly beautiful young woman of 16. But all these years she stayed inside the cave. She was very afraid of the tiger. Was it not her fear of the tiger, when she was very young, that had brought her here? It was that same fear. In fact, she had to go to the tiger. So, out of fear, she stayed in the cave.

One day, after sixteen years, the princess was seized by a strong desire to go outside. So when the tiger was out, she went outside. It was a big forest, right? Wherever you looked, there were trees, flowers—it was amazing. She was extremely happy. "Ayo, all these days I stayed in the cave. I didn't know how beautiful it was outside." She wandered around, going from tree to tree, from flower to flower. As it happened, that day a shepherd (Gŏllavāḍu) was passing by. He saw her. "Who is this beautiful girl?" he wondered. "Why is she alone in this wilderness? She looks like a princess." He approached her and asked her who she was.

She was seeing a person for the first time after many years. She told him her whole story, how since her childhood she had been living with the tiger. The shepherd was appalled. "You're living with this tiger for all these years," said the shepherd, very sad. "Somehow or other, I'll get you out of here."

"Really?"

"Yes, really."

"What can I do?" she asked. "Show me some way (*edaina oka upāyam cĕppu*)."

"I'll come back," he said. "I'll think of a way."

She went back into the cave. By the time the tiger returned, she was there. The shepherd went to his village. He sought out a blacksmith

(Kammari). He told him the whole story and asked for his help. "What can I do?" asked the blacksmith. "One of those big boulders—can you carve a space inside it?" asked the shepherd. "Can you carve it in such a way that from the outside no one can see? The house must be deep inside."

"OK," said the blacksmith. He carved out the house in the rock. When it was ready, the shepherd rolled it into the forest, near the cave. He stood outside and called, "Come out, Princess. Please go into the rock. Be inside it (*indulo uṇḍaṇḍi*)." He should have said, "Now you can go away from this place," but no: what he said was, "Be there." That's all he said.

A listener might ask at this point: "How can one live inside a rock without food and water?" But the shepherd had made all the arrangements. Food and all the rest—he had put it inside.

So from out of the cave, she went into the rock (*guhaloniñci guṇḍuloki poyindi*).

It's quite surprising.

Inside the rock, she was eating and drinking and living.

The tiger returned. He looked in the cave. She wasn't there. He didn't know what to do. Very angry, he roared. "Where is she?" From inside the rock, the princess heard his roar. She laughed, *paka paka*. The tiger became very angry. "How dare this rock laugh at me?" He hit the rock hard with his paw, and the rock moved, tumbled and tumbled until it came to rest in the garden of a king.

It was a very lovely garden. The king was very proud of it. It had very many remarkable trees. And there was one special, remarkable flowering tree. The king particularly loved that tree. That's where the rock came to rest. Eventually, when night came, the princess went outside. She saw the garden. What a beautiful garden! She wandered all through it. She also liked that special tree. She loved its flowers. She picked all the flowers and went back into the rock.

Every night she did this.

So every day, the flowers from this tree were missing, right? The king didn't understand. Where had his flowers disappeared? He put guards all around the garden. It was no use. The flowers kept disappearing, day after day. The king, missing his flowers, became sad. He was worried. "Even with all these guards, who can take my flowers? Why is this happening?" He took to his bed. He thought about it every day. Always the same sadness. The doctors came, everyone came, but no one could cure him. His illness was in the mind.

The king had a very handsome son who came to his father and said, "The doctors say you are sick at heart. Why are you suffering? Tell me." The king said to his son, "You know, don't you? Even though I put all those guards in place, the flowers are missing. That is my suffering. I have to know why they are disappearing."

"Don't be sad, father," said the prince. "I'll solve the problem." He went to the garden—not outside it, but inside it, to guard it. Time passed. He thought that catching the thief was not a big deal. He took his sword with him. He tired himself out walking all through the garden in search of the thief. Finally he sat down under a tree and fell asleep. The princess came out of the rock, wandered through the garden, picked the flowers again and, while on her way back to the rock, suddenly saw the sleeping prince. After seeing him, she put one flower beside him and went back inside. The prince awoke in the morning, and there was a flower beside him. All the other flowers were missing. He couldn't understand. "Who is the thief?" he wondered.

On the second day, he took some peas with him to the garden in order to stay awake. He was munching on these peas, but after some time he fell asleep. Again, as usual, the princess came out, picked all the flowers, and left one flower beside him. Then she went back into the rock.

On the third night, he was determined to stay awake. He had to find the thief. He only pretended to be asleep. The princess emerged from the rock and picked the flowers. As she was about to place one flower beside him, the prince stood up and grabbed her. She was thunderstruck. They forgot everything. Really everything. They went together into the rock.

From that time on, without fail, the prince would go to the garden. But he asked the princess to stop picking the flowers and explained that his father had fallen ill because of this. "I came here to save him. By good fortune, I met you." She said, "I won't pick them anymore." So the king's worry was over, and he got better.

But he noticed that his son was never home. He was going somewhere. He had no interest in anything at home or in the kingdom. The king couldn't understand. "Why is he not coming to court?" he wondered. "Why doesn't he stay at home? What has happened?" He convened his ministers. They said: "Nothing to worry about. If you arrange his marriage, everything will be fine." The king thought: "Anyway I am getting old. I should turn the kingdom over to my son. I have to marry him off." He had pictures sent to him of all the most beautiful girls in all the countries of the world. He showed these pictures to his son, but the prince didn't like any of them.

After a long time, the king despaired. "Why don't you like any of these pictures?" He asked his son. "If there's any woman you want in the whole world, even a beautiful *apsaras*, I'll have her brought here." The prince insisted, "I don't want any of them." "So what do you want?" asked the king. "Tell me what's in your heart."

"Marry me to the big rock in your garden," said the prince.

The king was puzzled. How can you marry a rock? But it was what the prince wanted. So the king, not knowing what else to do, said: "As you wish."

They had a big wedding. All the relatives and neighbors from near and far came to the ceremony. There was a big ritual celebration, and the marriage was performed. After the ceremony, it was time for the festive dinner. Places were set for all who had come—kings, relatives, and everyone. They all sat down to eat.

