

# 'A Cloud Turned Goose': Sanskrit in the vernacular millennium

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*A vast corpus of Sanskrit poetry (kāvya) was produced over the last thousand years; most of these works reveal a vital and organic relation to the crystallising regional traditions of the subcontinent and to emerging vernacular literatures. Thus we have, for example, the Sanskrit literatures of Kerala, of Bengal-Orissa, of Andhra, and so on. These works, often addressed primarily to local audiences, have remained largely unknown and mostly undervalued, despite their intrinsic merits and enormous importance for the cultural history of India. We explore the particular forms of complex expressivity, including rich temporal and spatial modalities, apparent in such poems, focusing in particular on Vedānta Deśika's Hamsasandeśa, a fourteenth-century messenger-poem modelled after Kālidāsa's Meghasandeśa. We hypothesise a principle: as localisation increases, what is lost in geographical range is made up for by increasing depth. Sanskrit poetry thus comes to play a critical, highly original role in the elaboration of regional cultural identities and the articulation of innovative cultural thematics; a re-conceptualised ecology of Sanskrit genres, including entirely new forms keyed to local experience, eventually appears in each of the regions. In short, rumours of the death of Sanskrit after 1000 A.D. are greatly exaggerated.*

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Why would a seventeenth-century poet in some small village of south India write an elaborate poem in Sanskrit, of all (Indian) languages? He or she could just as easily compose the work in a spoken language such as Tamil or Telugu, which have fully articulated literary traditions, an entire world of poetic theory, a rich genre-ecology, and a long history. If, nonetheless, our poet chooses Sanskrit—as so many did—what is the meaning of this choice?

We may gain some insight into this set of questions from a section about poets and poetic praxis in Venkaṭādhvarin's *Viśvaguṇādarśacampū*, 'The Mirror of

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All Qualities', a seventeenth-century Sanskrit text composed somewhere near Kancipuram. The *Mirror* is structured as an ongoing conversation between two flying *gandharvas*, Kṛṣṇānu and Viśvāvasu; the former is a rather grumpy observer who finds fault in everything he sees, whereas the latter is the eternal optimist, with something good to say about whatever Kṛṣṇānu has denounced.<sup>1</sup> They are on an aerial tour of southern India, especially the Tamil region. Towards the end of the tour, after they have thoroughly investigated the geography of southern India, including some apt observations about the new city of Madras (Georgetown) with its foreign residents (*śveta-hūṇas*), they allow themselves some general observations about various professions and identities (doctors, grammarians, logicians, astrologers—and poets).

As usual, Kṛṣṇānu begins with an acerbic comment:

There are lovely words  
fit to be turned into poetry  
that praises God.  
Poets, alas, enslave them  
to petty, crooked kings.  
Would anyone in his right mind  
go to the end of the world  
to fetch a libation for the god  
from the heavenly Ganges  
and then use it to water  
his vegetables?<sup>2</sup>

God exists. He frees those  
who praise him. Still, poets  
waste their fine phrases  
singing about whores.  
It's like a vulgar king  
who uses pearls that belong  
on God's crown to adorn  
his pet bitch.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See Narayana Rao, et al., *symbols of Substance*.

<sup>2</sup> *Viśvaguṇādarśa* 542:

*śrī-nātha-stavanānurūpa-kavanām vāṇīm mano-hāriṇīm  
kaṣṭam hā kavayaḥ kadarya-kuṭila-kṣmā-pāla-sātkurvate/  
dūropāhṛta-saura-saindhava-payo devābhiṣekocitam  
saṃseke viniyuñjate sumatayaḥ śākalāvalāsya kim//*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* 543.

