

'Verità e bellezza'
Essays in Honour of Raffaele Torella

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‘Verità e bellezza’
Essays in Honour of Raffaele Torella

Edited by
Francesco Sferra and Vincenzo Vergiani



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Table of Contents

Volume I

Preface.....	13
Foreword.....	19
Main Publications of Raffaele Torella.....	25
Andrea Acri <i>From Isolation to Union: Pātañjala vis-à-vis Śaiva Understandings of the Meaning and Goal of Yoga.....</i>	35
Lyne Bansat-Boudon <i>The Surprise of Spanda: An Aesthetic Approach to a Phenomenology of Transcendence (Rāmakaṇṭha ad Spandakārikā 2.6 [1.22/22]).....</i>	73
Bettina Sharada Bäumer <i>Kṣemarāja's Poetic Non-Dualism: Examples from his Netratantroddyota.....</i>	103
Giuliano Boccali <i>Lectio difficilior e creazione poetica: esempi dal Kumārasambhava..</i>	115

Johannes Bronkhorst <i>The Sarvadarśanasamgraha: One Text or Two? One Author or Two?.....</i>	129
Maria Piera Candotti and Tiziana Pontillo <i>The dikṣita's Language. Vedic Homologies and rūpakas in Jaiminīya-Brahmaṇa 2.60–64.....</i>	153
Daniele Cuneo and Elisa Ganser <i>The Emotional and Aesthetic Experience of the Actor. Diderot's Paradoxe sur le comédien in Sanskrit Dramaturgy.....</i>	193
Marzenna Czerniak-Drożdżowicz <i>Viṣṇu in his Three Abodes. Some Observations about Three-storey and Triple-shrined Viṣṇu Temples in South India.....</i>	273
Florinda De Simini <i>Rules of Conduct for the Śaivas. The Intersection of Dharmasāstra and Śaiva Devotion in the Śivadharmottara.....</i>	291
Vincent Eltschinger <i>Politics and/in the End of Times. On the Buddhist Reception of the Arthaśāstra.....</i>	337
Marco Ferrante <i>The Pratyabhijñā on Consciousness and Self-consciousness: A Comparative Perspective.....</i>	375
Giuseppe Ferraro <i>'Own-nature' (svabhāva) in the Abhidharma Tradition and in Nāgārjuna's Interpretation.....</i>	391
Marco Franceschini <i>The Printing History of Sargas 9 to 17 of the Kumārasambhava....</i>	411
Eli Franco <i>Prajñākaragupta on Pramāṇavārttika 2.1 in the Light of Yamāri's Interpretation.....</i>	433

Table of Contents

Elisa Freschi <i>Reconstructing an Episode in the History of Sanskrit Philosophy: Arthāpatti in Kumāriḷa's Commentators.....</i>	457
Paolo Giunta <i>Il rapporto di Śāntaraksita con Bhartḷhari. Edizione critica della Śabdabrahmaḷparikṣā e dello Sphoṭavāḷdakhāḷḷana.....</i>	487
Dominic Goodall <i>A Glimpse of Classical Saiddhāntika Theology in a Cambodian Epigraph: A Fresh Edition and Translation of the Sanskrit Śaiva Hymn K. 570 of Banteay Srei.....</i>	543
Alessandro Graheli <i>Predestination of Freedom in Rūpa Gosvāmin's Theology of Devotion.....</i>	577
Kengo Harimoto <i>A Few Notes on a Newly Discovered Manuscript of the Śivadharmā Corpus 1.....</i>	595
Harunaga Isaacson <i>Vasiṣṭha's Ashram: A Translation of Sarga 1 of Kālidāsa's Raghuvamṣā into English Verse.....</i>	627
Volume II	
Mrinal Kaul <i>A Preliminary Note on the Manuscripts of the Tantrālokaḷviveka....</i>	679
Yohei Kawajiri <i>A Report on the Newly Found Manuscript of the Īśvaraḷpratyabhijñāḷvivḷṛti.....</i>	751
Chiara Neri <i>A Phenomenology of Dreams in Theravāḷa Buddhism: An Annotated Translation of the Tenth Chapter of the Sārasaḷḅgaha by Siddhattha Thera.....</i>	773

