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The poetical strategy of Aśvaghōṣa: the Brahmanical image of *phena* ‘foam’ in a doctrinally inspired Buddhist poetry¹

Paola M. Rossi

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Abstract

This article aims to explore the new poetical strategy devised by the famous poet Aśvaghōṣa (2nd CE), a Brahmin converted to Buddhism, in order to promote the Buddhist doctrine: his works represent that cultural syncretism, which was supported by the policy of the Kuṣāṇa dynasty, spanning over three centuries in the northern India. Such a cultural environment stimulated new communicative strategies, especially on occasion of doctrinal debates, which must be held between the promoters of the Brahmanical counter-reformation movement, developed since the last centuries BCE – as assumable from the Brahmanical epics, especially the *Mahābhārata* –, and the challenging innovative Buddhist currents, such as the (Mūla)Sārvāstivāda school, attested in the Mathurā region, with which also Aśvaghōṣa must be affiliated. Against such a cultural background, the learned Aśvaghōṣa elaborated a sophisticated poetics, consisting not only of mere ornamentation, according to the earlier *kāvya* models, represented by the Brahmanical *Rāmāyaṇa*, but also of deeply complex inter-textual connections, made of flowing analogical suggestions, even inconsistent, producing a sort of ‘multistable’ perception of reality. Thus, an innovative *kāvya* poetry was shaped, fascinating and disorienting the educated audience at the same time. In fact, the manifold layers of reality, resulting from multi-meaning poetic expressions, suggest the main Buddhist principle which is exactly counterposed to the Brahmanical ontology: the phenomenal existence is devoid of a unique ‘essence’ itself (*ātman*), and is therefore ultimately unsubstantial.

This peculiar poetical strategy is here probed by means of the reconstruction of the textual network of the occurrences of the term *phena*, meaning ‘foam, froth’, and their literary contexts. Aśvaghōṣa adopts this Sanskrit term, drawing it and the correlated imagery from the Brahmanical textual *repertoire* (Vedic *corpus*, and epics) and Buddhist scriptures (Pāli canon), so that multifaceted meanings referring to different codified literary languages are implied by the single term *phena*. However, an ultimate value emerges from Aśvaghōṣa’s works: it paradoxically fulfils and consummates the previous inconsistent meanings, since in the Buddhist perspective the evanescence of the foam prefigures the supreme awareness of unsubstantiality.

Key Words – *kāvya*; Buddhist poetics; Brahmanical epics; *topos* woman-river

¹ I am very grateful to Sally Davies for the revision of the English version. I would like to thank also Giorgio Castelli, who inspired this article. I accept full responsibility for the final version.

1. Introduction²

This article aims to explore the relationship between the development of the Indian literary movement defined *kāvya*, and the spread of Buddhism in the kingdom of the Kuṣāṇas, focusing on the literary works of the famous poet Aśvaghōṣa, who lived in the second century CE, during the reign of the emperor Kanīṣka³. As is well known, the north-western area of the Indian subcontinent – especially the Gandhāra region – and the Gangetic plain – in particular the Mathurā region –, up to the borders of the central-western kingdom of the Kṣatrapas, were dominated for three centuries (1st–3rd CE) by the Kuṣāṇa dynasty, whose origins lie in Central Asian nomadic cultures, and whose politics were based on eclecticism that promoted forms of cultural syncretism⁴. Two points were relevant in the Kuṣāṇa cultural policy: first of all, the fact that a hybridized form of the Sanskrit language, pertaining to the educated Brahmanical tradition, was adopted as the representative language of their political role in the Doāb and Gangetic regions. This triggered a process of Sanskritization also in the Gandharian and Central Asian areas of the empire, where, albeit, the Gāndhārī Prakrit had been adopted as the *lingua franca*⁵. Secondly, the Kuṣāṇa sovereigns promoted the expansion of Buddhism, especially in Central Asia, even without being converted: manifold declensions of the Buddhist *dharma* spread in the Kuṣāṇa reign, others from the Theravādic canonical tradition⁶ in Pāli Prakrit. Among these, the (Mūla)Sārvāstivāda school in particular, which was also attested in the Mathurā region, effectively adopted the Sanskrit language⁷. Thus, around the turn of the new millennium, the Brahmanical tradition, which was a linguistically refined and socially exclusive heritage of the Vedic culture, was gradually combined with heterodox cultural traits – such as Buddhism –, and a process of Sanskritization was applied to and associated with phenomena of Prakritism⁸.

Against such a background, the works of Aśvaghōṣa must have played an important role. An eminent exponent of the intellectual *entourage* of the Kuṣāṇa emperor Kanīṣka and a Brahmin converted to Buddhism, Aśvaghōṣa was born in Ayodhyā/Sāketa, the centre of the Brahmanical epic tradition hinged on the *Rāmāyaṇa*: he and his works may reasonably represent the Kuṣāṇa syncretic culture⁹. In particular, his two epic poems, the *Buddhacarita* or “Life of the Buddha” (BC), and *Saundarananda* or “Handsome Nanda” (Saund), are considered as examples of that innovative literary art (*kāvya*), which was being modelled among others after the *Rāmāyaṇa*, whose legendary composer Vālmīki Aśvaghōṣa himself was acknowledged as being the *ādikavi* (‘first *kavi*’) *par excellence* (BC 1.43)¹⁰. In fact, Aśvaghōṣa’s poems are the earliest surviving examples of the so-called genre of ‘extensive poetry’ (*mahākāvya*), composed in refined Sanskrit¹¹, but referring to Buddhist topics. In relation to this, Olivelle (2009: XXI-XXII) argues that especially the

² As far as the passages of the Vedic, Sanskrit and Pāli texts are concerned, unless otherwise stated, the translation is mine.

³ For this dating, see Olivelle (2009: XVII-XXIII); as regards the attribution to an earlier age, cf. Salomon (2015).

⁴ As regards the cultural policy of the Kuṣāṇas, cf. e.g. Lam (2013).

⁵ As regards the hybrid linguistic situation in the Kuṣāṇa empire and the so-called Sanskritized Buddhism, cf. e.g. Bronkhorst (2011: 122-142; 153ff.), and the related bibliography, especially Hinüber (1989: 348-355), and Pollock (2006: 64-74); the latter highlighted how such a phenomenon was part of a broader tendency concerning the Indian culture as a whole in the same period, defined by the American scholar as a ‘reinvention of Sanskrit culture’ (Pollock 2006: 67).

⁶ As regards different Buddhist schools spread in the Kuṣāṇa reign ([Mūla]Sārvāstivāda, Mahāsāṅghika, Dharmaguptaka, Mahāyāna), cf. e.g. Tremblay (2007: 82-88), and Salomon (2018: 24-25).

⁷ As to the issue, cf. Eltschinger (2017).

⁸ As an example of such a linguistic tendency, the case of the controversial fourth Buddhist council may be mentioned: according to later Chinese sources, this council, held in Kashmir under the royal patronage of Kanīṣka, decreed that the earlier Buddhist texts, transmitted by means of Prakrit languages, were to be translated into the Sanskrit language: cf. e.g. Salomon (2018: 22-23).

⁹ For a literary presentation, see Warder (1974: II. 144-147); Passi (1979: 225-228; 233-240; 1985: 209-223).

¹⁰ As regards this, cf. Johnston (1984²: XLVII-XLIX); and Olivelle (2009: XX-XXI).

¹¹ Cf. e.g. Salomon (1983).

Buddhacarita can be considered as the Buddhist response to the Brahmanical movement of ‘counter-reformation’ that began in the 2nd century BCE through a Brahmanical revision of epic material and thanks to which definitive redactions of works such as the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa* were carried out. Therefore, Aśvaghōṣa’s innovative literary form was affected by the specific cultural context, that must have been the cultural framework of the Kuṣāṇa northern Indian regions: it was characterized by both a Brahmanical education¹² and a Buddhist *Weltanschauung*, especially that of the (Mūla)Sārvāstivāda *milieux*, notably active in dealing with Brahmanical environments¹³. Indeed, Aśvaghōṣa could be related to a branch of this school¹⁴. In other words, such a *kāvya* must have emerged in order to promote the Buddhist doctrine persuading the non-Buddhist audience, especially the Brahmins, that the Buddhist *dharma* was the consummation of the Brahmanical *dharma* itself¹⁵. Therefore, this kind of poetry must have been deliberately fashioned after a skilful combination of aesthetics – poetical devices and learned language, due to the Brahmanical cultural legacy – and the Buddha’s teaching, according to which reality is a suffering (*duḥkha*) chain of conditioned existences, beyond whatever aesthetic pleasure. Aśvaghōṣa’s famous poetical declaration, referred to in the last but one verses of the *Saundarananda*, is significant:

ity eṣā vyupaśāntaye na rataye mokṣārthagarbhā kṛtiḥ śrotṛñāṃ grahaṇārtham anyamanasāṃ
kāvyopacārāt kṛtā /

yan mokṣāt kṛtam anyad atra hi mayā tat kāvyadharmāt kṛtam pātuṃ tiktam ivaśadham
madhuyutaṃ hr̥dyaṃ katham syād iti // (Saund 18.63).