*stuvad-bhava-nivartake sati harau kavīḥ sūktibhiḥ  
karoti vara-varṇinī-carita-varṇanam garhitam/*

Kṛṣṇānu may well be speaking about Sanskrit when he mentions the Ganges water brought from afar. So language, *vāṇī*, that is of this status—and that is also charming, *manohāriṇī*—is really limited to highly specific, religious contexts. Any other use is debasing, a kind of prostitution. Thus the author of our text, Venkaṭādhvarin, has actually inserted a potentially self-critical remark into his text through the mouth of Kṛṣṇānu, who also happens to be, not surprisingly, a realist of sorts. Poets like this author do use Sanskrit for purposes other than composing *stotras*.

Viśvāvasu immediately acknowledges this truth in verses that could be seen as the author's self-defence or apology: there are, he grants his opponent, poets whose words are entirely fruitless, *aphala*. On the other hand, descriptions of women and kings are entirely appropriate if they appear in the context of *kāvya* that celebrates Kṛṣṇa, for example. He cites honourable precedents: one can find such passages in the works of Vyāsa and Vālmīki (544–45). Context matters. This defence only paves the way for Kṛṣṇānu's second burst of criticism, this time a more general and principled one: the real problem lies in the fact that poets waste their talent in praising ordinary human beings, *nara-stuti*. Those who know the *śāstras* will always find this practice appalling.

At this point Viśvāvasu—or perhaps it is Venkaṭādhvarin himself who is speaking through him—produces a highly specific and elaborate response. There is, he says, no reason to single out poets in this respect:

When poets praise kings,  
they often produce exquisite verses.  
Others praise such men  
with empty words that have no punch.  
That's the whole difference:  
the fault of praising human beings  
is universal, while a poet  
has, at least, a special power.<sup>4</sup>

Viśvāvasu resists the attempt to confine poetry to *stotra*. In effect, what is at issue is the poet's freedom. Even mundane subjects—even panegyric—can be elevated and enlivened by a skillful poet. The categoric identification of any patron-client

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*anītir avanī-patir grha-śuni-tanuṃ mauktikair  
vibhūṣayati devatā-mukuta-bhāga-yogyair yathā//*

<sup>4</sup> Viśvaguṇārdarśa-campū 547:

*padyair hr̥dyatamaih stuvanti kavayah prāyeṇa pṛthvī-patīm  
anye tān stuvate vacobhir acamat-kārair asārair apī/  
padyārambhāṇa-śakty-aśakti-vihito bhedaḥ kavīnām bhavaty  
anyeṣāṃ ca paraṃ nara-stuti-kṛto dosas tu sārvaṭrikaḥ//*

relationship as prostitution misses the mark; it is too sweeping, and as such ultimately irrelevant to what the poet really does. Moreover, the medium of poetry allows communication with several sets of distinguished predecessors:

The classical masters of poetry—  
Vālmīki, Vyāsa, Parāśara and others—  
are universally admired.  
People who recognize quality  
should also respond with respect  
to the new crop of great poets  
for their service to the world.<sup>5</sup>

Māgha, the ‘Thief’,<sup>6</sup> Mayūra, Murāri, Bhāravi who knew the essence,  
Śrīharṣa, Kālidāsa—the poet—Bhavabhūti, King Bhoja,  
Śrī Daṇḍin, Ḍiṇḍima, Vedānta Deśika, Bhallaṭa, Bhaṭṭa Bāṇa,  
and other equally well-known poets (think of Subandhu)  
make everybody happy with their poems. (549)<sup>7</sup>

The poet who rolled in the dust of the devotees’ feet [Tontaratipotī],  
Viṣṇucitta [Periyālvār],  
the sage Śaṭhakopa [Nammālvār],  
Bhūtattālvār,  
Madhurakavi,  
and quite a few other great souls—  
don’t they make the worlds pure  
with their flowing sweet words? (551)<sup>8</sup>

These three verses direct us to at least three authoritative literary canons. The first comprises, as is usually the case with praise of previous poets,<sup>9</sup> the pair of great epic poets Vyāsa and Vālmīki, the latter seen as the First Poet, *ādī-kavi*. Next comes what initially seems to be a conventional list of classical Sanskrit poets; but in the middle of this set we suddenly find a shift southwards to include

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* 548:

*prācetasā-vyāsa-parāśarādyāḥ prāñcaḥ kavīndrā jagad-añcitās te/  
goṣṭhi navināpi mahā-kavīnām pūjyā guṇa-jñair bhuvanopakartrū//*

<sup>6</sup> = Bilhaṇa.