Cristina Pecchia <i>With the Eye of a Scholar and the Insight of a Physician: Gangadhar Ray Kaviraj and the Carakasamhitā.....</i>	797
Gianni Pellegrini <i>On prahasann iva. Bhagavadgītā 2.10 in the Light of Traditional Commentaries.....</i>	841
Stefano Piano <i>Qualche riflessione sui diversi tipi di śaḍaṅgayoga.....</i>	901
Cinzia Pieruccini <i>Transition and Transformation: On the Roles of Parks and Gardens in Early India.....</i>	913
Isabelle Ratié <i>Some Hitherto Unknown Fragments of Utpaladeva's Vivṛti (IV): On Non-being and Imperceptible Demons.....</i>	929
Antonio Rigopoulos <i>Prahasann iva. On Kṛṣṇa's Hint of Laughter in Bhagavadgītā 2.10.....</i>	965
Margherita Serena Saccone and Péter-Dániel Szántó <i>A Fragment of Pramāṇa from Gilgit.....</i>	1011
Małgorzata Sacha <i>Imagine the world... Abhinavagupta vis-à-vis the Psychoanalytic Mystic.....</i>	1025
Alexis Sanderson <i>The Meaning of the Term Trairūpyam in the Buddhist Pramāṇa Literature.....</i>	1049
Cristina Scherrer-Schaub <i>D'impronte e ombre tra India e Grecia. Questioni e visioni di storia del pensiero politico e filosofico tra il V e il II secolo a.C.....</i>	1063

Table of Contents

Francesco Sferra <i>The Second Chapter of the Abhidharmasamuccayakārikā</i> by Saṅghatrāta.....	1145
Federico Squarcini <i>Ecce yoga. Il miraggio del nome, il fantasma della salute</i> <i>e la concomitanza delle ‘cose’ qualsiasi.....</i>	1167
Ernst Steinkellner <i>Śāntarakṣita on the Induction Problem. A Translation</i> <i>of Vādanyāyaṭikā 14,12–16,29.....</i>	1223
Lidia Sudyka <i>Imagined Landscapes or Through the Year: The Descriptions of All</i> <i>Seasons and All Seasons’ Gardens in Indian Literature.....</i>	1237
Vincenzo Vergiani <i>Vivakṣā and the Formation of Meaning According to Bhartṛhari....</i>	1253
Alex Watson <i>Pratyabhijñā: Recognition’s Nature, Cause and Object.</i> <i>Critical Edition and Annotated Translation of a Portion</i> <i>of the Nyāyamañjarī.....</i>	1325

Transition and Transformation: On the Roles of Parks and Gardens in Early India

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In the last few years I have devoted some articles to the literary representations of gardens and parks in ancient India, taking into consideration, in particular, the *aśokavanikās* of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, passages of Aśvaghōṣa and Kālidāsa, and the halting places of the Buddha as presented in the Pāḷi Canon.¹ In the course of these studies I have come to the idea that the gardens and parks as depicted in ancient Indian literature, appearing as interstitial areas, as something lying in-between or alongside other entities of more settled significance, were conceived of as places open to many possibilities of use and interpretation, and specifically as places of transition, transformation and change, or as the favoured spaces in which writers could locate some sort of transgression. Here I will address some aspects of the issue more thor-

¹ See Bibliography for fuller information on these articles. The primary sources substantiating many of my remarks in the present paper are referred to and quoted extensively in those essays, and I will not repeat all the data here, but I will mainly refer to those articles themselves.

oughly. In conclusion, I will try to trace out some connection between my remarks and some contemporary theories on spatiality.²

Although the vocabulary of the primary sources hardly makes clear distinctions, we need to take into account the fact that the realities involved generally differ according to location, presumable size, and, at least partly, original purpose; thus I will generally use the English word ‘garden’ with reference to the spaces with trees and flowers beautifying buildings such as royal palaces, and the word ‘park’ for the sites which, according to the sources, generally appear to be located outside — and apparently right on the outskirts — of the ancient Indian cities.