This composition on the subject of liberation (*mokṣa*) is for calming (*vy-upa-śānti*) the reader, not for his pleasure (*rati*). It is fashioned out of the medicine of poetry (*kāvyaopacāra*)¹⁶ with the intention of capturing an audience whose minds are on other things (*anya-manas*). Thinking how it could be made pleasant, I have handled in it things other than liberation, things introduced due to the character of poetry (*kāvya-dharma*), as bitter medicine is mixed with honey (*madhu-yuta*) when it is drunk. (Covill 2007: 363)¹⁷

Here, the dichotomy between ‘pleasure’ (*rati*) and inner calm (*vy-upa-śānti*), a component of that path of awareness leading to Liberation (*mokṣa*), is explicit and further emphasized by the very use of a poetical device such as comparison. The aesthetic devices by means of which ‘pleasant’ poetry (*kāvya*) is composed are analogically related to the sweetness of ‘honey’ (*madhu*), and reality as it is – that is suffering (*duḥkha*) – is associated with the ‘ill’ condition of existence, in relation to which the Buddha’s teaching (*dharma*) is the bitter medicine to be drunk. However, in accordance with Aśvaghōṣa’s declaration, the awareness of such a reality of suffering and impermanence, and the consequent Liberation, are also attainable by means of the *kāvya* itself: it is the ‘pretext’ (*upacāra*)¹⁸, the sweet coat of honey, through which the ‘bitter medicine’ of the Buddhist doctrine (*dharma*) can be drunk, thus becoming ‘dear to the heart’ (*hr̥dya*)¹⁹. This is also how the *kāvya* poetry works as the

¹² As regards the northern *kāvya* style, counterposed to the southern *kāvya* style, cf. Ollett (2019).

¹³ See e.g. Eltschinger (2017: 323).

¹⁴ As to the issue, cf. Yamabe (2003), claiming Aśvaghōṣa’s relationship with a meditative tradition that later developed as the Yogācāra school; similarly, but more cautiously, Eltschinger (e.g. 2013; 2019).

¹⁵ As to the so-called *Apologetic* intent of Aśvaghōṣa’s works, see Olivelle (2009: XXV-XXX), and Olivelle (2019).

¹⁶ For this translation and the related interpretation, cf. Covill (2009, namely p. 142).

¹⁷ See also the excellent Italian translation by Passi (1985: 160): «Così termina quest’opera mirante alla quiete interiore e non al diletto, pregna del significato della Liberazione, composta secondo gli usi dell’arte letteraria per attirare i lettori che avessero mente ad altro. Ciò che vi è stato scritto di altro dalla Liberazione l’ho infatti scritto secondo la legge dell’arte – come medicina amara da bersi unita al miele – affinché potesse essere in certo qual modo gradevole».

¹⁸ As regards this interpretation of the term *upacāra*, generally meaning ‘figurative expression’ and ‘usage’, cf. Salomon (2009: 189-191).

¹⁹ As is well known, the same metaphor and a similar poetical declaration is even referred to in the famous Latin poem *De rerum natura* (I. 935-950) by T. Lucretius Caro (1st BCE), in relation to the teaching of the Epicurean doctrine. In any

medicine *par excellence*, the *dharma*²⁰, and is a means of Liberation. Therefore, according to this declaration, Aśvaghoṣa's poetry was intended to attract a refined but non-Buddhist audience, preferably Brahmins, but also a non-Buddhist elite, such as the members of the Kuṣāṇa court, in order to promote the Buddhist doctrine: in other words, his works belong to the genre of "didactic poetry", intended as a pleasant and sophisticated way to divulgate a sapiential doctrine as a form of therapy.

However, the poetical strategy assumed by the learned Aśvaghoṣa does not consist merely of "coating" the not-learned speeches of the Buddha in an educated and sweet fashion. His poetics is more than ornamentation; it is rather, as some scholars have suggested, a speculative poetics²¹. In particular, a deep chain of correlations weaves manifold levels of reality, based on a recurring, variously morphologized lexicon, that cyclically conveys images of refined literary *repertoires*, but which is metaphorically associated from time to time with different even antithetical meanings. This is a specific poetical strategy, which Salomon explains as follows: «[...] although Aśvaghoṣa's poetry is on the surface relatively (as compared to the later ornate *kāvya*) simple and straightforward, it is at the same time full of complex levels of meaning which reveal themselves to the more attentive reader» (Salomon 2009: 192). However, these «complex levels of meaning» (Salomon 2009: 192) implied in Aśvaghoṣa's poetry represent that grid of the manifold aggregates that constitutes the conditioned reality of existence, according to the Buddhist doctrine. Therefore, by means of a complex intra-textual grid of lexical, grammatical, semantic references and a network of literary quotations and suggestions, it alludes to the main Buddhist principle which is exactly counterposed to Brahmanical ontology: the phenomenal existence is itself devoid of a unique 'essence' (*ātman*), and is therefore ultimately unsubstantial.

The «more attentive reader» (Salomon 2009: 192), the learned Brahmin and/or the elitist member of the Kuṣāṇa court, can take 'delight' in sophisticated combinations of polished language and rhetorical devices, even literary references, but this entertainment, which is so 'dear to the heart' (*hr̥dya*) of this selfsame audience, is the sapiential means to realize reality as Buddhist *dharma*²², that is the intellectual attainment of awareness of the ultimate reality as such.

2. The image of *phena* 'foam' in Aśvaghoṣa's poems

An example of Aśvaghoṣa's poetic strategy can be provided by the textual network constructed by the term *phena*, meaning 'foam, froth': it is attested in five occurrences, three of which are in the *Buddhacarita* and two in the *Saundarananda*. Here are the verses:

duḥkhārṇavād vyādhivikīrṇaphenāj jarātaraṅgān maraṇogragegāt /
uttārayiṣyaty ayam uhyamānam ārtam jagaj jñānamahāplavena // (BC 1.70).
'From this sea of grief (*duḥkha*), strewn with the foam of sickness, with waves of old age (*jarā*)
and the fearsome tides of the death (*marāṇa*),
He will rescue with the mighty boat of the knowledge (*jñāna*) this stricken world carried away by
the current' (Olivelle 2009: 29)

case, the identification of the poetical word with honey, or a sweet liquid, as 'sweet speech' (*mādhuvacas*) or 'sweet tongue' (*mādhujihvā*) had been a very common *topos* since the Vedic textual *repertoire* (e.g. RV 5.11.5; 8.24.20; *mādhuvacas* in RV 4.6.5; 5.43.2; 7.7.4; etc.); and the 'sweetness' (*madhura*) comes to be considered as one of the main 'ingredients' for the *kāvya* discourse, as declared in the inscription of Rudradāman dating back to the 2nd century CE (Warder [1974: II. 256]). Moreover, this poetical *topos* is attested in manifold Indo-European cultures: cf. e.g. West (2007: 89-90); Durante (1976: 113).

²⁰ As regards the metaphors between Buddha's teaching-medicine and poetry-honey, especially with reference to the therapeutic qualities of the honey, cf. Covill (2009).

²¹ See recently e.g. Shulman (2018); Tzohar (2019).

²² As regards the manifold levels of meaning of the term *dharma* in Aśvaghoṣa's works, see Hildebeitel (2006: 237-241); Olivelle (2009: XLIII-LI).

vibabhau karalagnaveṇur anyā stanavisrastasitāmśukā śayānā /
rjuṣatpadapaṅktijūṣṭapadmā jalaphenaprahasattaṭā nadīva // (BC 5.49).

‘[...] another sparkled, a flute in her hand, lying down, her white gown slipping from her breasts, Looking like a river its banks laughing with foam (*jalaphena*), its lotus relished by a straight row of bees’ (Olivelle 2009: 145)

sitaśaṅkhojjvalabhujā nīlakambalavāsini /
saphenamālānīlāmbur yamuneva sarid varā // (BC 12.110).