<sup>7</sup> *māghas coro mayūro mura-ripur aparo bhāraviḥ sāra-vidyāḥ  
śrīharṣaḥ kālidāsaḥ kavir atha bhavabhūtyāhvayo bhojarājah/  
śrīdaṇḍī ḍiṇḍimākhyaḥ śruti-mukūṭa-gurur bhallaṭa bhāṭṭa-bāṇaḥ  
khyātāś cānye subandhv-ādaya iha kṛtibhir viśvam āhlādayanti//*

<sup>8</sup> *pranata-caraṇa-reṇu-viṣṇu-cittaḥ śaṭha-mathana-raso munīḥ sa bhūtaḥ/  
madhura-kavir ito ‘pare dhanyāḥ kati na punanti jaganti sūkti-pūraiḥ//*

<sup>9</sup> Pollock, ‘In Praise of Polis’.

Diṇḍima, who belongs to the high Vijayanagara period, and then the outstanding figure of Vedānta Deśika (*śruti-mukūṭa-guru*, thirteenth century), a foundational figure in the world of south Indian ‘regional’ Sanskrit—as we will argue at length below. This merging of two local figures with the great classical names of Kālidāsa, Māgha, Bāṇa and others is not a trivial matter. The third verse takes us into the Śrīvaiṣṇava Tamil *bhakti* canon, naming (or renaming in Sanskrit) five of the 12 Ālvārs. Note that the Sanskrit poets ‘make everybody happy’ while Tamil *bhakti* poets ‘make the worlds pure’. In between the second and third verses is another one, which we have not translated, that speaks of the intimate relation (*sāmānādhikarānyam*) of various pairs of qualities, including, conspicuously, *sāhitya*, literature, and *pāṇḍitya*, erudition. The reference is, most probably, to *alaṅkāra-śāstra*, the science of poetics, another highly relevant canon.

This is the end of the debate between the two *gandharvas* about the merits and demerits of poets. We have cited it as an initial answer to the question we posed at the outset. Composing poetry in Sanskrit in seventeenth-century Tamil Nadu means, among other things, positioning oneself in relation to these wider literary universes: pan-Indian epics, cosmopolitan and local Sanskrit *kāvya*, scientific Sanskrit discourse, and vernacular poetry. A poet always faces the danger of being confined in a single, limited identity. This, in fact, is just what Kṛṣṇānu argues: a poet either inhabits the temple and puts the ‘pearls that belong on god’s crown’ where they belong, or he is entirely enslaved to ‘petty, crooked kings’. But Viśvāvasu’s defence allows the poet to transcend this dichotomy. Poetry has a wider scope. In fact, Venkaṭādhvarin in effect offers an implicit rationale for the special role of Sanskrit in this context. Sanskrit enables a unique connectedness of the various domains. It opens up a certain space and offers the poet a kind of freedom. In these verses, we find again and again words such as *jagat*, *jaganti*, *bhuvana*, *viśva*, all conveying a sense of a worldwide potential. Even a highly local milieu allows a skilled poet to dig deep, to tap into these underlying currents.

### What is Regional about Regional Sanskrit?

For nearly an entire millennium, Sanskrit served as what Sheldon Pollock has called a ‘cosmopolitan’ medium or *Koine*—a vehicle for elite communication and collective cultural imagination. Sanskrit poetry travelled and was enjoyed over a vast geographical expanse transcending the Indian subcontinent itself; at the same time, *kāvya* created its own internal, imaginative maps based largely on the grand landscape of the ancient Epic.<sup>10</sup> In a fundamental sense, these maps converged into a unified global vision of space, one which was ‘meant precisely to occlude local differences, or rather, to make the local universally standard’.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Pollock, pp. 103–8. ‘Sanskrit Literary Culture from the Imide Out’.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 108.