In the Pāḷi Canon we repeatedly encounter a similar scene: the Buddha halts and preaches in places located near or just outside towns and villages, and mostly in some kind of grove. Of these places, some are apparently entirely natural sites, but others are in some respects domesticated areas, designated by some kind of proper name, and often belonging to an individual or group of individuals, as evidenced by the place names themselves or by other indications in the texts. As I have sought to argue elsewhere,³ the latter cannot all simply be considered ‘parks,’ in the sense of pieces of land intended from the outset — only or primarily — for amusement and leisure, these being the purposes of the parks we encounter in *kāvya* literature, where such places (as well as ‘gardens’) are closely connected with the pleasures of love. The famous *migadāya* of Isipatana, and, in fact, the various other *migadāyas* mentioned by the Pāḷi Canon may well have been, primarily, reserves for breeding animals, and the many *ambavanas*, among which the one belonging to the celebrated courtesan Ambapālī, were presumably primarily luxuriant orchards. Moreover, as we know, the Buddha is said to have been born in the Lumbinivana, a *sālavana* (‘wood of *sāla* trees’), between the towns of Kapilavatthu and Devadaha, owned by the citizens of both towns,⁴ and to have died in another *sālavana* outside Kusinārā,

² A source of inspiration for the present paper has been Katharine T. von Stackelberg’s book on the Roman gardens (von Stackelberg 2017).

³ Pieruccini 2018a, 2018b.

⁴ These are the details given by the *Nidānakathā*, p. 52.

called Upavattana and belonging to the local ruling clan of the Mallas.⁵ As the wood of the *sāla* trees has since ancient times been of great economic value in India, the *sālavanās* may well have been groves serving an immediate utilitarian purpose rather than ‘parks.’ In any case, all these places share the same basic characteristics of the leisure parks, providing sensual and especially erotic enjoyment, celebrated by the *kāvya* poets: all of them are spaces outside towns, intermediate spaces which belong neither to the town itself nor to the forest that lies beyond.⁶

Quite often, the location of some of the Buddha’s sermons appears to be a redactional intervention. The compilers of the Buddhist Canons clearly felt the need to set each and every speech of the Buddha in some specific site, and this is achieved by mentioning a place name according to a certain set of practical indications and conventions — or at least so it seems. Well-known locations are thus endlessly replicated.⁷ However, this does not significantly change the issue; the fact remains that the redactors of the texts felt that such places on the fringe of a town were appropriate settings for the Buddha to deliver his message. Moreover, in these parks, as we can call them for the sake of simplicity, besides the halting and preaching of the Buddha, the Pāli Canon also records the presence of *śramaṇas* of different persuasion, with whom exchanges of opinions take place.

From a practical (historical?) point of view, we obviously have to consider that these parks could offer safety and peace, besides a useful proximity to towns where alms could be collected by the Buddha and his monks, and from where lay people could easily make their way to visit the Awakened one and gather to listen to his sermons, as a famous passage explicitly declares through words attributed to king Bimbisāra, who wonders what might be the ideal features of the place where the Buddha should reside.⁸ But, from

⁵ In the *Mahāparinibbānasuttanta*, *passim*, *upavattanaṃ mallānaṃ sālavanaṃ* and variants. See Pieruccini 2018a: 70–71.

⁶ A parallel may be traced with the protected areas devoted to the breeding of animals and the production of various goods that the *Arthasāstra* defines as *vanas*; the places that the Pāli Canon calls *migadāyas* may well have been of the same sort. See in particular Pieruccini 2018b.

⁷ Schopen 2004.