‘[...] wearing a dark-blue garment, her arms sparkling with white shells, she looked like Yamuna, best of rivers, with its dark-blue water enwreathed with foam (*saphena*)’ (Olivelle 2009: 367)

idaṃ hi rogāyatanam jarāvaśam nadītaṭānokahavac calācalam /
na vetsi deham jalaphenadurbalam balasthatām ātmani yena manyase // (Saund 9.6).

‘You think bodily strength will endure in you (*ātman*) because you do not comprehend that the body is the living quarters of disease (*roga*), helpless before old age (*jarā*), as loose as a tree on a riverbank, fragile as a water-bubble (*jalaphena*)’ (Covill 2007: 175)

diteḥ sutasyāmararoṣakāriṇāś camūruceḥ vā namuceḥ kva tad balam /
yam āhave kruddham ivāntakam sthitam jaghāna phenāvayavena vāsavaḥ // (Saund 9.19).

‘Where is the strength of Namuci son of Diti, light of the army and provoker of the gods? Furious as death he stood his ground in battle, but Vasava killed him with a morsel of foam (*phenāvayava*)’ (Covill 2007: 179)

In these five occurrences the term *phena* is inserted in three different contexts, connoting the same natural image of foam in three different ways, to which three different levels of reality correspond. In particular, the warrior context is represented in Saund 9.19, by the reference to the Vedic myth of the contest between the god Indra and the *asura* Namuci, where a ‘foam of waters’ is employed as a deceptive weapon. The feminine figures depicted in BC 5.49 and 12.110 and compared to ‘foaming’ watery streams of rivers, refers to an idyllic and eroticized representation of nature. The latter had already been suggested in a few Rigvedic attestations (e.g. RV 1.104.3b; 10.61.8a), and chiefly belongs to the earlier *kāvya* literature, such as the *Rāmāyana*²³, probably tracing back to a profane literary courteous *repertoire*²⁴. Finally, BC 1.70 and Saund 9.6 use the term *phena* to represent natural phenomenon as such – oceans or river foam – without any feminine personification and/or idyllic connotation. On the contrary, these two verses highlight the dangerousness of natural elements, like watery streams, flowing impetuously, and the impermanence of the beings having to deal with it. This anti-idyllic image of the foam is particularly related to the Pāli canonical scriptures, where it is used to exemplify a few crucial principles of the Buddha’s teaching, so that it complies with didactic intent in Aśvaghōṣa’s works. Nonetheless, an equivalent anti-idyllic representation of the foam occurs in a few sections of the *Mahābhārata*, especially in the *Mokṣadharmaparvan*, one of the sapiential and speculative sections of the twelfth book of the Brahmanical epic work. Moreover, a similar disturbing image of the foam is frequently pictured in the description of bloody warrior scenes, as referred to in the Epics as well (e.g. MBh 6.55.121d; 6.56.25a; 7.21.42d; R 3.18.6; 4.9.17, 6.84.30, etc.). Therefore, on all these literary levels, Aśvaghōṣa combines the natural phenomenon of ‘foam’ with different contexts, expanding the levels of reality, and making them overlap each other, in order to appeal to his learned audience.

²³ Cf. e.g. R 7.31.20-22; as regards the erotic connotation of riverbanks depicted as idyllic and pleasant places, see also the *Thera-gāthās* (‘Elders’ Verses’) 309; 523; 1067.

²⁴ Cf. Lienhard (1975: 390-393); and Boccali (1999: 16-17).

The use of the / *phena* / form of the term, with no retroflex, seems to be the result of a sophisticated strategy. In fact, / *phena* / is attested in the Vedic *corpus* to denote the ‘foam of waters’, especially of rivers (e.g. RV 1.104.3b; AVŚ 1.8.1b; AVŚ 6.113.2c; *apām phéna-*: RV 8.14.13a; *udnáḥ phéna-*: AVP 2.2.3d; 9.10.1d), being a cognate *i.a.* of Lat *spūma*, OHG *feim*, Lith *spáine*, MP *fīnak*, thus corresponding to PIE **(s)pHoi-no-*²⁵. However, the same term denotes the film of cream produced by boiled milk or clarified butter, and in general a solidified substance, coming from a liquid: in such a semantic field *phéna* is hybridized with Proto-Muṇḍa interferences²⁶, so that the form *phaṇá* (TB 3.10.1.4)²⁷, related to the Proto-Muṇḍa term *maṇḍa* ‘spume, cream’, is attested. Finally, both forms occur in Middle Indic with and without a retroflex, apparently with no difference in meaning²⁸: in the Pāli canonical scriptures ‘lump of foam’, referring to a physical aggregate, corresponds to both *phenapiṇḍa* (Thī 501) and *pheṇapiṇḍa* (SN III 142); both the form *pheṇovamu* and *phenoamo*, meaning ‘like foam’ fading away, are attested in the Gāndhārī versions of the *Dharmapada*²⁹. Nonetheless, Aśvaghōṣa chooses the purist form *phena*, in compliance not only with the educated audience, but also exclusively with the meaning of ‘watery foam’. In fact, in all five occurrences, the term *phena* is only associated with a watery environment, especially with flowing streams and riverbanks: the ‘water foam’ is suitable for representing the liminality of existence, suspended between substantial being and void impermanence. Yet, the meaning of scum as the hardening surface layer of any liquid remains implicit: as a non-Buddhist conception of existence, which the Buddhist doctrine challenges, it is constantly suggested in the verses, especially with the physical appearance of a female, the object of sensual pleasures.

2.1. The image of *phena* ‘foam’ in the Vedic textual tradition

As a Brahmin, we can assume that Aśvaghōṣa was acquainted with the Vedic textual *repertoire*. In fact, Johnston, in his introduction to the *Buddhacarita* (1984²: XLIV-XLVI) had already highlighted this point. As to the term *phéna* and correlated images, it is relatively rare in the Vedic *repertoire*, and therefore the references to it in Aśvaghōṣa’s work seem to be even more relevant. It only occurs four times in the Rigvedic collection; in RV 1.104.3 it is associated with the feminine image of two impetuous watery streams, identified with two maidens:

áva tmánā bharate kétévedā / áva tmánā bharate phénam udán /
 kṣīreṇa snātaḥ kúyavasya yóse / haté té syātām pravaṇé śíphāyāḥ // 3 //
 ‘She who knows his [=Kuyava’s?] will carries away by herself; (the other) by herself carries away
 the foam in her water.
 The two maidens of Kuyava bathe in milk: may they both be smashed in the torrent of the Śíphā
 (River).’ (Brereton and Jamison 2014: 248)

The traditional motif of the identification of the rivers with female figures is widely developed in the later profane poetry, as mentioned above. However, in this Rigvedic stanza, they are antithetically connoted either as charming figures, who are bathing in milk or as beings who are smashed in whirling torrents: it is this double connotation of the rivers, now fascinating maidens, now dangerous streams, that is notably familiar to Aśvaghōṣa. Similarly, the second occurrence of *phéna* in RV 3.53.22 alludes

²⁵ Cf. Lubotsky (1988: 86-87).

²⁶ Cf. Kuiper (e.g. 1950).

²⁷ So also the verbal derivative *phāṇayati*: Mayrhofer (1992-2001), *sub voce*.

²⁸ See Turner (1962-1985), *sub voce*.

²⁹ Cf. Falk (2015: 53).

to a dichotomous connotation: it refers to the boiling foam, inserted in an apotropaic representation of the enemy, so that his ‘cutting’ and ‘boiling’ weapons can be harmless, like flowers or foam:

paraśum cid ví tapati / śimbalām cid ví vṛścati /
 ukhā cid indra yéśantī / prāyastā phenam asyati // 22 //
 ‘(Though) he heats his axe all the way through, it’s just a śimbala flower he hacks off.
 The ukhā-pot, (though) boiling, boiling over, just throws off foam, o Indra’ (Brereton and Jamison 2014: 540)

This image of the foam once again suggests antonymic reality: it is fragile and powerful, innocuous and dangerous at the same time. The same warrior context is present in ṚV 8.14.13, where we find an explicit mention of Indra’s enemy, the ‘demoniac’ Namuci, being slayed by the ‘foam of waters’.

apām phéna nāmuceḥ / śira indród avartayaḥ / víśvā yád ájaya spṛdhaḥ // 13 //
 ‘With the foam of the waters you made the head of Namuci roll, Indra, when you conquered all contenders’ (Brereton and Jamison 2014: 1057)

This myth is well known in the Rigvedic collection, and also in Yajurvedic collections, such as in *Maitrāyaṇī Samhitā* 4.3.4, and it is frequently recounted in the later Brahmanical texts, such as in ŚB 12.7.1.10ff³⁰. The watery foam employed as a weapon is a trick used by Indra to elude the agreement, which prevented him from slaying Namuci either by day or by night, with anything dry or anything wet. In actual fact, Indra strikes Namuci with foam at the very moment between day and night, using foam, which is neither solid nor liquid, as his weapon. If the Vedic version of the myth insists on the deceptive nature of the foam, which turns out to be a powerful weapon, what is remarkable in the *Saundarananda* is the contrast between Namuci’s mighty strength and the insubstantiality³¹ of the weapon that kills him, which recalls the antithetic representation of ṚV 3.53.22.