But the queen was weeping in her room (*arra*). The bridegroom saw his mother weeping and went up to her. "Why are you crying, mother?"

"What can I say? In the custom of our family, after the wedding ceremony, the new bride goes from guest to guest and pours ghee on the rice. How can this big rock serve the guests with ghee? They're all sitting there waiting. I'm very sad. It's our custom, isn't it?" The prince wiped away her tears and said: "Mother, go stand close to the rock and say one word. Say, 'Oh princess in the rock, come outside. Serve the ghee.'" The mother didn't understand, but she did as her son asked. She went up to the rock and said, "Oh princess in the rock, come outside. Serve the ghee."

Suddenly, from inside the rock a splendid, radiant woman came out. Everyone was amazed and gasped: "Ah!" The prince, smiling, took her hand. She went from guest to guest and served each of them with ghee. Among the guests invited to the wedding were her own mother and father. When they saw her, they recognized her. They cried: "Our daughter, our daughter." They were very happy. The princess, too, when she saw her parents, recognized them. She, too, was happy. She served everyone, and the wedding feast came to an end. The story is over.

On Feeding

There seems to be some magic in this story, though it may not be so easy to define it—and if we define it, will it still be magic? Still, we can't help noticing some themes this story seems to be "about." It has its own rhythm or movement. Observe how the princess moves from her home

in the royal court to the tiger's cave in the wilderness, from there into a rock, from the rock into a royal garden, and finally beyond the garden into a public, communal space. Indeed, the transitions between personal and collective spaces seem critical; they also correspond, in some way, to temporal developments; like so many of the south Indian folktales studied by A.K. Ramanujan,[1] our story, too, is clearly a drama of growth and maturation, of becoming a woman, a wife, and a member of a community. It is also a drama of recognition—of the daughter by her parents, of the parents by the daughter, as we see at the beautifully understated and moving denouement; in a different way, of the daughter-in-law by the sorrowful mother-in-law; perhaps, at moments, of self-recognition on the part of the princess (as when she laughs at the tiger from inside the rock, and when she leaves her flower-trace beside the sleeping prince) and others. These moments of recognition require certain definite modes of perceiving and knowing, possibly of imagining or believing or trusting. And the story's performances of perception are intimately linked to the way space itself is conceived and expressed, explicitly or implicitly—as we shall see.

What kind of space are we talking about? At the most literal level, the story speaks about living, being alive, growing -- inside a rock. That internal rocky space has its own specific qualities. Being interior to the rock, it is clearly marked off from the stony exterior. In other words, this is also a story about surface and depth. Some things can perhaps only happen inside a rock, where you cannot be seen from the outside. What is inside the rock seems to offer various unexpected possibilities. It is not exactly a closed space—quite the contrary. Moreover, transitions in and out of it seem to happen naturally, spontaneously, effortlessly, without obstruction. Moreover, at least initially, it seems to be a kind of female space. Rocks, in Telangana, are often classed or seen as mothers.

The rock in this story is, strikingly, a friendly place.

But let us go back to the beginning and attempt to describe the family setting and the course of the heroine's growth. This is, perhaps, the easiest way into the story. Here is a young girl who is somewhat pampered and fractious — an only child. Her mother brings in the (imagined) tiger in order to get her to eat. Imagined or not, the tiger is clearly something of a threat. Eventually, a situation evolves in which the tiger is wholly real, and the parents' aggression no less real.

We may take a moment to go deeper into the theme of feeding the fractious child. This moment of the mother's feeding — first and foremost, a nourishing act - is surrounded by considerable cultural attention and anxiety. There is a shared repertoire of stories and songs that accompany

this activity. One song known throughout the Telugu country goes as follows:

canda māma rāve

jābilli rāve

kŏṇḍ'ĕkki rāve

gogu-pūlu teve

baṇḍ'ĕkki rāve

banti pūlu teve

[*vĕṇḍi ginnĕlo veḍibuvva teve*

paiḍi ginnĕlo pâlabuvva teve]

anni tĕcci mā pāpaki ivvave

Come, moon.

Sweet moon, come.

Climb the mountain and come.

Bring lots and lots of *gogu* flowers.

Get on the cart and come.

Bring marigolds.

In a silver bowl, bring hot rice.

In a golden bowl, bring milk rice.

Bring all of them and give them to my child.

Like many of the songs and stories, this one refers to the late-evening feeding (*uggu pĕṭṭadam*). One has to distract the child's attention, or hold the attention, long enough for the food to be taken in. They say that the baby Krishṇa refused to eat, despite his mother Yaśodamma's coaxing. He was looking at the moon and wanting to play with it; he said he would eat only if his mother brought the moon to him. Yaśodamma eventually took a mirror and showed the baby the moon's reflection—and Krishṇa was satisfied and ate.

Such moments are a crucial part of the daily routine of parent and child. The young child may play upon the mother's anxiety to bargain for something he or she wants. The *anna-rasam*—the essence of cooked rice—has to enter the child's body, lest disaster ensue. Sometimes this feeding becomes a drama embracing the entire family. Sometimes each

bite is named for a family member: this one for Daddy, this one for Uncle.....Even deceased ancestors join the act and give their names to bites of *uggu*. This community performance sometimes has the quality of accomplishing an impossible mission, like bringing the moon down to earth.

If the mother is worn out, she may well resort to extreme measures. "I'll give away your rice-bowl (*ginne*)." "The crow will come and take your *ginne*." More frightening words may also be heard. "I'll give you to the demon (*bucoḍu*)." "I'll give you to the lunatic." "I'll give you to the woman who roams around at midnight." From here, the distance to the tiger is not so great.

The standard prototype for these moments involves overcoming the child's resistance—molding or shaping the child's will so that it fits that of the parents. There is a strong sense of a duty or obligation which is part of the child's task. He or she must internalize this task, like it or not. Of course, the entire process is also suffused with a profound affection and tenderness; but there is, nonetheless, an ongoing process of shaping or building the child's *buddhi*, the "mind" or "intellect" or "will." In this context, the child's refusal to eat could be seen as an early, natural form of self-expression and protest. In our story, this theme of a certain defiance on the part of the girl, and later on the part of the young woman she becomes, is very pronounced.