⁸ *Vinaya Piṭaka*, *Mahāvagga* I.22.16.

a conceptual point of view, there is more to it than this. The human settlements, cities and villages, are the places of business and political power, while the forest, as Brahmanical literature such as the Epics insist on proclaiming, belongs to wild animals, frightening beings and uncivilized tribes, and, as far as religion is concerned, is already occupied by *ṛṣis* and *vānaprasthas*, with their hermitages where the smoke of Vedic sacrifices rises up to the sky. Located in between these two worlds, the parks figure as interstitial areas — as half-empty spaces, prone to be filled with new significances and traditions. For this reason, they acquire prominence as places of transformation, where new doctrines can be announced and evolve, and entirely new ideas about human life can develop.

Moreover, Buddhism appears to have been very active in achieving permanent occupation of such places, thus transforming them again in terms of meaning and purpose. In fact, the first Buddhist monasteries are said to have arisen exactly in sites of this kind, particularly famous cases being the Veḷuvana, the ‘Bamboo Grove’ of Rājagaha, donated to the Buddha by King Bimbisāra, and the Jetavana of Sāvattihī, the ‘Jeta’s Grove,’ where Jeta is the name of the prince who originally owned the land that the *setthi* — banker — Anāthapiṇḍika acquired for the Buddha.⁹

On a more definite symbolic level, we may add further elements to the picture. As already mentioned, besides his sermons, the most salient episodes in the Buddha’s life occur in places of this type. We encounter a *sālavana* at the beginning and end of his mortal life, and of course he achieves his *bodhi* under a tree not far from the village of Uruvelā — the place later known as Bodh Gayā.¹⁰ In these choices many elements appear to conflate — in other words, those places *were not* entirely empty. Queen Māyā gave birth there in the posture of a *yakṣī*, grasping the branch of a tree, and the Buddha himself, while meditating under a tree, may well have figured as the counterpart of a *yakṣa* of vegetation.

⁹ As a consequence, in some cases or texts of the Pāli Canon it can be difficult to decide whether the term *ārāma* should be translated as ‘park’ or ‘monastery.’ Cf. e.g. Horner 1957: XLIX.

¹⁰ For discussions on the sanctity of Bodh Gayā before Śākyamuni’s times, see in particular DeCaroli 2004: 105–120, and Sayers 2012.

According to the *Nidānakathā*, when the young Sujātā offers him her plate of milk rice, this is exactly what she thinks — that he is the *devatā* of a *nigrodha* tree, for whom the homage of food was originally meant and who has exceptionally manifested himself.¹¹ Somehow, these events occur in places which are, or better until that time had been solely, under the arcane power of the spirits of vegetation. Obviously, this is a vast theme, that we can only briefly recall here, but we can certainly state that Buddhist lore occupied spaces where popular, non-Vedic faith could already sense the presence of divinity, a presence that Buddhism incorporated, superseded and substituted.

The intermediate quality and transformative power of the park/garden was later also enhanced by Buddhism in a different, but extremely significant way. This happened with the conception of the Sukhāvātī, ‘the Blissful,’ that is the paradise of the Buddha Amitābha, as presented by Mahāyāna texts such as the two versions of the *Sukhāvātīvyūhasūtra*.¹² The Sukhāvātī is an entire ‘world’ (*lokadhātu*) conceived as a majestic garden (let us use this term here), where people are reborn as *bodhisattvas* soon to attain liberation, to become Buddhas — what greater transformation could be predicted for any living being? Set between earth and *nirvāṇa*, this is the liminal place leading to the supreme step, the ultimate transitional vision.

Of course, the ideal representation of ‘paradise’ as a kind of garden is common to many cultures. It may basically be considered to have its roots in the attractiveness of earthly gardens, thus allowing earth — man’s creations — and heaven — man’s projected fantasies — to reciprocally mirror each other. In the wide range, or perhaps network, of constructions stemming from this conception in the different cultures, India presents her own version. In the Indian tradition, the idea that paradise can be a garden has the most ancient formulation in connection with Indra and his heavenly resort inhabited by alluring *apsarases*, whose embraces are the desired reward. As we have said, in *kāvya* in particular parks and gardens are generally associated with amorous

¹¹ *Nidānakathā*, pp. 68–70.