The fourth occurrence of the term *phéna*, in ṚV 10.61.8a, referring to the figure of a bull (*vṛṣan*), suggests both a violent and eroticized context: «sá im vṛṣā ná phenam asyad ājaú / smád á párā aid ápa dabhrácatāḥ / Like a bull in a contest he threw off foam. Heedless, she went away, hither and yon» (Brereton and Jamison 2014: 1476). In fact, this hymn deals with the myth of the rape of Dawn by Heaven, her father: his semen, here defined as *phéna*, falls on the ground and gives rise to the ritual fire.

Such a sexual motif is re-elaborated in the *Brāhmaṇa* texts as the cosmogonic myth of Prajāpati, which was well known to Áśvaghōṣa (Johnston 1984²: XLIV). However, it is a peculiar version, mentioned *e.g.* in ŚB 6.1.3.1-3³²:

prajāpatir vā idam agra āsīt / eka eva so 'kāmayata syām prajāyeyeti so 'śrāmyat sa tapo 'tapyata
 tasmāc chrāntāt tepānād āpo 'sṛjyanta tasmāt puruṣāt taptād āpo jāyante // 1 //
 āpo 'bruvan / kva vayam bhavāmeti tapyadhvam ity abravīt tā atapyanta tāḥ
 phenam asṛjanta tasmād apām taptānām pheno jāyate // 2 //
 pheno 'bravīt / kvāham bhavānīti tapyasvety abravīt so 'tapyata sa
 mṛdam asṛjaitatad vai phenas tapyate yad apsv āveṣṭamānaḥ plavate sa yadopahanyate mṛdeva
 bhavati // 3 // (ŚB 6.1.3.1-3).

‘1. Verily, Prajāpati alone was here in the beginning. He desired, 'May I exist, may I reproduce myself!' He toiled, he practised austerity (or, became heated). From him, worn out and heated, the waters were created: from that heated Person the waters are born.

2. The waters said, 'What is to become of us?' - ‘Ye shall be heated,’ he said. They were heated; they created foam: hence foam is produced in heated water.

³⁰ For a detailed account, see Bloomfield (1893: 143-163).

³¹ As regards the representation of the foam as innocuous in the Vedic corpus, see *e.g.* AVP 2.2.3; AVP 9.10.1; 15.23.10.

³² Cf. also ŚB 6.1.1.13; 6.5.1.3.

3. The foam (m.) said, 'What is to become of me?' - 'Thou shall be heated!' he said. It was heated, and produced clay; for indeed the foam is heated, when it floats on the water, covering it; and when one beats upon it, it indeed becomes clay' (Eggeling 1894: 157).

Here the earth is depicted as being derived from the process of heating and solidification of watery foam, resulting from the heating of the primordial water; the cosmogonic act consists of an act of desire, with the consequent emission of heat. If it is true that in Aśvaghoṣa's works the cosmogonic motif is not explicitly mentioned in relation to the term *phena*, the motif of desire, combined with the feminine representation of the waters, implied in the Brahmanical myth, prefigures the eroticized portrayal of the maiden-stream of the earlier *kāvya* literature, to which also BC 5.49 and 12.110 refer.

2.2. The image of *phena* 'foam' between the earlier *kāvya* and the epic tradition: the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata*

As mentioned above, Aśvaghoṣa acknowledged Vālmīki as the *first kavi*, especially as the 'poet' of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, and as associated with Rāma's sons, the epic cantors Kuśa and Lava: they all are defined *dhīmat*- 'inspired' (Saund 1.26)³³. Furthermore, he knew at least a few sections of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, especially the episode narrating the departure of Rāma in the *Ayodhyākāṇḍa*, the second book, on which the departure of prince Siddhārtha in the *Buddhacarita*, and the lamentations in the city and the palace are modelled: he is explicitly identified with prince Rāma in BC 8.8 and 9.9. Similarly, the scene of the women asleep in Rāvaṇa's palace in the *Sundarakāṇḍa* (5.7-9), the fifth book, is the model for the description in the *Buddhacarita* of Siddhārtha's sleeping harem, on the night of his departure³⁴.

As regards the *Mahābhārata*, whose legendary poet Vyāsa is quoted in BC 1.42, it is likely that Aśvaghoṣa knew a few episodes, or even a few sections, in any form of redaction different from the later compiled version, although he never makes any explicit reference to the main plot of the epic, and only rarely alludes to it and its characters³⁵. Nonetheless, as a converted Brahmin, he is acquainted with specific Brahmanical terminology and sapiential issues, which occur especially in the *Śāntiparvan*, the twelfth book of the *Mahābhārata*.

In any case, the survey of the occurrences of the term *phena* in the two epics has highlighted that Aśvaghoṣa is particularly indebted to the *Rāmāyaṇa* for the refinement of poetical devices and the sophisticated elaboration of the idyllic motif combined with eroticism, especially through the representation of the maidens-watery streams *topos*.

In fact, although the representation of sovereignty within the royal environment and also warrior heroism within bloody scenes are relevant in both the Brahmanical epics, the image of a sensually connoted, idyllic nature is also depicted in the *Rāmāyaṇa*, namely as woman-river. It is worth noticing that it is in relation to such a representation that Aśvaghoṣa's verses present peculiar lexical correspondences with the *Rāmāyaṇa* formulation: the compounds *sa-phena-* and *jala-phena-* are formulaic expressions attested only in this epic. However, only in one case do they convey the same images.

Thus, the expression *sa-phena-* 'with foam, foaming', employed by Aśvaghoṣa in the idyllic representation of the river Yamunā, compared to the female figure, Nandabalā, who nourished the Buddha just after the Enlightenment, is frequently quoted in the *Rāmāyaṇa* as an epithet of the reddish streams of blood in the formulaic expression *saphena-* *rudhira-* 'foaming blood' (e.g. R 3.18.6; 4.9.17;

³³ Cf. Johnston (1984²: II. XLIX).

³⁴ Cf. Hildebeitel (2006: 247-254), and the related bibliography.

³⁵ As regards, cf. Johnston (1984²: II. XLVI-XLVII), Hildebeitel (2006), Eltschinger (2018: 311-314), and the related bibliography.

6.84.30). In fact, the emphasis on the warrior context cannot be lacking in an epic poem and, likewise, the expression *phenabudbuda*- ‘bubbling of foam’ in R 3.29.6b refers to blood; in R 6.46.27 the battlefield is likened to a river with torrents of foaming blood ([...] *phenasamākīrṇā nadī*). The same motif of bloody rivers, foaming with bones and flesh (*asthika-māṃsa-phena*) or ribbons of turbans (*uṣṇīṣaphena*) as horrific representations of the battlefield is very common in the *Mahābhārata* (e.g. MBh 6. 55.121d; 6.56.25a; 7.21.42d; etc.).

Finally, in R 2.106.7 a desolated and silent Ayodhyā, after having been definitively abandoned by Rāma, is compared to «the great wave raised foaming (*saphena*) and roaring on the open sea, when the wind dies down, dispersed into silence» (Pollock 2005: 581)³⁶. This is a variant of the common *Mahābhārata* image of mighty roaring and foaming (*phenavatī*: feminine) torrents in the ocean (e.g. MBh 3.142.18c; 3.166.2a; etc.). Thus, both the negatively connoted images alluding to turbulent scenarios conveyed by the compound *saphena* in the *Rāmāyaṇa* are quite different to the idyllic scene of the maiden-river depicted by Aśvaghoṣa in BC 12.110. Thus, it appears that although formally the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the related Brahmanical cultural background do resound throughout Aśvaghoṣa’s verses, they convey discordant messages, even antithetical ones, focusing on the multiplicity of meanings, revealing the intrinsic contradiction of existence and, paradoxically, the meaninglessness itself of reality.