In the story, an inescapable element of anxiety or disquiet exists from the beginning. First, the mother is worried that her child will not eat. She threatens her by falsely invoking the tiger. Once the tiger has been mentioned, the child, too, has some fear. And when this fear crystallizes in a real, living tiger, the father, his courtiers, and all the others are also afraid. The threat is concrete: if the king fails to "keep his word," the tigers will destroy his kingdom. Moreover, the girl's initial fear of the tiger keeps her cowering in the cave for sixteen years, until the moment of courage, or of overpowering desire, that propels her outside.

In a sense, the tiger is a creation of the queen. In another sense, the tiger embodies an obvious failure on the part of the father, who cannot or will not protect his child. Indeed, the father's inability, in the context of his responsibilities to the larger community, takes the form of an astonishing act of aggression against his own daughter (however grieved he may be). But in any case, the underlying element of fear propels the story forward. Were there no fear, there would be no story. Note that this fear is not linked to a sense of scarcity or lack—indeed, the whole story is rooted in a striking natural abundance, a world of trees and flowers and living creatures, including, it seems, the rock. The fear is, at least

initially, entirely specific to the issue of feeding and thus to the mother's womanly role and the question of the girl's eventual assumption of that same role.

This question of what motivates the plot is far from trivial. What would have happened if Oedipus's parents had simply ignored the devastating statement of the oracle? What if they had laughed it off (as Aristophanes may well imply in his comic review of the story)? There would have been no story and thus no tragedy. There is no reason to adopt a mechanical, fatalistic view of the oracle's role. Even in Greek tragedy, fate is mostly something internal to the protagonists, certainly not an external coercive power. The same could be said for our princess.

This story is, thus, not about "fate" in any impersonal, supernatural, external mode. Rather, it deals with the natural. Many south Indian folktales do problematize the question of a fatal structure inherent to the hero's personhood—but not our story. In so far as anything can be said to be fated here, it is purely the result of the interplay of the personal trajectory of growth and the interactive community (and caste) norms that condition and contextualize that trajectory. There is a strong sense of some natural, spontaneous, organic movement, though not necessarily a linear one, as we will see. The whole design of the story reflects this perception of a logical and necessary set of actions emerging out of the grid of personal, family, and community relations.

Within this grid, however, there is certainly one set of forces that seem to work intuitively, out of some necessary logic — those forces set into motion by spoken words. The girl's father has unconsciously become responsible for a word given to the tiger by his queen. She never meant to give her daughter to the tiger, but the mere fact that she has spoken this sentence (repeatedly) endows it with an existential power. The word will realize itself through the community's engagement with it, which forces the king's hand:

"The king had no idea what to do. Even though the queen was crying, even though he felt sad, he gave away the child. The tiger took her to the forest. In the kingdom, everyone felt bad, but there was no choice."

Later, too, the spoken word has profound pragmatic effect. The shepherd says to the girl: "Come out, Princess. Please go into the rock. Be inside it (*indulo uṇḍaṇḍi*)." Within moments, she *is* inside it, inhabiting a space he has articulated for her. At the story's end, the prince's mother speaks to the rock in words given her by her son — and the girl finally comes forth. Words work wonders. Here it is not a matter of taking an oath, or of cursing or conjuring, or of magical or automatic actions but

rather of matching language to the truth it speaks. On another level, the kind of speech that is repeatedly demonstrated in the story demands attention from the listener inside the text. Words are not empty, despite what the queen tries to say about her initial threats to the stubborn daughter. By compelling attention, they come to life.

Wilderness

Where is the young girl in all of this? Is she merely the object of her mother's somewhat compelling attention and her father's helplessness? Does she have some particular, intuitive nature of her own — right from the beginning? It would seem that the girl's connection to the tiger is not extrinsic to her own self. Sixteen years of living in a cave with a tiger must mean something. This princess is a wilderness creature, perhaps herself more than a little wild. She is, in one sense, a tiger's daughter, thus a semi-tigress or a human-tiger composite. She lives for much of her life outside of any human community, in a wilderness. In this setting, she has feelings, curiosity, desires that unfold naturally and reveal her creative powers.

Of course, she is still fearful of and subject to the tiger who has imprisoned her in his cave; and, upon reaching maturity, she cannot contain the impulse to leave this cave and escape the tiger's grip. We have to remember, always, that this tiger has a nurturing, caring nature: "The tiger didn't eat the girl. He put her in his cave; he fed her every day and gave her whatever she needed. He cared for her well..." In this respect, the wild tiger-element has a benevolent quality. Wilderness, in our story, is not a chaotic domain but seems rather to reflect a sense of natural abundance and a freedom from social constraint. Still, the princess has to overcome her fear of the tiger, whatever this might mean—perhaps, at 16, she is still afraid of her own impulses. Or this fear may well be *her* version of her mother's initial anxiety, which takes the form of the verbal threat: "I'll give you to the tiger." That is, "I'll separate you from myself and from the rest of the family and community." Some sort of exile is at stake— an exile that can only be healed, in the end, if she leaves the cave. We can see the princess overcoming her fear, first by actually leaving the cave in response to her own will, and then by the resonant laughter that she directs, from within the rock, at the tiger outside. At this early point in the story, "out" and "in" are relatively well defined categories, somewhat compartmentalized, and apparently mutually exclusive. This line of demarcation will soon be blurred.

This girl has a profound connection to the wilderness world, with its trees and flowers — an aesthetic bonding that expresses some deeper affinity. "Ayo, all these days I stayed in the cave. I didn't know

how beautiful it was outside." More specifically, she is strongly linked to flowers, as we see in the episodes in the garden. Apparently, the flowers embody her life-force and serve as a key to her future. An annual ritual in Telangana — *Batukamma paṇḍaga* — is entirely devoted to wild flowers, which the villagers pick in the forest and then use to build a high, circular mound, the "Life Goddess," Batukamma, an embodiment of life-force, *batuku*, itself. Each household builds its own Batukamma and brings it into the open village space. Women take the leading role in this festival, although men may help in building up the mound. Dozens of songs and stories accompany the ritual, which also includes a dance, by women, known as *boddemma āḍadam*. At the festival's end — after a week — the Batukamma flower-mounds are cast into the river. Warrangal city is especially known for its magnificent Batukamma celebrations. Interestingly, this ritual lacks any deity—apart from the wild flowers themselves, which pass from the forest into the village and thence into the flowing water. It is as if human, social life takes place in a space *between* these two domains of forest and stream, a space that has to be ritually and repeatedly opened up to the life that naturally flows in the wilderness. Our story similarly moves its heroine from the wilderness, where she reaches physical maturity, into a rock that is taken from that same world, and thence into a communal space that retains something of the creative essence of tree and flower.