¹² Shorter *Sukhāvātīvyūhasūtra* 3–7; Longer *Sukhāvātīvyūhasūtra* 16–23, etc. Cf. Pieruccini 2014: 22–26.

encounters, for which they provide appropriately sensual and secluded scenery (see below). But Indra's paradise, too, at least according to the post-Vedic idea of *samsāra*, is a transitional place, from where one is reborn on earth after his merits are exhausted.¹³ In the Sukhāvati, the scenario is de-eroticized, and the pleasures granted by Indra's loving nymphs are substituted, for the inhabitants of this magnificent place, with total and virtually automatic satisfaction of every practical and spiritual need. Nevertheless, this happens in a landscape strongly appealing to the senses in its grandiosely synesthetic beauty.

And yet, Sukhāvati's beauty is not the charm of a 'natural' garden. *Kāvya* poetry teems with the beauty of plants and flowers that belong to the 'real' vegetation of South Asia, even though, besides the frequent difficulty in identifying them precisely in botanical terms, in the Indian context some of them are attributed specific cultural or mythical or poetical significance to which the poets often allude only in a cryptical manner. By contrast, Sukhāvati's allure is the result of a fabulous reworking of nature, because the shining trees, the marvellous lotuses and sparkling ponds are said to consist of precious metals and jewels; the winds stir celestial music, and flowers and precious things rain from the sky. Now, such imagery is far from being an original invention of these Mahāyāna texts, although in the descriptions of the *Sukhāvativyūhasūtras* we find it exploited to the greatest extent and brought to its extreme dazzling magnificence, as well as developed with specifically Buddhist language and details. In fact, such elements as the golden and bejewelled lotuses and trees, the ponds with precious stairways and sand, and other features of similar import, evoking sumptuousness and the immunity of vegetation from the vicissitudes of seasons and time, are recurrent in ancient Indian descriptions of 'gardens' seen to be endowed with some fabulous, supernatural quality. And the texts often associate the places thus conceived with the idea of a journey, or some passage. We encounter imagery of this kind, for example, in the *Rāmāyaṇa* for the *asokavanikā* of Laṅkā where, after her abduction by Rāvaṇa, Sītā is held captive in a kind of suspended time; in the *Meghadūta*, when the

¹³ See e.g. *Saundarananda* 9.31, etc.

cloud is invited to enter mythological Alakā and the garden of the *yakṣa*'s house, that is where the text leaves the 'real' Indian landscape traversed so far by the cloud to move to another dimension; and in the description of Indra's paradise in Aśvaghoṣa's *Saundarananda* to which Nanda is flown to by the Buddha — of course not surprisingly, but it is important to stress that this is probably the first well developed literary description of this place.¹⁴ Thus, the earthly garden, the obvious model for such fantasies, is manipulated and reconstructed to evoke transition — and at the same time bring the audience — to another level of reality.

In the classical Sanskrit court-plays such as Kālidāsa's *Mālavikāgnimitra* and *Vikramorvaśīya*, and Harṣa's *Ratnāvalī* and *Priyadarśikā*, sections of the plots are staged in a garden evidently belonging to a royal palace, and frequented by kings, queens and their retinue. As we know, these plays basically revolve around the new love story of a king with a beautiful maiden (or an *apsaras* in the case of the *Vikramorvaśīya*), a love story which has initially to be kept secret and protected from the jealousy of the chief queen or queens. With due variants, the garden with its luxuriant and sense-arousing scenery is typically the place where the two see or spy on each other, fall in love or grow in their feelings, express their longing conveniently overheard by other characters, and have secret meetings. In much the same way, also in the *Svapnavāsavadatta* the palace garden is the place where the male and female protagonists express their intimate thoughts, some privacy can be kept, but words revealing the true love feelings are significantly overheard. In this connection, Daud Ali insightfully observed:

Daily life within the royal establishment, with its minutely calibrated protocols, was highly 'public' in nature. Daily movement was open to the more or less constant scrutiny of interested parties or their agents. [...] In this context, the garden formed a relatively 'neutral' and 'open,' space, yet one which was protected and intimate as well. It thus formed a place, at once secluded and 'interior,' but unmarked and public, where the games of pre-marital or post-marital courtship could take place. It formed the ideal setting for the illicit or quasi-licit romances which formed the subject of

¹⁴ Cf. *Rāmāyaṇa* 5.12–13, *passim*; *Meghadūta* 73–74; *Saundarananda* 10.19–26. For more detailed references and comments, see Pieruccini 2014, 2015, 2016.

numerous plays and poems in Sanskrit literature. [...] The garden functioned as a sort of 'outside' place at once beyond the scrutiny of the court yet comfortably within the safety of its confines.¹⁵

Thus, according to Ali, the role of the gardens that we see embedded in Sanskrit plays reflects the actual circumstances of the life in those ancient courtly precincts. He is most probably right, but, as the same scholar briefly remarks,¹⁶ we may equally well regard the recurrence of this kind of setting for the various love stages and encounters as a literary *topos*, perpetuated by authors as a way to 'move the plot forward,' positioning the characters, when needed, in aptly private and sensual surroundings — besides offering the poets the possibility to display their art in some elaborate stanzas exalting the beauty of nature. In both cases we are, once more, confronted with an interstitial place, a space in-between that by its very nature appears open to possibilities that other 'ins' and 'outs' cannot offer.

Considering again specifically out-of-the-town parks, here too Sanskrit authors locate events that, for different reasons, cannot, or should not, take place indoors, or under the public eye. The setting in a park outside Kapilavāstu of the unsuccessful seduction of the future Buddha by a host of splendid courtesans, as recounted in the Fourth Canto of the *Buddhacarita*, basically reflects the erotic qualities of the garden/park;¹⁷ nevertheless, at least from the point of view of the Buddhist Aśvaghōṣa, the entire episode may be said to evoke a deviation, a possibility of transgression. But in this context, especially the *Mṛcchakaṭikā* presents a very significant picture, setting the crucial events of the play in a park, and more generally around the trip to a park. In the well-known plot of this famous work, the courtesan Vasantasenā is supposed to meet her lover Cārudatta, to spend a pleasant day with him, in a park outside Ujjayinī belonging to Saṃsthānaka, the wicked brother-in-law of the king.¹⁸ But, for a mistake of carriages, the two

¹⁵ Ali 2003: 237.

¹⁶ Ali 2003: 237.

¹⁷ See Pieruccini 2014.

¹⁸ An analysis of the material aspect of this park is proposed in Voegeli 2013: 35–39. We may remark here that these out-of-the town parks generally figure as open to every kind of visitor, like the one in the *Mṛcchakaṭikā* and the 'parks' con-

lovers fail to meet, and in the park *Samsthānaka*, rejected by *Vasantasenā*, attempts to strangle the beautiful courtesan, who is later found alive by another character, a gambler turned Buddhist monk who has come to the park to wash his robes. Thus, the half-secluded reality of the park is used to build up a setting not only for a desired love encounter, but also for murder.

It is possible to link the characteristics of parks and gardens as presented by ancient Indian literary sources and highlighted in the present pages with some relevant contemporary theories on spatiality: in particular, the Foucauldian concept of heterotopia and the notion of Thirdspace as elaborated by Edward W. Soja.

Michel Foucault propounded the concept of heterotopia, lit. 'other-place-ness,' in a lecture held in 1967 and published as an article only many years later, in 1984, and, since 1986, in various English translations.¹⁹ In this essay, consisting of a few dense and somewhat only exploratory pages, Foucault declares his interest in certain sites 'that have the curious property of being in relation with all the other sites, but in such a way as to suspect, neutralize, or invert the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect.'²⁰ Among these sites, he mentions utopias, which 'present society itself in a perfected form, or else society turned upside down, but in any case [...] are fundamentally unreal spaces,'²¹ and quickly goes on defining his main subject:

There are also, probably in every culture, in every civilization, real places — places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society — which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality. Because these places are absolutely differ-

connected with the Buddha, even though they are said to belong to specific individuals.