Likewise, the compound *jalaphena*, lit. ‘foam of water’, is quoted in only two occurrences in the *Rāmāyaṇa*: the first in R 2.23.9 is an epithet of Rāma’s royal parasol, which is *jalaphenanibha* ‘with hue of white-capped water’³⁷ (lit. ‘similar to foam of water’) and, thus, royal magnificence is represented by the reference to one of its attributes, bright whiteness. Similarly in R 7.18.028c *śuklaphenasamaprabha* ‘equal in lustre to shining foam’, the image of the foam is correlated to the royal attribute of brightness, as well as to a spotless garment similar to foam in R 5.16.20cd, in reference to Rāvaṇa’s garment. Also in MBh 5.150.26b and 10.10.17a the foam suggests the brightness of weapons and the related royal superiority. Once again Aśvaghoṣa adopts *Rāmāyaṇa* lexicon to depict a very different scene to the Brahmanical epics, disorienting his audience: in fact in Saund 9.6 the same compound is combined with the adjective *durbala* meaning ‘devoid of strength, weak’, thus conveying an image opposite to the warrior magnificence, now becoming lit. ‘fragile as foam of water’.

However, the occurrence of the same compound in BC 5.49 assumes a value analogous to R 7.31.21, where *jalaphena* is inserted in a complex comparison (R 7.31.20-23), depicting the river Narmadā likened to the ‘beloved woman’ (*iṣṭā nārī*); the terrifying lord of the *rākṣasas*, Rāvaṇa, immerses himself in its/her streams, as if he were entering his lover’s embrace, in compliance with the idyllic and eroticized motif of the maiden-river. Although *terminus comparationis* and *comparandus* are exchanged, a similar kind of simile occurs in BC 5.49 where we find a *samasta(vastu)viṣayopāma* or ‘complete simile’. The latter is an extremely refined rhetorical device, by means of which two objects belonging to different layers of reality – in this case a river and a woman – are identified with each other, through a list of parallel comparisons that correlate each and every aspect, and each and every specific part of both the objects³⁸. In the case of Aśvaghoṣa’s verses, the single elements of this complex simile are not explicitly mentioned one by one, as in the *Rāmāyaṇa* passage, but the details of the description of the female figure in the first line are metaphorically suggested through the detailed portrayal of the river in the second. Thus, according to Olivelle (2009: 448), the river is the woman’s body/chest, the foam is her white dress, her breasts are the lotuses, and

³⁶ R 2.106.7: «saphenāṃ sasvanāṃ bhūtṅvā sāgarasya samutthitāṃ / praśāntamārutoddhūtāṃ jalormim iva niḥsvanāṃ //».

³⁷ This follows Pollock’s translation (2005).

³⁸ Gerow (1971: 241); as regards the development of such a figure in pre-*kāvya* and early *kāvya* literature, cf. Boccali and Pontillo (2010).

the row of bees is the flute³⁹. And such an interpretation becomes clearer if the *Buddhacarita* passage is correlated to the following *Rāmāyaṇa* verses (7.31.20-21), in which the complex simile is ‘inflected’ detail by detail:

phulladrumakṛtotsām cakravākayugastanīm / vistīrṇapulinaśroṇīm haṃsāvalisumekhalām //
20 //
puṣpareṇvanuliptāṅgīm jalaphenāmalāṃśukām / jalāvagāhasaṃsparśām phullotpalaśubhekṣaṇām
// 21 // (R 7.31.20-21).
[Narmadā] which had blossoming trees for a chaplet, a pair of *cakravākas* for breasts, broad banks for hips, a line of *haṃsas* for a lovely girdle, a body smeared with pollen, the foam of the river for a white mantle (*jalaphenāmalāṃśuka*), a plunge into its water for an embrace, and blooming lotuses for lovely eyes (Goldman and Sutherland-Goldman 2018: 307).

In particular the *Rāmāyaṇa* compound *jalaphenāmalāṃśuka*, lit. ‘spotless garment as foam of water’ echoes in the *Buddhacarita* compound [...] *sitāṃśuka* ‘white garment’, denoting the cloth that slips from the body of the recumbent woman and corresponds to the foam of the water (*jalaphena*) along the riverbanks in the second line. In this case the terminology used by Aśvaghoṣa refers to a very similar image described in the *Rāmāyaṇa* by means of the same lexicon: this would mean that Aśvaghoṣa, as well as his audience, was somehow familiar with the poetical material of the seventh and last book of the *Rāmāyaṇa*⁴⁰. However, what is even more intriguing is the fact that the picture of the woman in BC 5.49, is part of the lengthy description of female figures, lying asleep in a disorderly fashion in the palace, the sight of whom had so disgusted Siddhārtha on the night of his departure: Aśvaghoṣa would have modelled this scene on *sargas* 7-9 of the fifth book of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. In actual fact, the usual comparison between woman and river is mentioned in R 5.7.48, but the term *phena* does not occur, even though hints at white garments, musical instruments (*i.a. Vulgata*, 5.10)⁴¹, lotuses, bees, etc., are not lacking. It seems that Aśvaghoṣa deliberately inserted such a natural element into the crucial scene, which has to definitively convince Siddhārtha – and Aśvaghoṣa’s audience – to undertake the path leading to Enlightenment and Liberation. Nonetheless, the foam associated with feminine garments, connoting a bad-mannered female, is an image depicted in one of the rare idyllic representations of the *Mahābhārata*, dealing with the description of the mythical woman-river *par excellence*, the Gangā, who descends from heaven to earth, filling up the ocean.

sā babhūva visarpantī tridhā rājan samudragā /
phenapuñjākulajalā haṃsānām iva pañktayaḥ // 10 //
kva cid ābhogakuṭilā praskhalantī kva cit kva cit /
svaphenapaṭasaṃvītā matteva pramadāvrajaḥ /
kva cit sā toyaninadair nadantī nādam uttamam // 11 // (MBh 3.108.10-11).
‘Thus the Ganges became triple, o king, meandering with water floods that were covered with patches of foam (*phenapuñjākula*) like rows of wild geese.
Here tortuously coiling, there stumbling and tripping she made her way like a drunken woman, wrapped in her robe of foam (*sva-phena-paṭa*), but sometimes roaring the great roar with the thunder of her waves’ (Buitenen 1975: 430)

Here, the double connotation of the river as both female inserted in an idyllic scene and roaring dangerous streams, is proposed once again, in compliance with RV 1.104.3; furthermore, the identification woman-river relies on the image of the sinuous movement of a drunken female (*mattā*), which recalls the disordered figure of the recumbent woman in BC 5. 49: her garment is also *phena*, but

³⁹ Cf. also Johnston (1984²: II. 70, n. 49); Passi (1979: 200, n. 5), with some variations.

⁴⁰ As speculated by Hildebeitel (2006: 244) vs. Johnston (1984²: XLIX).

⁴¹ Cf. also Biarreau (1999).

it is explicitly and repeatedly asserted in the *Mahābhārata* verses. Moreover, they both are characterized by ‘rows’ (*paṅkti*): of birds for the woman-Gangā and bees for the sleeping musician. It seems that Aśvaghoṣa employs poetical devices and erotic suggestions borrowed from the *Rāmāyaṇa*, but does not fail to make references to a lexicon common with the *Mahābhārata*, thereby drawing attention to the discrepancy between the Brahmanical epics. In this way, the term *phena* stands out against both the mere description of natural phenomena and poetical ornamentation, and alludes to a specific meaning, which may compose the discrepancy, conferring a new sense on the codified image of woman-river.

Finally, the figure of Namuci is relevant in Aśvaghoṣa’s verses: the mythical Vedic contest between Namuci and Indra is also quoted in the *Rāmāyaṇa*, but through the use of a simple instrumental case *phenena* (R 3.29.28), which echoes the Rigvedic formulaic expression *apām phénena* (RV 8.14.13a), in a different way to Aśvaghoṣa’s verses. Likewise, there are sporadic mentions in the *Mahābhārata* of expressions such as *namucer hantā* ‘slayer of Namuci’, referring to Indra (e.g. MBh 1.3.152b; 3.26.9b; 3.161.23d; etc.), thus hinting at the warrior enterprises undertaken by the victorious divinity. A more detailed reference to the myth only occurs in MBh 9.42, which presents a phraseology similar to the formulation of the Vedic ritualistic texts, and the same Rigvedic syntagma *apām phénena* is mentioned in MBh 9.42.31d. In any case, it is not comparable to the linguistic complexity and poetical elaboration of Aśvaghoṣa in Saund 9.19; one can therefore presume that this mythical figure can assume any important symbolical value in the Buddhist work.