We'll return to the garden and its flowering tree. First, let us notice the transition that the girl undergoes while still in the wilderness. She escapes from the tiger's cave into the carved boulder with the help of the passing shepherd. He wants to rescue her, and she accepts his offer—a first step in the direction of re-entering the human world with its male figures. It is the shepherd's idea to have a home carved for her inside the rock. His blacksmith friend accomplishes this work of art. The princess is by now, rather quickly, drawn into the man's consciousness and its practical effects. His artistic creation is, for her, a way out of the trap—and it is truly her own trap; the cave is, apparently, open to the outside; there is no door or stone to block the entrance, no closed boundary. She inhabits this cave *as if* it were closed off—because of her own fear. The rock she enters, by contrast, is externally closed but internally an open, even expansive space. Here, one might say, she has already begun to emerge out of herself, to impinge upon the awareness of another human being, a man, and to be impinged upon herself. Her trajectory has a beautiful complexity structured around an inverted symmetry: she goes from a concave but open-ended home (the tiger's cave), in which she is still largely bound up within herself, in a somewhat regressive reflex, to a convex home—the rock—which physically encloses her but in which she can begin to open herself up to a wider world. From this point on, she

will also be increasingly subject to a male imagination, and some element of "domestication" is already present. At the same time, within the rock, within herself, a certain tentative integration is happening. She is no longer afraid of the tiger, no longer lost inside her own self, no longer only wild. The radical compartmentalization that divided inside from out is also giving way to a much more fluid, interactive, and ambiguous mode.

Let us listen again to what the shepherd says to her, along with the narrator's commentary: "'Come out, Princess. Please go into the rock. Be inside it (*indulo uṇḍaṇḍi*).' He should have said, 'Now you can go away from this place,' but no: what he said was, 'Be there.' That's all he said." Why should the shepherd have said it differently? The narrator seems to feel that the phrasing is important. *Uṇḍaṇḍi*: "Be there." It can also mean: "Wait" or, simply, "Be." This ambiguity has purpose and meaning; it is the idiom of possibility, of options that may open up. It allows for interpretation on the part of the heroine who, from now on, will be continuously, indeed increasingly, exposed to ambiguous states and relations. We are at a turning point in the story, and there is reason to feel wonder: "So from out of the cave, she went into the rock (*guhaloniñci guṇḍuloki poyindi*). It's quite surprising." She asks no questions, but simply follows the shepherd's suggestion. She slips effortlessly into the rock. Did the shepherd expect her to wait there forever? Fortunately, the tiger comes home and finds her missing. If she hadn't laughed at his rage, and if he hadn't struck the rock with his paw, we would all still be waiting.

What about her laugh? It seems to reflect the incipient change in her, the expansion of her inner world. It is a spontaneous laugh. Indeed, everything she does in the course of this story is spontaneous. But this moment is critical. If she is herself still part-tigress, she is now capable of laughing at this part, at observing it. We can speak no longer of a singular, self-enclosed self. Her awareness is becoming more complex. From this moment on, the path is open to the garden and its adventures and, ultimately, to her marriage.

Stated differently, and schematically, in terms of surface and depth, it is only by going into the rock that she begins to move outwards.

In the Garden

The rock rolls into the garden. Actually, in Telugu the rock "tumbles for itself", reflexively (*dŏralu kuṇṭū dŏralu kuṇṭū potundi*), as if it had a will of its own, or as if the logic of the story moves it inevitably to that garden, which isn't even said to be downhill. Here again we find a strong

statement about things inner and outer. The flower-thief emerges from deep inside the rock, which is inside the garden. The king naturally places his guards outside the garden, probably facing outward, expecting the thief to come from anywhere but inside. They, of course, fail in their mission, as does the prince who, at least, has the intuition to enter the garden, to guard it from inside. But even he cannot really imagine the true source of his father's problem—and, besides, he has a fatal tendency to fall asleep.

The garden is a piece of wilderness that has been tamed, cultivated, possessed. It belongs to the king, who is outraged by the fact that something happens there beyond his control. The most precious part of the garden, the flowering tree and its flowers, is being despoiled. The king falls ill, his mind disturbed, as if he were being robbed of some core part of himself. He is afraid of the unknown thief. If the story begins with a mother's fear for her child, it reaches toward its conclusion with a father's unease, and later with his worry about his son. Not surprisingly, this beloved tree becomes the link between the princess inside the rock and the prince outside it.

But this is no longer simply a matter of ins and outs. There is a singularity about this tree. The princess seems to know this, too. She leaves a single flower, each night, beside the sleeping prince. Something unique, irreplaceable, is being intimated. The king will show his son the pictures of all the world's most beautiful women, but there is only one woman who interests him. She, of course, inhabits the one, special rock. More precisely, she goes in and out of it at will. By now her ability to make choices is fully in evidence: *she* chooses the prince, leaves the flower beside him, marks him for herself. There is still something willful, even rebellious, about this girl. In Telangana, as perhaps elsewhere in Andhra, one should not pick flowers at night. Trees sleep at night, so they say; it is wrong to disturb their rest. Yet this is precisely what our heroine does. Indeed, she not only picks these flowers but also takes them away with her, into the rock. Hence the king's illness. She is, in a sense, challenging the entire normative order of kings, courts, and gardens, with their largely male agents, by repossessing its greatest treasure.

Note that the rock apparently has ample room inside it for two people. Moreover, it seems to have become still softer and more flexible. More and more, as the story advances, the interior of the rock, and its surprising potential, continue to expand. But the inside of the rock is also the girl's inner space, which has also expanded to include the prince's world—peopled by his father and other relatives. The prince asks her to stop picking the flowers, for his father's sake; and she agrees. In fact, she is, by now, strikingly amenable to suggestions coming from the outside.