¹⁹ For a history of this text and its various translations, see Dehaene and De Caeter 2008: 13–14. The article is quoted here in the translation from French by Jay Miskowiec.

²⁰ Foucault 1986: 24.

²¹ Foucault 1986: 24.

ent from all the sites that they reflect and speak about, I shall call them, by way of contrast to utopias, heterotopias.²²

In the pages that follow, he also mentions the garden as a form of heterotopia, recalling in particular the examples of ancient Persia and the fact that they were meant to be condensed representations of the entire world. As for the gardens and parks of ancient India, it seems to me that a fundamentally heterotopic quality they show consists in the fact that the texts appear to locate their visitors in a kind of middle- or no-ground, in a space open to new possibilities. But other qualities become clear in relation to a general division which Foucault introduces to classify such places. In fact, he envisages two main kinds of heterotopias: *heterotopias of crisis*, which he defines as ‘privileged or sacred or forbidden places, reserved for individuals who are, in relation to society and to the human environment in which they live, in a state of crisis: adolescents, menstruating women, pregnant women, the elderly, etc.’;²³ and *heterotopias of deviation*: ‘those in which individuals whose behavior is deviant in relation to the required means or norm are placed’ — and among these he mentions ‘rest homes and psychiatric hospitals, and of course prisons.’²⁴ Extending or, better, differently applying these categories, we may certainly say that the ‘parks’ of the Buddhist tradition represent both heterotopias of crisis, and heterotopias of deviation: stressing, in the first case, the (voluntary) removal from society of people deeply engaged in spiritual quest, and thus at a turning point in their life, and in the second case their deviance from the general Brahmanical social norms and the so far officially accepted religious practices. There Buddhism creates a type of community which at the same time replicates and subverts the rules of ordinary society, and this is in perfect accord with the general definition of heterotopias quoted above. Moreover, the definition ‘heterotopias of deviation’ may be readily applied, albeit again with a twist of its original meaning, to gardens of the royal palace and the parks where authors set some complicated love stories, or some transgressive

²² Foucault 1986: 24.

²³ Foucault 1986: 24.

²⁴ Foucault 1986: 25.

or even unacceptable acts — events that for different reasons require a location somehow beyond norms and control, and are thus made to occur in a kind of conceptually ‘other’ place.

The theory of Thirdspace was elaborated by Edward W. Soja in a seminal book first published in 1996. Here, in a sort of dialogue with the writings of Henri Lefebvre and through a re-reading of some of his basic concepts, besides taking into account Foucault himself and a number of contemporary thinkers engaged in post-colonial, gender and feminist studies, Soja proposes to overcome the various forms of dualistic thought by constantly adding ‘an-Other.’ Thus he builds a ‘trialectics’ of spatiality where the third element is the terrain for new forms of awareness about space, open to different and constantly evolving points of observation. Soja thus sets the stage in his introductory pages:

[...] the mainstream spatial or geographical imagination has, for at least the past century, revolved primarily around a dual mode of thinking about space; one, which I have described as a Firstspace perspective and epistemology, fixed mainly on the concrete materiality of spatial forms, on things that can be empirically mapped; and the second, as Secondspace, conceived in ideas about space, in thoughtful re-presentations of human spatiality in mental or cognitive forms. [...] I have chosen to call this new awareness Thirdspace and to initiate its evolving definition by describing it as a product of a ‘thirthing’ of the spatial imagination, the creation of another mode of thinking about space that draws upon the material and mental spaces of the traditional dualism but extends well beyond them in scope, substance, and meaning. Simultaneously real and imagined and more (both and also...), the exploration of Thirdspace can be described and inscribed in journeys to ‘real-and-imagined’ (or perhaps ‘realandimagined’?) places.²⁵

Briefly speaking, we may say that, according to Soja, Firstspace is physical space, as materially perceived, Secondspace is how it is mentally conceived, felt, or planned, while Thirdspace encompasses and goes beyond the two insofar as it also represents the world of experience, the way spaces are *lived*. His definition runs thus:

²⁵ Soja 2017: 10.