As regards the cosmogonic myth, already present in the Vedic texts, it is widely quoted in the Brahmanical epics. In particular in R 5.16.20cd, Rāvaṇa’s garment is ‘spotless (*arajas*) like the foam of freshly churned milk’ (*mathitāmṛtaphenābham*, lit. ‘like foam of the nectar of immortality (*amṛta*) [from] churned [milk]’), thus alluding to the famous Purāṇic cosmogonic myth of the churning of the Ocean of Milk, a variant of the aforementioned Brahmanical one: the universe comes to be shaped from the cream of the immense ocean of milk. The same myth is referred to in R 7.23, where the term *phena* is again connected to the nectar of immortality (*amṛta*), which derives from an ocean of milk: the supreme seers subsist by drinking this foam (*phena-pa* v. 18). The same myth is hinted at in MBh 5.100. 5-6 and 13.14.39. On the contrary, Aśvaghoṣa does not mention the term *phena* in relation to a cosmogonic myth even though it is such a famous one: the image of the foam is not associated with a positive idea of the regeneration of being, but with the disturbing idea of an incessant saṃsāric becoming, well represented by the flowing streams of water.

2.3. The image of *phena* / *phena* ‘foam’ in the didactic literature: the Pāli canonical scriptures and the *Mokṣadharmaparvan* of the *Mahābhārata*

As noted previously, the vernacularized form *phena*, with retroflex, predominately occurs in the Pāli canon. It denotes the natural phenomenon of the foam of water, and, as a natural image, is employed to provide an empirical explanation of the key concept of the Buddhist doctrine, that is the insubstantiality of reality or Selflessness (*anātman*). The existence of being as individuality (*ātman*) is nothing but the ‘experience of Self’: it does not rely on a postulated permanent entity, be it substance or soul, but consists of the incidental binding of aggregates, as manifold interconnected meshes, in an incessant process of becoming, the *saṃsāra*⁴². This is referred to in one of the Buddha’s famous sermons, the *Anattālakkhana Sutta* (SN III 66ff.), in which each constituent of reality is acknowledged not to be *attā* (*ātman*) as such. This crucial Buddhist teaching is exemplified *i.a.* in the *Phenaṇḍūpama sutta*, SN III 140, as follows:

⁴² Cf. e.g. Hamilton (1996).

tatra kho Bhagavā bhikkhū āmantesi / Seyyathāpi bhikkhave ayam Gaṅgā nadī mahantaṃ phenapiṇḍam āvaheyya / tam enaṃ cakkhumā puriso passeyya nijjhāyeyya yoniso upaparikkheyya / Tassa tam passato nijjhāyato yoniso upaparikkhato rittakaññeva khāyeyya tucchakaññeva khāyeyya asārakaññeva khāyeyya / kiñhi siyā bhikkhave pheṇapiṇḍe sāro / (SN III 140).

‘There the Blessed One addressed the *bhikkhus* thus: “*Bhikkhus*, suppose that this river Gaṅgā was transporting a great lump of foam (*phenapiṇḍa*). A man with good sight would inspect it, ponder over it and carefully investigate it: to him, who inspects it, ponders over it and carefully investigates it, it would appear to be void, hollow, insubstantial (*a-sāra*). What substance (*sāra*) could there be in a lump of foam?’

The answer is versified in SN III 142:

phenapiṇḍupamam rūpaṃ / vedanā bubbulupamā /
marīcikūpamā saññā / saṅkhārā kadalūpamā /
māyūpamañca viññāṇaṃ / dīpitādiccabandhunā // (SN III 142).

‘Form (*rūpa*) is like (*upama*) a lump of foam, feeling (*vedanā*) like a water bubble; perception (*saññā*) is like a mirage, volitions (*saṅkhārā*) like a plantain tree, and consciousness (*viññāṇa*) like an illusion. (Thus) it was explained by the Kinsman of the Sun.’

Therefore, the foam is the *terminus comparationis* (Pā *upama*) of the unsubstantiality (*a-sāra*) of the five *khandhas* or aggregates (*rūpa, vedanā, saññā, saṅkhārā, viññāṇa*), that constitute bodies (*kāya*), particularly of the first one, the ‘form’ (*rūpa*): they are insubstantial (*a-sāra*) as such, that is they lack any solid interior part (*sāra*). Moreover, they are impermanent (*a-nicca*), flowing like river streams. This principle is similarly expressed in the famous collection of verses *Dhammapada*, and in the *Therīgāthās*, the *Verses of the Elder Nuns*:

phenūpamaṃ kāyam imaṃ viditvā marīcidhammaṃ abhisambudhāno /
chetvāna Mārassa papupphakāni adassanaṃ maccurājassa gacche // (Dhp 46).

‘Knowing that this body (*kāya*) is like foam, knowing that it has the nature of a mirage, cutting off the flowery blossoms of Māra, one should go where the king of death cannot see him’ (Norman 1997: 8)

sara rūpaṃ phenapiṇḍopamassa kāyakalino asārassa /
khandhe passa anicce sarāhi niraye bahuvighāte // (Thī 501).

‘Remember the form (*rūpa*) of this worst of bodies (*kāya*), unsubstantial (*a-sāra*), like a lump of foam (*phenapiṇḍa*). See the elements of existence (*khandha*) as impermanent (*a-nicca*); remember the hells, living much distress’ (Norman 1971: 49)

A similar formulation is found in the twelfth book of the other Brahmanical epic *par excellence*, the *Mahābhārata*, namely in the *Mokṣadharmaparvan*.

phenapātropame dehe jīve śakunivat sthite /
anitye priyasaṃvāse kathaṃ svapiṣi putraka // (MBh 12.309.6).

‘If the body is like a coat of foam, the living soul is stable like a bird,
the companionship of all the agreeable is impermanent, how do you sleep, o dear son?’

These verses are inserted in one of the didactic sections that make up Bhīṣma’s teaching to the Pāṇḍava Yudhiṣṭhīra: it is a digression reflecting on extremely speculative issues, such as the nature of Self (*ātman*), suffering (*duḥkha*) as a condition of existence, the attainment of Liberation (*mokṣa*). These are a few of the controversial questions that characterized the so-called Śramaṇical cultural context, which was the variegated movement of asceticism that emerged around the 5th century BCE

in the Ganges valley as a cultural current alternative to Brahmanical ritual formalism. This multifaceted speculative *milieu* constituted the background of both Upaniṣadic wisdom, integrated in the Brahmanical orthodoxy, and heterodox movements such as Buddhism and Jainism. In particular, the Brahmanical epics represent the reinterpretation in a Brahmanical perspective of Śramaṇical instances, so that they can be considered as a Brahmanical response to the heterodox challenge. The twelfth book of the *Mahābhārata*, especially the *Mokṣadharmaparvan*, is the speculative counterpart of such a Brahmanical counter-reformation⁴³, presenting the core of the later Sāṃkhya-Yoga Hindu philosophical system⁴⁴. Given such a common Śramaṇical background, it is no wonder that some verses echo similar terminology and ideas as the early Buddhist Pāli literature; however, the Buddha and his disciples are never mentioned explicitly, as if a specific Brahmanical strategy of ‘revisionism’ was applied to the challenging movement⁴⁵.

Nonetheless, similar linguistic devices are employed, such as the simile between the natural phenomenon of watery foam and the idea of impermanence of existence, but in order to suggest another idea of Self, which complies with the conception of a double layer of existence, the empirical and manifest one, and the ontological and un-manifest one. The former is the body (*deha*), involved in the process of saṃsāric becoming, but the latter, the *ātman*, is permanent and awake, while all the bodily faculties have vanished, during sleep:

indriyāṅy api budhyante svadehaṃ dehino nṛpa /
 kāraṇāṅy ātmanas tāni sūkṣmaḥ paśyati tais tu saḥ // 81 //
 ātmanā viprahīṇāni kāṣṭhakuḍyasamāni tu /
 vinaśyanti na saṃdehaḥ phenā iva mahārṇave // 82 //
 indriyaiḥ saha sūptasya dehinaḥ śatrutāpana /
 sūkṣmaś carati sarvatra nabhasīva samīraṇaḥ // 83 // (MBh 12. 289. 81cd-83)
 ‘[...] The sense-faculties of the embodied soul are aware of their own proper body, o king. // 1 //
 These are the instruments of the Self (*ātman*); he is subtle, but he sees by means of them. // 81 //
 When these are separated from the Self they vanish like wooden fences, no doubt of it, like foam
 upon the great ocean. // 82 // After the embodied soul and its faculties have gone to sleep, O
 scorcher of your enemies, then the subtle one moves everywhere, like the wind in the sky. // 83 //’
 (Fitzgerald 2012: 209)