The term *mārga*, the Way, thus comes to signify this universal, classical vision of Sanskrit in contrast to the evolving local or vernacular cultures, known as *deśi*.<sup>12</sup>

We now want to argue that second-millennium Sanskrit poetry—which in fact comprises most of the existing *kāvya* corpus—is ‘regional’ in the following primary sense: serving as an available and localised medium in each and every region separately, Sanskrit participated along with the vernaculars in the project of inventing and elaborating distinctive regional cultures and identities. Far from occluding such regional distinctiveness or uniqueness, Sanskrit is now employed precisely to articulate it. Take Venkaṭādhvarin’s poem, discussed above, as a simple example. The two *gandharvas* frame or map by their flight plan a particular south Indian, mostly Tamil universe—not merely, or even primarily, in ‘hard’ geographical terms but rather a patterned, re-imagined, meaningful socio-aesthetic domain. Such a frame is meaningful to someone who lives within it, whose identity is partly shaped by it. And all this is achieved here in Sanskrit.

Every Sanskrit poem is, of course, local or regional in that it was composed in a particular place by a poet speaking some vernacular as his or her mother tongue (and writing in some local script). This is not, however, sufficient to qualify a text as ‘regional’ in our terms. We are talking about a much deeper, vital relation to a crystallising regional tradition—a relation we seek to define more precisely. First and foremost, a regional Sanskrit work aims at a local audience. It is not meant to travel the length and breadth of the cosmopolis, nor did it do so. In this, regional poetry differs from much erudite and theoretical Sanskrit composition of the second millennium, which does often reach the distant corners of the subcontinent, at times with amazing speed.<sup>13</sup> Sometimes we see this discrepancy in the works of a single author, such as Appayya Dīkṣita (sixteenth century), whose scholarly compositions travelled far and wide and produced almost immediate responses throughout the subcontinent, while his devotional poetry, *stotras*, was strictly limited to Tamil Nadu.<sup>14</sup>

The local audience we are positing is sensitive to a large series of textual features, operating simultaneously on various levels. Nearly all ‘regional’ Sanskrit texts show evidence of local linguistic materials, from the purely phonological stratum to morphology, lexis and syntax. The latter domain is perhaps the most salient: a work like Nīlakaṇṭha Dīkṣita’s *Ānanda-sāgara-stava*, to take one random example out of many hundreds, often reads as if it had been conceived in a Tamil syntactic structure and with specific Tamil syntagma and idioms. In fact, we very much lack a historically attuned, comprehensive view of Sanskrit syntax; each regional

<sup>12</sup> Note that this basic distinction between *mārga* and *deśi* was later internalised by the regional cultures themselves, so that each vernacular tradition has its own variants of Way and Place. See Narayana Rao and Shulman *Classical Telugu Poetry*, p. 24ff.

<sup>13</sup> See, e.g., Minkowski, *Manimakāśikhanda*. Nīlakaṇṭha Caturdhara’s.

<sup>14</sup> See Bronner, ‘Back to the Future’ and ‘Hymns as Curriculum’.

text deserves to be analysed from this perspective. In general, the very fixedness of Sanskrit morphology seems to have allowed poets a remarkable freedom in syntax.<sup>15</sup>

Vernacular metrical schemes penetrate into Sanskrit, reflecting the metrical sensibility and expectations of the listeners. We limit ourselves to two clear examples. The Telugu preference for consistently overriding the *yati*-breaks, so that musical hiatus and semantics become disjoined, works its way into Sanskrit texts such as Śrīdhara Veṅkaṭeśa's *Śāhendravilāsa* (late seventeenth century), as Raghavan has noticed in his introduction to this work.<sup>16</sup> More generally, the Dravidian technique of head-rhyme becomes prevalent in some Sanskrit poetry composed by speakers of south Indian languages such as Śākalya Malla in his *Udāra-rāghava* and Nīlakaṇṭha Dīkṣita in his *Śivalilārṇava*. Here again, specific, focused studies are in order.