[...] a knowable and unknowable, real and imagined lifeworld of experiences, emotional events, and political choices that is existentially shaped by the generative and problematic interplay between centers and peripheries, the abstract and concrete, the impassioned spaces of the conceptual and the lived, marked out materially and metaphorically in spatial praxis, the transformation of (spatial) knowledge into (spatial) action in the field of unevenly developed (spatial) power.²⁶

Might it prove relevant to associate Soja's triad with the documentation on ancient Indian parks and gardens that we have investigated here?²⁷ For our knowledge of these ancient places, which have totally disappeared in their materiality, we can rely only on how they are represented in literature, and, to a lesser extent, in the visual arts,²⁸ and thus conceptualized by intermediate actors. The mythical or legendary resonances of plants and flowers which are commonly embedded in the poets' descriptions offer hints as to what such environments could emotionally or intellectually be felt to represent, even if only, in the case of *kāvya*, by a refined élite of connoisseurs. A Thirdspace perspective would stress, however, precisely the factors of encounter, evolution, transformation. The aspects open to such an approach are, in fact, the liminality, the in-

²⁶ Soja 2017: 31.

²⁷ See von Stackelberg 2017: 52–53.

²⁸ A couple of reliefs depicting gardens are particularly worth mentioning. A panel on the northern pillar of the east *torāṇa* (end of 1st c. CE–beginning of 1st c. CE) of the Great Stūpa of Sanchi shows a beautiful image of couples in a highly apparelled garden or park; the panel immediately underneath most probably presented a similar scene, but it is now badly damaged. See the still fundamental Marshall-Foucher-Majumdar 1983, vol. 1: 122, 228–229, vol. 2, Plate 64c and comment; here it is suggested that the image may depict Indra's paradise. A section of a coping frieze from Mathura containing a very interesting representation of an enclosed garden or, again, park is owned by the National Museums of Scotland, Edinburgh (accession number A.1975.265; proposed date, 2nd or 3rd c. CE); to my knowledge, it has been published in an advertisement of Spink & Son in *Artibus Asiae* 35.3 (1973), in Quintanilla 2007, fig. 184 (see pp. 146–147; here the suggested date is instead 50–20 BCE), and in Ali 2003, fig. 1, where the image is reversed. I wish to express my gratitude to Dr Friederike Voigt, Senior Curator of the National Museums of Scotland, for providing me with precious information on this piece. Moreover, as for literature, an incursion into Secondspace in terms of ideal planning could also be represented by a survey of the technical indications of the *Śilpaśāstras*. For a reading of the relevant passages of the *Mānasollāsa* (early 12th c.), see Ali 2012.

betweenness of such places, which leaves them eminently open to a multiplicity of social interactions and meanings. The importance of being in or adopting a liminal position is repeatedly emphasized in Soja's pages; in fact, it is a crucial point of his discourse, because of the wide range of possibilities such a position can unlock. And, by highlighting the dynamic potentialities of places like parks and gardens, the ancient Indian authors seem themselves to have built up some kind of proto-Thirdspace narrative.

Finally, it is also worth considering that the parks frequented by the Buddha and his monks, and other *śramaṇas*, can be seen as a sort of third space (concrete, without capital letters), enlarging with another and very decisive element the widely-recognised and studied dichotomy, or better interaction, between forest and town, or, as Sontheimer put it, between the *vana* and the *kṣetra*.²⁹

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²⁹ See Sontheimer 1987; cf. also Pieruccini 2018a: 68; Pieruccini 2018b.

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