Still, we have to remember that the princess herself chooses to move toward the outside. She first encounters the Golla shepherd, a sort of in-between, itinerant character, neither entirely of the wilderness nor of the village, with none of the fixedness-in-place that will eventually mark the royal community she marries into. Like the story itself, and like the rock, he is in movement; but he does have some relation to the theme of taming what is wild. The blacksmith, too, belongs to an intermediate, artisan caste—Visvabrahmanulu, classed as "creators" (in contrast to kings and farmers). And both of these first figures are males. The blacksmith creates the princess's new home. Her own creativity will be of a different kind, not so much "made" as spontaneous, natural, and corporeal.[2] She will eventually find herself living in a world that is, at least externally, largely shaped by men.

On Weddings

So why does the prince insist on marrying the rock? Couldn't he have simply told his father about the girl inside it? And how is it that the father goes along with this somewhat bizarre idea without much resistance? The mother is not, apparently, part of this moment of decision, but she apparently also accepts it, at least up to a point. The storyteller gives the impression of a certain inevitability, even a natural progression, in the very heart of the absurd ritual that marks the story's climax. If the prince wants to marry this rock, fine—we'll do it. In fact, everyone will be invited; and all the guests seem to be quite comfortable with the surprising ritual. No one protests. For that matter, the storyteller makes a similar demand on his listeners. If she insists on marrying off the rock, so be it. Still, we can ask ourselves what it means.

One element is clearly critical. The mother has her moment of crisis and courage, or of something close to faith. The prince finds her weeping after the wedding ceremony. He wipes away her tears and, at the same time, intensifies the cognitive dissonance she is feeling. "Mother, go stand close to the rock and say one word. Say, 'Oh princess in the rock, come outside. Serve the ghee.'" The mother naturally fails to understand, but her willingness to perform this act is what allows the story to end. For at least that one moment, she believes. Such belief is a matter of imagination — which means, minimally, going beyond one's own given imaginative domain, or silently sharing in another's imaginative sphere. Like so many south Indian stories—as when a father sends his sons out into the world to look for something he has dreamt (Shulman and Stroumsa 1999)—ours opens a heavily conventionalized world to the operation of some creative or visionary force, which turns out to be entirely real, though not in an expectable way. The Queen has, perhaps, no expectations at all when she

addresses the rock. All she has to go on is her son's word and her trust in it, and in him. This turns out to be enough.

But for us, the listeners—and eventually for both the Queen and the King—there is the clear possibility, actually a necessity, of seeing beyond what we can see. From the beginning, this potential exists. The young girl believes her mother's "empty" threat about the tiger—and the tiger appears. The shepherd invites the girl to enter a rock—and she easily does so. The father's grief, a mental one, is healed by the son who waits, asleep, in the garden. This son promises to protect his father's flowers, and unexpectedly does so. In all of these cases, the visible, external surface is shown to be capable of some unknown, invisible depth, which is at the same time wholly real, indeed more real than the apparent surface. Again and again, this message comes through the characters' actions and feelings. They all undergo repeated bursts of wonder—the power that actually keeps these characters alive. In this sense, the fundamental paradox of a rock that is alive, expansive, almost human, is what motivates the whole story.

But in fact this paradox is itself a matter of the surface, a superficial perception. The rock is not, in any way, a hard, threatening, occlusive, resistant "object." It is much closer to a subjective experience, one rich in wonder. Indeed, we are by now, perhaps, capable of answering, at least in part, one of our initial queries: What is a rock? Clearly, we need not content ourselves with a single answer.

On one level, the rock appears to be a miniature world—self-contained, self-generating, self-protecting. As such, it is like any other member of the human community whose story is being told. As such, it is no less porous than any other member of this community, no less in contact with the worlds that are *as if* outside it. But the rock belongs to the *ūru*, the structured village world with which it is, in a way, coterminous—and not to the wilderness, *aḍavi*, from which it came. It is, in the end, a highly structured space. In another sense, the rock is the space of one girl's maturation, specifically the space of her reaching puberty and physical adulthood. It could be said to provide a ritual context or frame for such a moment, one that is not formulated in language but nonetheless carries a very powerful cognitive message. Wonder—*citram*, the narrator's word; also *vinta*, or *adbhutam*—is part of it, perhaps the main part, the one that allows entrance into a community. The rock condenses the girl's experience, with its imaginative components, in its complexity, into a strangely intimate, intensified state. Rockiness is, indeed, above all a state.

As such, rockiness is also a medium for selfhood, for the full unfolding of an active, social, personal self. The "self" that the princess

comes to be is, like the rock, expansive, composite, and ultimately undefined by categories such as "in" and "out." We might call this rocky personhood "porous" or "osmotic"—in the sense of an expansive "I" or "We" that is open to other composite, porous beings. Better, the "I" in the case of the princess expands to become a "we," *manam*, the inclusive Telugu pronoun that comes to constitute the heart of the story.[3]

Rockiness seems here, in fact, to be mostly about this kind of expansiveness. We can see something of what this must mean: the interweaving of one person's imagination with others'; a kind of listening well, or paying attention, to a set of voices that require recognition—as we see, for example, when the princess and her parents recognize one another at the end of the story. The chorus of voices is by no means limitless; rather, this story seems to be primarily focused on a single community, perhaps even a single caste or series of sub-castes, with its king, queen, and royal court; although such a community will be like others—bounded but still fluidly connected beyond itself. In general, the story seems to show how thick boundaries transform into liquid zones, like the rock. The simultaneous softening of boundaries and tuning in to the other impart a certain rhythm and movement to this process. As we have already seen, this rhythm, informing the design of the narrative as a whole, takes the place of a concept like "fate." The rock's destiny "rolls out" of itself—"tumbling" reflexively (*dŏralu kuṇṭū*) from the wilderness into the king's garden. What begins in one king's court necessarily ends in another. In this sense, the story traces and defines the limits of one communal space.