In broader socio-linguistic terms, we might ask ourselves to what extent these linguistic entities that we think of as so neatly bounded and distinct—Sanskrit, Tamil, Telugu, etc.—were truly separate in the minds of those who used them. Let us state this as an explicit problem or theme: in a polyglossic environment, in which Sanskrit is one more available option for literary production and in which the vernacular has internalised huge chunks of Sanskrit just as Sanskrit has absorbed significant patterns and modes of the vernacular, how are we to understand the dynamics of the linguistic spectrum underlying a poet's choice of language?

What pertains to the level of language and metrics also holds true when we look at thematics. Regional poetry is primarily concerned with issues or themes rooted in the culture, society and history of specific places. To take another example from Nīlakaṇṭha Dīkṣita: his *Śivalilārṇava* is a *mahākāvya* that narrates the 64 amusements (*līlā*, Tamil *tiruvīlaiyāṭal*) of Sundareśvara-Śiva. Not only is this a Sanskrit *kāvya* rendition of an earlier Tamil equivalent, but the events described take place only in Madurai and are replete with highly specific allusions to local topography, cultic practice and historical tradition—all centred on the Minaksi-Sundaresvara temple in the heart of the city. Moreover, one of the core narratives of this tradition focuses on the body of ancient Tamil poetry known as 'Sangam literature' and on several of its most famous poets (Nakkīrar, Kapilar, and others). Thus, as in the case of Veṅkaṭādhvarin's *gandharvas*, here we have a Sanskrit *kāvya* that deliberately positions itself in relation to a classical vernacular corpus and explores this relation in highly complex ways. No one who is outside the orbit of this local south-Tamil tradition, detailed knowledge of which the work assumes, can truly appreciate the poetry. Or let us state this in a positive way: texts such as Nīlakaṇṭha Dīkṣita's are meant to give voice in Sanskrit to a local world with its own integrity, vitality and selectivity.

<sup>15</sup> We thank Velcheru Narayana Rao for this observation.

<sup>16</sup> Raghavan, *Sāhindra Vilāsa* of Śrīdhara Veṅkaṭeśa, p. 71.

As stated earlier, such local constructions in Sanskrit sometimes explicitly set themselves against classical or canonical images. Take, for example, one of the invocation verses in this same work, the *Śivalīlārṇava*:

*anviṣya khinnaṃ nigamān aśeṣān  
amī na mīnaṃ prathamam smarāmaḥ/  
anviṣyamānaṃ nigamair aśeṣair  
amba stumas te vāyam akṣi-mīnam!*<sup>17</sup>

There was this old Fish, exhausted  
from looking for all the Vedas.  
We don't think about him.  
What we praise,  
Mother,  
is what all the Vedas see,  
your two  
fish-eyes.

Formally, this poem is beautifully constructed of two closely parallel halves with a shared, singular vocabulary. There is the old, *purāṇic* tradition embodied by Viṣṇu's first avatar as the Fish; this tradition has been exhausted. The Fish went searching for the Vedas (in the depths of the sea); but the Vedas themselves search for a way to express the truth embodied in the fish-eyed goddess of Madurai, Minaksi, the main deity of the temple where the *Śivalīlārṇava* takes place. The hierarchy is clear. The younger, regional configuration has superseded the older canon and displaced its pan-Indian mythic canvas in favour of a highly localised ritual system. We see this most clearly in the vocative *amba* strategically placed at the start of *pāda* 4, thus turning the entire verse into a prayer to Mīnākṣī.