Likewise, the well-known formulation of the first of the Four Noble Truths, the *Dhammacakkapavattana Sutta* (lit. discourse of the setting in motion of the wheel of *dharma*), taught by the Buddha on the occasion of his first discourse held after the attainment of Enlightenment, seems to resound in a few verses of the *Mokṣadharmaparvan*. According to the Buddha’s words, birth (*jāti*) is suffering (*duḥkha*), old age (*jarā*) is suffering (*duḥkha*), disease (*vyādhi*), is suffering (*duḥkha*), and death (*maraṇa*) is suffering (*duḥkha*), so that existence as such is marked by suffering.

idaṃ kho pana bhikkhave, dukkhaṃ ariyasaccaṃ: jāti ‘pi dukkhā jarā ‘pi dukkhā vyādhi ‘pi
 dukkho maraṇam ‘pi dukkhaṃ appiyehi sampayogo dukkho piyehi vippayogo dukkho yam
 ‘picchaṃ na labhati tam ‘pi dukkhaṃ saṅkhittena pañcupādānakkhandhā dukkhā (SN V 421).
 ‘Therefore, o *bhikkhus*, this suffering is the noble truth: birth is suffering, old age is suffering,
 disease is suffering, death is suffering; the association with what is disagreeable is suffering, the
 dissociation with what is agreeable is suffering; the fact that the object of desire is not obtained is
 suffering. The five aggregates of grasping are suffering’.

⁴³ Cf. Biardeau (2002: 96-129; 747-783).

⁴⁴ As regards the relationship between the *Mokṣadharmaparvan* and a proto-Sāṃkhya *cum* Yoga pluralistic tradition, cf. e.g. Larson and Bhattacharya (1987: 116-122), and the related bibliography.

⁴⁵ As regards the relationship between the *Mokṣadharmaparvan* and Buddhist *milieux*, especially as resulting from a Brahmanical reaction to Buddhist currents, in the post-Ashokan period, cf. Hildebeitel (2005).

Similarly in the *Mokṣadharmaparvan* the impermanence of the empirical layer of existence is foregrounded, but the knowledge (*jñāna*) and understanding (*viññāna*) of such a layer as the mere manifest dimension of the un-manifested layer are the key access points to the attainment of Liberation (*mokṣa*)⁴⁶:

varṇānām ca kṣayaṃ dr̥ṣṭvā kṣayāntaṃ ca punaḥ punaḥ
jarāmṛtyuṃ tathā janma dr̥ṣṭvā duḥkhāni caiva ha // 49 //
dehadoṣāms tathā jñātvā teṣāṃ duḥkhaṃ ca tattvataḥ / [...] //
apāṃ phenopamaṃ lokaṃ viṣṇor māyāśatair vṛtam /
cittabhittipratīkāśaṃ nalaśāram anarthakam // 57 // (MBh 12.290.49-50ab; 57).

‘Once again, after repeatedly seeing the destruction of the classes and the end of destruction, and having also seen death, old age, and birth and sufferings.

So having known the faults of the bodies and their suffering in relation to the empirical reality of things, [...] having known the world like the foam of waters, enveloped by hundreds of illusions of Viṣṇu, like [painted] wall in the mind⁴⁷, vain [as] interior part of reeds [...]’.

Moreover, the same image of the boat crossing over the dangerous river streams or the ocean is extremely common both in the Buddhist scriptures and in the Brahmanical epic, symbolically meaning the heroic enterprise of attaining Liberation. For example, in MN I.134 the Buddhist *dhamma* is compared to a ‘raft’ (*kulla*); in Sn 771 the streams are metaphorically equivalent to sensual pleasures (*kāma*) and the bailed-out boat is the means by which the other shore is reached.

Tasmā jantu sadā sato kāmāni parivajjaye /
te pahāya tare oghaṃ nāvaṃ siñcitvā pāragū ti // (Sn 771).

‘Therefore a mindful person (*jantu*) should always avoid sensual pleasures. Having abandoned them, he would cross over the flood like one had gone to the far shore after baling out the boat’ (Norman 2001: 103)

An analogous idea is expressed in the *Mokṣadharmaparvan* (e.g. MBh 12.289.34-35), where, coherently with the proto-Sāṃkhya-Yoga doctrine, the boat is declared to be equivalent to the knowledge obtained by means of *yoga*, as follows:

yathā ca nāvaṃ kaunteya karṇadhāraḥ samāhitaḥ /
mahārṇavagatāṃ śīghraṃ nayet pārthiva pattanam // 34 //
tadvad ātmasamādhānaṃ yuktvā yogena tattvavit /
durgamaṃ sthānam āpnoti hitvā deham imaṃ nṛpa // 35 // (MBh 12.289.34-35).

‘As a steadfast pilot, o son of Kuntī, can rapidly drive a boat across the great ocean to the city [on the other shore], o Lord, so one who knows the empirical reality of things, having endowed the Self with concentration by means of yoga, attains the condition difficult to reach, having abandoned this body, o king’.

Thus, the compound *jñānaplava* (‘boat of knowledge’ / ‘boat as knowledge’) is mentioned in MBh 12.229.1ab: the wise man, who firmly holds the boat of knowledge, stays at peace (*atha jñānaplavam dhīro grhītvā śāntim āsthitaḥ*).

As regards Aśvaghōṣa, his acquaintance with Sāṃkhya doctrines has already been claimed⁴⁸; especially if we take into account the twelfth *sarga* of the *Buddhacarita*, where clear evidence of proto-Sāṃkhya formulations is present, regarding Prince Siddhārtha’s meeting with the sage Arāḍa.

⁴⁶ Cf. Fitzgerald (2012).

⁴⁷ The compound *cittabhittipratīkāśa* literary means ‘having the resemblance of a wall in the mind’; however, also the variant reading *citrabhittipratīkāśa* ‘having the resemblance of a painted wall’ is implied in translation.

⁴⁸ Cf. e.g. Larson and Bhattacharya (1987: 113-115), especially in relation to the *Buddhacarita*; Fitzgerald (2012).

As to the verses Saund 9.6 and BC 1.70 here analyzed, it is worth noticing that they adopt a lexicon also found in the *Mokṣadharmaparvan* of the Brahmanical epic, rather than in Pāli canonical formulation. In fact, the only similarities between Saund 9.6 and Pāli verses is the use of the verbal root *vid-* (*viditvā* [Dhp 46] / *vetsi*) and, of course, the term *phena*, since the term *deha* is preferred over *kāya* meaning ‘body’, and the extremely Brahmanical connoted term *ātman* is chosen instead of *sāra*, meaning only ‘solid interior part’.

Furthermore, both the verses, but in particular BC 1.70, refer to the *incipit* of the first of the Four Noble Truths, according to which birth (*jāti*) is *duḥkha*, old age (*jarā*) is *duḥkha*, disease (*vyādhi*), is *duḥkha*, and death (*maraṇa*) is *duḥkha* as formulated in the aforementioned canonical *sutta*. However, this intrinsic condition of suffering is due to ignorance (*a-vidyā*), correlated to desire, fed by the sensual pleasures; the first step to cope with it is knowledge, which in Buddhist terms is defined either as *vidyā* (Pā *vijjā*) or by means of derivatives of the root *jñā* ‘to know’, (*ājñā*, *jñāna*, *prajñā*, Pā *aññā*; *ñāna*, *paññā*)⁴⁹. However, the expression *jñānamahāplava* in BC 1.70 echoes the compound *jñānaplava* of MBh 12.229.1ab, and *jñāna* is the specific Sāṃkhya term that connotes the supreme ‘Knowledge’ as the way leading to Liberation. Therefore, it seems that once again Aśvaghoṣa uses the proto-Sāṃkhya lexicon, rather than the Sanskrit terms equivalent to the Pāli canonical ones. This would mean that he is dialoguing with the counter-Buddhist movement represented by the Brahmanical counter-reformation, especially expressed through the proto-Sāṃkhya doctrines presented in the twelfth book of the *Mahābhārata*. He is teaching the Buddha’s doctrine by means of terminology, expressive modalities, and poetical devices belonging to the educated Brahmanical audience. In fact, any explicit mention of the other three Buddhist Noble Truths is lacking. Only the second one, referring to craving (*trṣṇā*) the immediate cause of suffering in the canonical scripture, is replaced by the other verses quoting the term *phena*: they convey the motive of desire, as tension to pleasure, especially sensual pleasures, through the eroticized image of woman-river, borrowed from the profane literary tradition developed within the Brahmanical *Rāmāyaṇa*.