One young girl has somehow managed to produce a world—one in which persons exist osmotically with one another, in which the self is not fixed in stable boundaries but rather flows into and through other selves without exiting its natural (social) orbit or losing its own consistency. Let us repeat: this process is expansive in a mode that requires recognition of difference but that allows for the interweaving of shared imaginations. But this last statement might sound too idealized: the story recognizes a constraining design with its own normative components. Our heroine falls in love not with just anybody—not even with the shepherd who sets her free, or the blacksmith-artist who makes her home-- but with the prince whom the narrator has been keeping ready for just this role. She seems blind, in fact, to any such non-normative possibilities. It is as if a strong centripetal power—the power of the inclusive "we" at the center—also blocks and limits; and this force also impacts upon the rock, drawing it to its natural resting place. For this very reason, the conspicuous theme of resistance that we noted at the beginning—in the girl's wildness, or tigerness, her fractious nature, her self-assertion—is never wholly lost. When she emerges from her cave, she seems to be

endowed with an incipient, unconscious willingness to be drawn toward her community; at the outer limit of this development, she will need to be recognized, through an act of trust, by her new mother-in-law, before she can fully emerge again. She ultimately reaches a point where words like "in" and "out" are no longer meaningful. She has become "we." But at the same time, by choosing her husband, she has also chosen an exclusive, conjugal or family "we" (*mem*), thereby contracting back into a smaller circle embedded within the wider, village sphere. This more general movement of expansion and contraction, of a centrifugal urge to freedom and centripetal structuring, is active throughout our story and never finally resolved. In this sense, the apparent closure of this tale may be misleading. "She served everyone, and the wedding feast came to an end. The story is over." For now.

And there is something more to be said, still, about this particular tension that inheres in the story, and about the way it plays itself out at the end. We began with a mother trying to make her daughter eat—the prototypical act of taking something in from outside. Unless she allows this external substance in, the daughter cannot exist; but still she is reluctant, and her resistance eventually leads her into the wilderness. Apparently, her life as a semi-tigress is not, however, entirely satisfying. Hence the move out of the cave and into the rock. Notice how self-sufficient the rock is, a well-appointed world replete with food and drink and whatever else the girl might need. It is also a domain where she can remain hidden from view. Such were the instructions the shepherd gave the blacksmith: "Can you carve it in such a way that from the outside no one can see? The house must be deep inside." And the princess who is deep inside this house—is she not, in some sense, still preserving an autonomous space for herself, even as she begins to allow other voices, other imaginations, to impinge upon her world? What is it that prompts her finally to emerge from that personal space? Of course, by the time of her wedding, she is already deeply intermeshed with the prince's own personal space and with the royal court and village beyond it. Still, the story ends with a symmetrical but inverted repetition: the force-feeding mother of the beginning has become the despairing mother-in-law of the conclusion. Here there is no more coercion, only a kind of entreaty: "Oh princess in the rock, come outside. Serve the ghee." It is as if the very act of taking in nourishing food, the original problem, so to speak, has led, via the rock, to this moment of imaginative acceptance, or a somewhat different, greatly magnified taking in—of this young woman by the community, and of that community by her.

In a way, it is a matter of listening with deep interest—a mode that becomes generalized by the end of the story. The mother-in-law listens, first to her son; then, hardly believing, she "listens for" her hidden

daughter-in-law, whose very existence is opaque to her. And the princess, too, seems capable of such listening, the result of the long process of opening up the rock. What began as a problem of impingement from the outside has ended up as something quite different, an interaction devoid of coercive force. By now many voices are active, or interactive, though some of them will always remain opaque. Coming out of the rock will not resolve all questions; but it does indicate that something has indeed changed in this girl's way of being.

Perhaps we can now answer the question: why was it necessary to marry a rock? We know, by now, that it is not just any old rock, but rather a surprisingly porous, soft, expansive space-in-movement. Yet this rocky space-in-movement remains opaque, like any deep personal space. It also continually reminds us, and all who see it, of the wilderness from which it came, which is also, as we saw, continuous in some sense with the heroine's internal resistance—that centrifugal force that drives her from her parents' home to the tiger's cave, and that remains alive in her actions right up to the moment of her emergence outward at the wedding, and beyond. The striking conclusion is that the village community into which she moves is itself operated upon, perhaps driven or motivated, by this same resistant force. The rock, in fact, seems to remain in the middle of the garden, which is no doubt in the middle of the palace domain, which is no doubt at the heart of the village. As we have said, this is a world in which rocks are everywhere.

So in a dynamic perspective—and that is precisely the perspective we need if we are to understand this kind of moving space—the active wilderness power, with its aspect of resistance, its self-contained autonomy, its opacity, is the key to the very existence of the village. It inheres in the sense of belonging. The village ultimately nurtures and values it, as the mother-in-law speaks to the rock, or as the prince shows us by marrying this rock. Social space is created through a kind of complementarity between a centrifugal will for personal creativity — always opaque to the observer, and in some sense resistant to outside impingement — and the centripetal, community-bound attraction that draws the rock into itself and holds it in place. In terms of the imagination, a critical register in our reading of the story: imaginative sharing or interweaving is not a matter of leveling, of making everyone the same. Resistance is not suppressed. In fact, it energizes the collective arena as a whole. Difference (as in the case of gender, to name one conspicuous conceptual space) survives, is perhaps even celebrated by a wedding.

Another Rock, Another Girl

There is in India another famous story about a woman who lives inside a rock. It appears in the Sanskrit text, composed in Kashmir around

the eighth century, called the *Yoga-vāsiṣṭha-mahā-rāmāyaṇa*, a text full of baffling stories rich in philosophical content. The frame story binding all the narratives together has to do with the epic hero Rama's deep depression and the sage Vasiṣṭha's attempt to cure it by teaching him through telling these stories.

Toward the end of this long therapeutic session, Vasiṣṭha finally tells his own story, which is perhaps the most complex and enigmatic in the entire long text (6.2.56- 6.2.94.7). He tells how once he wanted to find a place, somewhere in the universe, where he could meditate in complete self-absorption and quiet; but he had great difficulty finding such a place. The mountain peaks were too noisy because of the blowing of the winds; the bottom of the ocean was unsatisfactory because he was disturbed by the movement of the fish and waves; in the forests, there were leaves shaking on the trees. Finally, in some desperation, he found a place of total isolation in some small corner of his own mind.

He made some progress in his meditation. Indeed, he reached the point where he could identify the pernicious effects of his innate *ahaṅkāra*, the ego-sense that drove him like a ghoul (*piśāca*). He thought, for a while, that he could perhaps go beyond this tyrannical egoism. At that moment, he heard the sound of music, a gentle, soft, sweet voice. Someone, a woman, was singing a song in the *ārya* meter. Vasiṣṭha followed the music—all the time absorbed in deep philosophical speculation—but could find no source for it. He made himself into space and, becoming space, became the sound that is carried through space; he was like a drop of water mixing with water. Eventually he came across the woman, who introduced herself as an *Vidyādharī*, a celestial singer, who lived far away inside a huge rock or a rock-machine (*upala-yantraka*, YV 6.2.64.35-6), with its harsh, stony exterior (*śilodare…akṣīṇa-vajra-sāra-sama-tvaci*). She lived there with her husband, a somewhat dessicated sage intent only upon achieving liberation from this existence; this man had, in fact, invented the girl out of his own imagination (since he needed a wife in order to live a full Brahminical existence),[4] but he refused to touch her or show her any love, despite her burning passion. After many years of this frustrating life, the girl had given up all hope of living as a woman with this husband; she was like a lotus burnt by frost. All she wanted now was for Vasiṣṭha to teach both of them the truth of reality, a truth that would finally set them free.

She introduced Vasiṣṭha to her husband and to her world inside the rock. At first, Vasiṣṭha, lacking practice in seeing into rocks, could see nothing but the stony surface. Eventually, guided by the girl, and after some practice (*abhyāsa*), he was able to follow her into the rock. Inside it he saw endless worlds folded within other worlds; in every atom, there were millions of interlocking universes.

And these universes all came to an end in a violent, catastrophic fire, in which the girl and her husband also perished. Vasiṣṭha watched it happen. When it was over, he wanted to go back to the hut he had built for himself, for meditation, in that quiet corner of his mind. When he arrived there, he saw that the hut was now occupied by someone else, a Yogi, sitting in deep meditation. Vasiṣṭha thought: "He must have come here, like me, looking for a very quiet place; and seeing a dead body in the hut—mine—he must have thrown it away." Vasiṣṭha wanted to go back to his own world; he withdrew his imagination from the hut and the Yogi, and the hut at once disappeared while the Yogi, now lacking any support, came crashing to the ground, like a cloudburst from the sky or a cloud blown away by the wind. Vasiṣṭha felt a certain kindness (*saujanya*) for the falling Yogi, who was still sunk in meditation; Vasiṣṭha rushed to him and woke him up with a great roar. "Who are you? Where do you live? What do you do?" Vasiṣṭha asked him, and the Yogi, slowly regaining his memory, replied: "For a long time I enjoyed the pleasures of life in the gardens of the gods; I was carried along on the waves of awareness in the river of what can be seen by the eyes; but then I discovered that pleasure is evanescent. Now my only delight is in the empty space of consciousness. Life is a river flowing between death and birth; whatever comes into existence disappears, and all the little pieces of our lives continuously fall away. Our bodies vanish like waves, or clouds, or the flickering of a lamp. After a long time, I am at last free of my ego sense; I have no thirst for heaven or for release. I came here, like you, looking for a solitary space. I saw the hut, and the body of a man; I thought some Siddha must have reached *nirvāṇa* and left his body behind. I had no idea you would be coming back one day."

Vasiṣṭha, standing in that golden space, said: "It was not only you who failed to think things through to the end; I made the same mistake. People generally don't pay enough attention (*avyāpti-rahitā nāma na sambhavati dehinām*, 6.2.94.2).[5] Why didn't I make sure the hut was fixed securely in the sky? If I had done so, you would not have fallen. Come, now, let us two go to wherever we want in the worlds of the Siddhas. One's own place is always the best if one is seeking self-fulfillment." The two of them, having come to a decision, then flew up into the sky together, like two stones in a sky-machine (*vyoma-yantropalau*). Bowing to one another, they took their leave. The Siddha went to the land he desired, and Vasiṣṭha went where he wanted to go. Life—this is Vasiṣṭha's conclusion, conveyed to his main listener, Rāma—is a strange affair, full of surprises (*āścarya-mayīṃ paśya saṃsṛtīnāṃ vicitratām*, 6.2.94.7).

This story from the *Yoga-vāsiṣṭha* defies any simple interpretation. It has the quality of a wilderness, a space in which one can easily get

lost. Clearly, there are concerns relating to perception, notions of illusion and reality, and the engagement of the self with itself and its possible worlds. But there are also some evident connections to our Telangana story, which we can perhaps spell out.

First, both stories offer us an image of a habitable, inviting, spacious, elastic, expansive rock. In the *Yoga-vāsiṣṭha* text, the rock actually holds within it an infinite number of embedded worlds, each with its inhabitants, its planets and seasons, its endless stories. The story-teller, Vasiṣṭha, enters into this expansive space, just as our Telangana girl goes into *her* rock—although for her the transition seems easier, almost effortless. In any case, the *Yoga-vāsiṣṭha* offers us a clear articulation of just what a rock is thought to be:

snigdhā spaṣṭāa mṛdu-sparśā mahā-vistāra-śālinī/
nibiḍā nitya-nīrandhrā kva-cid asti mahā-śilā//
tasyântaḥ praphullāni padmāni su-bahūny api/
sārasyam iva ramyāṇi santy anantāni rāghava//
anyonya-prota-patrāṇi mitho vighāṭitāni ca/
mithaś copari rūḍhāni gūḍhāni prakaṭāni ca//
ūrdhva-mūlāny adho-mūlāny amūlānîtarāṇi ca//
teṣāṃ ca nikaṭe santi śaṅkhāḥ śata-saharaśaḥ/
cakraughaś ca mahākārāḥ padmavat saṃ-ni-veśinaḥ//
....
cic-chilaiṣā mayoktā te yasyām antar jagat-sthitiḥ/
ghanatvaikâtmakatvâdi-vaśād eṣā śilaiva cit//
apy atyanta-ghanâṅgāyāḥ su-nīrandhrâkṛter api/
vidyate 'ntar jagad-vṛndaṃ vyomnîva vipulo 'nilaḥ//[6]

"Tender, luminous, soft to the touch, very expansive, continuous, always without gaps—somewhere or other, there is a great rock like this. Inside it, as if inside a lake, there are very many flowering lotuses, lovely and limitless. Their leaves are tangled together; some are separated from one another, others are growing on top of one another, some hidden, others visible. Some have roots in the sky, others have roots down below, some lack roots of any kind. Nearby are hundreds of thousands of conch-shells and masses of wheels, folded into themselves like lotuses.[7]...What I am describing to you is an awareness-rock, in which the whole universe abides. For awareness is indeed a rock—because it is condensed and

entirely self-contained. A vast array of worlds exists inside that rock, even though it is so solidly condensed and utterly without gaps, like the wild wind blowing in the sky."