Thus, as far as Namuci is concerned, it is reasonable to think that Aśvaghoṣa’s learned audience correlated this mythical figure with the well-known para-etymology of the noun *namuci*, which even in Pāṇini (A VI.3.75) is analysed as ‘*na mucī*’ or ‘not releasing’, from the root *muc-* ‘to release’; in compliance with his demoniac nature, he does not let anyone go freely, and the attainment of Liberation-*mokṣa* was symbolically prevented. Thus, the mention of the myth of Namuci is related to the fundamental question of how to attain Liberation. In fact, a doctrinal dialogue between Indra and Namuci is even inserted in the *Mokṣadharmaparvan* (12.229): Namuci’s words provide the new model of wise man, *acala* ‘unshakeable’, embodying knowledge and understanding, in accordance with proto-Sāṃkhya-Yoga principles. However, this interpretation is challenged by Aśvaghoṣa’s verses (Saund. 9.19): the powerful Namuci continues to be ‘not releasing’, since he can be defeated by innocuous foam, according to the original Brahmanical version of the myth. In this way, Aśvaghoṣa represents the Buddhist response to the Brahmanical movement of ‘counter-reformation’.

Likewise, Aśvaghoṣa uses the expression *jñānaplava* ‘boat of knowledge’, but in an extended way: it is *jñāna-mahāplava*, the ‘**great** boat of knowledge’, and once again, Aśvaghoṣa in presenting the Buddhist *dharma* as compared to the Brahmanical doctrinal counter-model, highlights that it is better than the Brahmanical version, since it is its natural consummation. In fact, *jñāna* as ‘cognition’ will assume a relevant role in the later northern Buddhist tradition, especially in the Yogācāra school⁵⁰, with the earlier currents of which also Aśvaghoṣa must be affiliated; so, his expression ‘great boat of knowledge’ can anticipate this development.

⁴⁹ SN 56.11: «*taṃ kho paṇ’ idaṃ dukkhaṃ ariyasaccaṃ pariññeyya’ nti: me, bhikkhave, pubbe ananussutesu dhammesu cakkhuṃ udapādi, ñāṇaṃ udapādi, paññā udapādi, vijjā udapādi, āloko udapādi*» (PTS V. 420); ‘Now, this noble truth of suffering is to be completely known: in me, o *bhikkhus*, in regard to things unheard before, the eye arose, knowledge arose, wisdom arose, supreme knowledge arose, light arose’.

⁵⁰ Cf. e.g. Deleanu (2019).

Finally, Aśvaghōṣa makes no reference to any cosmogonic myth concerning foam-*phena*, even though there are important Vedic attestations, and an analogous version is also quoted in the *Mokṣadharmaparvan* (12.183), that is earth results from the solidification of foam. However, this can be considered as a deliberate choice: also in the Upaniṣadic tradition, emerged from the same Śramaṇical background common to the early Buddhism, such a Vedic cosmogonic myth is reformulated in the *Śvetāśvetara Upaniṣad* 4.16⁵¹, as follows:

ghṛtāt param maṇḍam ivātisūkṣmam jñātvā śivaṃ sarvabhūteṣu gūḍham /
viśvasyaikam pariveṣṭitāraṃ jñātvā devaṃ mucyate sarvapāśaiḥ // (ŚvetUp 4.16).

‘When someone knows the one who is extremely fine, like the spume on top of the ghee, as the Benign One hidden in all beings; when someone recognizes him, who alone encompasses the universe, as God – he is freed from all fetters’ (Olivelle 1998: 427).

In this Upaniṣadic version the vernacularized term *maṇḍa* ‘cream, scum of butter’ is adopted, instead of the form *phena*: it is identified with a ‘subtle’ substantial existence inside all beings. Therefore, by using the purist form *phena*, Aśvaghōṣa not only alludes to a more educated and refined Brahmanical lexicon, but employing it to convey the core of the Buddhist doctrine, that is the unsubstantiality of reality, confers a superior value on the Buddhist conception itself. The term *phena* as such expresses the fulfilment of the Buddha’s teaching in relation to the Brahmanical doctrine. In fact the educated term *phena*, denoting watery foam, is unsubstantial as such and prefigures the unconditioned nature of Liberation, whereas the vernacularized term *maṇḍa*, meaning cream and thickened earth, is the mark of conditioned existence.

3. Conclusions

The reconstruction of the network of literary attestations of the term *phena*, both in the Sanskrit Brahmanical *repertoire* and in the Pāli canonical scriptures, have highlighted that the poetical strategy of Aśvaghōṣa consists of sophisticated inter-textual connections between different literary sources (Rigvedic stanzas, Vedic ritualistic texts, warrior and royal epic and courtois and eroticized epic, didactic *suttas*), which fascinate and disorient the audience at the same time. The audience is fascinated, because it is challenged in a refined intellectual game with words, centred on the peculiar references to the prestigious Brahmanical culture. In fact lexicon and poetical devices are in compliance with the authoritative Brahmanical tradition: the foam of waters evokes the *topos* of women-rivers, as a dangerous turbulent nature, an idyllic flowered nature, an eroticized nature, but also suggests bloody streams and royal splendour, with references to Vedic mythical contests and cosmogonic myths. And the *Rāmāyaṇa* is especially echoed in these idyllic and eroticized environments. However, this manifold and multiform possibility of contextualization, images and meanings is overlapped and meshed so that the audience is delightfully disoriented, transported from one layer of reality to another similar one, flowing between the implicit and explicit. Moreover, such a skilful combination of Brahmanical ingredients is used to express images antithetical to the Brahmanical models, such as the cases of *saphena* or *jala-phena*, so that the Brahmanical traditional *repertoire* is amplified and enriched with expressive values and unexpected poetical solutions that multiply again and again the layers of reality implied by a single word, *phena*. This multifaceted network of references also makes what is unexpressed, such as the cosmogonic myth or, on the contrary, what receives particular attention, such as the myth of Namuci, assume relevance. Finally, the flowing multiplicity of meaning allows the audience to experience the arbitrariness of existence, the unsubstantiality of reality, that is *phena*,

⁵¹ Similarly in BrhUp 1.2.2, which resumes Prajāpati’s cosmogonic myth.

impermanence as such. In fact, the foam just like the honey of the poetical declaration in Saund 18.63 is the liminal coating of the Buddhist *dharma*: when it vanishes, the *samsāric* current is revealed, and impermanence is distinctively acknowledged.

However, such an awareness is expressed through sapiential and didactic formulations which evoke the *Mahābhārata* textual background, rather than the Pāli canonical scripture. In fact, the Sanskrit lexicon of the speculative sections of the Brahmanical epic can be more aligned with the aim to respond to the Brahmanical counter-reformation, and the same Brahmanical communicative strategy is mirrored. Just as the *Mahābhārata* lacks any explicit reference to Buddhist context, even though it shares certain terminology, these Buddhist works of Aśvaghōṣa allude to the *Mahābhārata* speculative environment, but no element of the famous epic plot is mentioned. This communicative strategy must be developed especially in the (Mūla)Sārvāstivāda *milieux*: coating the Buddhist ideas by the linguistic code of the challenged Brahmanical culture must be the mimetic strategy adopted in the doctrinal debates, complying perfectly with the Kuṣāṇa syncretic cultural policy⁵². In effect, in the later texts of the Yogācāra school a specific meaning of the term *jñāna* is attested and a relevant role is attributed to it in the contemplative practices; moreover, the *phenapiṇḍasutta* is also known, confirming a peculiar interest in this topic⁵³.

Finally, Aśvaghōṣa's new poetry results from dialectics between Buddhist and non-Buddhist, reality and poetical coating: the *mahākāvya*. Its ingredients delight the Brahmanical taste, like *madhu* 'honey', heritage of the Vedic context⁵⁴, but their blend is innovative, since it allows the audience to aware that its sweetness is just a coating of inconsistent reality: it dissolves like foam.

And as the Buddhist doctrine of *anātman* paradoxically emerges as the fulfilment of the Brahmanical doctrine of *ātman*, likewise, this innovative Buddhist poetry consisting of in-consistent foam emerges as the consummation of the Brahmanical poetry: this is the new *kāvya* literary art.

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⁵² Cf. Eltschinger (2017: 316-317, n. 31).

⁵³ Cf. e.g. Lusthaus (2009).

⁵⁴ Cf. n. 17.

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