So, as we have said before in connection to the Telangana rock, we are clearly dealing with a friendly, quite open space, "tender, luminous, soft"—a mini-world, self-contained, autonomous, complete, and utterly continuous with itself. There are no gaps, no interstices or cracks, no breaks in the flow; and the worlds growing inside, in a seemingly luxuriant, abundant fullness, are strongly interwoven with one another. This is a space in which things, or beings, or perhaps thoughts and feelings, are alive and grow. Nothing, it seems, could be more alive than this rock, which is also, it turns out, the perfect embodiment of awareness, *cit*, the continuous, rhythmic, liquid flow of being. Being so condensed, that is, endlessly pervasive—like wind blowing through the sky—it is also, for this very reason, spacious and open, neither hindered nor blocked by any internal breakage or gap. This rocky space has a meditative quality, "empty" of sociality and thus strikingly internal, a space for pure self, in which the self's self-imaginings have infinite scope.

Second, in both stories there is absolutely no way around the rock. One has to go through it. The Telangana girl matures and invents herself, one might say, within that rocky space, which allows both self-reflection and some, limited impingement from the social world outside. There is movement in the rock, and the princess moves along with it. The prince insists on marrying the rock (not the princess in it)—for reasons which we tried to explore. Vasistha, for his part, sees multiple, interlocking worlds only by entering the rock; and his story ends with a kind of celebration of just this interdependent mode of being, the dreamer woven into the dreamed, woken up by what he dreams.

Or, third, we might say that the imaginer is woven into what he or she imagines—that this hypertrophy of the active imagination is something like an explanation of what is real. The world is a dense, criss-crossing, multiply determined lattice of imaginings that flow into and out of each of us, connecting us to one another, creating us in and through each other. In the Telangana rock we find a similar imaginative enterprise that begins, for the girl, with an intimation of self-understanding. From this point, still living inside the rock and relatively complete in herself, she begins to open up to the wider web of collective imaginings. The Telangana story then proceeds to abandon the rock—as the princess and her husband enter into the life of their community. In this story, imagination, freely at work inside the rock, is a wilderness feature, somewhat recalcitrant and autonomous in relation to the village with its centripetal forces and its rules. Like other elements that belong naturally to the wilderness, the

imagination has a remarkably self-sufficient aspect. It is what allows the girl to live alone in the rock, to go in and out of it freely, without obstacle, and ultimately to make her choices. But this active role of the imagination also implies a certain sense of indeterminate possibility. Indeed, in a sense imagination *is*, in the Telangana story, precisely this search for the unexpected or the previously unimagined. Again and again, the figures in the story are carried beyond their conditioned expectations into some surprising new experiences. Such is the self-liberating aspect of an imagination that plays with possibility and discovers unknown spaces, for example, inside a rock.

Note that in both stories imagination is partly fueled by desire. Vasistha's burning desire, which survives all the catastrophes he witnesses and the epistemic destabilization he undergoes, is to find a truly quiet place somewhere in the universe. The Telangana girl has a surprisingly consistent desire, operating even inside the rock, to join others. In fact, it is precisely this desire that moves the rock. Once again, the central conceptual point that shapes the unfolding of the story is that this connection to a community emerges through activating the imaginative potential of the individual—in a mode that is not definitive but rather one of exploration and invention, and that unfolds in some singularly creative yet also defiant space.

Fourth, both of the great rocks, insofar as they are emblems of de-objectification—of a hard surface becoming a liquid zone—generate in the listener or reader the primary emotion of wonder. If imagination operates by opening up the person to a potential unpredictable in its effects, its cognitive counterpart is the experience of amazement. Neither tale has a moral or a lesson, in the usual sense of the words. In fact, both stories tend to undermine any such reading. Part of the wonder we may feel lies in the fact that both the great Yogi and the village girl meet at a certain vantage point. He learns to see the infinite worlds, full of living beings, in every atom, but only by attuning himself to the girl who takes him into the rock. The Telangana girl, too, discovers—more precisely, creates - a rich world resonant with multiple voices, all of them somehow present in the single rock. The "self" that comes into view, or that comes into being via the rock, is similarly composite, porous, continuous, and expansive. We are happy to have introduced the Yogi to this girl—or perhaps they have already met in that stony space; in any case, we hope they will continue their discussion.

There remains, partly unanswered, a question we posed at the beginning of this essay. What is a woman?

Notes

[1] *E.g.*, "The Flowering Tree": Ramanujan 1999.

[2] In the *Jāmbapurāṇam*, a caste *purāṇa* belonging to the Untouchable Madigas, the woman's creativity—fully recognized as a primary life-source, Ādi-śakti—stands in marked contrast to *Brahmā's* male cosmogony. He creates the world after her, as an artist. She, for her part, has to exit the structured male world.

[3] Telugu, like other South Indian languages, distinguishes between two first-person plural pronouns: *mem*, which excludes the other, and *manam*, which includes everyone.

[4] *Yoga-vāsiṣṭha* 6.2.64.46: this is what the Vidyādharī herself says about her birth.

[5] Following the *Vāsiṣṭha-mahārāmāyaṇa-tātparya-prakāśa: dehināṃ dehavatāṃ yoginām api avyāptiḥ praṇidhānena sarva-viśaye mano-vyāptis tad-rahitā atītânāgatârtha-samvittir na sambhavaty eva*.

[6] *Laghu-yoga-vāsiṣṭha* 6.4.1-5, 7-8.

[7] According to the commentator of the *Vāsiṣṭha-candrikā*, the conches are actually planets and constellations in the sky, and the wheels are islands.

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