'Theme' is an elastic term which easily extends into religious or theological concerns of a regional nature, local politics and history, and specific social formations. Regional Sanskrit works naturally and repeatedly address such topics in all their specificity. In addition, they organise themselves into a whole ecology of local genres, some shared with other regions. For example, in eastern India we find Śaiva epigones of Jayadeva's *Gīta-govinda*. In Vijayanagara and Nāyaka times in the far south, a genre known as *abhyudaya*—tracing the daily ritual routine of the king, hour by hour—became popular. In the west of India, we find a whole set of Sanskrit biographies dedicated to the emblematic eighteenth-century figure of Śivāji. Then there are wider patterns or fashions in regional literary genres such as *sandeśa-kāvya*, discussed in detail below. Literary conventions emerging from a strong vernacular tradition make their way into local Sanskrit poetry—for example, the implicit references to the classical Tamil landscape divisions (*tiṇai*) in Venkaṭanātha's *Haṃsasandeśa* (see below). Regional poetic or aesthetic theories

<sup>17</sup> *Śivalīlārṇava* 1.3.



also seem to accompany literary production in Sanskrit no less than in the vernacular: think, for example, of the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava plays and their theory of *bhakti-rasa*, or of the Andhra school of *alaṅkāra-śāstra* and its interest in the sorcery of syllables as played out in Andhra Sanskrit works such as the *Udāra-rāghava*,<sup>18</sup> or of Ksemendra's idiosyncratic theory of metrics which he applies in his own Kashmir-flavoured poetry. Indeed, we could postulate that as a rule, wherever we find a mature 'Sanskrit of place', we will also find a commensurate body of literary theory unique to that area or at least some salient expression of metapoetic awareness.

Such localised poetic theories inevitably engage with classical or normative schemes and categories, and with canonical theoreticians. Thus the novel idea of *bhakti-rasa* developed in the writings of the Gauḍīya Vaisnavas taps into the dominant *rasa* discourse and aims at expanding its scope and meaning in relation to post-Caitanya literary output.<sup>19</sup> This kind of intertextual conversation inevitably generates a certain intellectual or experiential depth. The same kind of complexity is an essential feature of what we are calling regional Sanskrit poetry. Local themes, conventions, genres, concepts, names and places are consistently plotted against the old, rich cosmopolitan set of images and patterns. Such intertextuality is no mere technical feature but lies at the very heart of the poetic enterprise that concerns us. As argued earlier, Sanskrit still allows a poet to transcend his or her parochial context and reach out to a space shaped by a wider, inherited discourse. At the same time, Sanskrit enables a skilled poet to condense into the space of a single work—even a single verse—an entire world of specific associations, contents and meaning.

Here is another postulated theorem: 'Sanskrit of the place' is almost by definition an essay in depth, and as geographical extent shrinks—sometimes to the space of a single, minute royal court—there is a corresponding deepening and complexity. The vast range of cosmopolitan Sanskrit has become almost vertical. But a certain fundamental tension accompanies this move. The poet has a choice—he or she can always opt to maximise the universal aura of his poem at the expense of particular localised traces. Or he or she may go for a vision and language that are entirely immersed in a micro-context. Each such choice has its promise and its price. Take, for example, the *Kosala-Bhosaliya* of Śeṣācalapati, a poet from Marathaperiod Tanjavur (late eighteenth century). This work narrates in *śleṣa* style the life history of King Śāhāji together with that of Rāma. One cannot really understand this poem without detailed prior knowledge of Śāhāji's career, the names of the notables in his court, and so on. The whole point of the exercise is to superimpose this historical biography on that of the mythic model; but the price is poetry that, like an inscription, cannot travel beyond the confines of Śāhāji's court. This is one, rather extreme example. This tension may go to the other extreme as well.

<sup>18</sup> See Shulman, 'Notes on Camaikāra'.

<sup>19</sup> The interaction between Gauḍīya *alaṅkāra-śāstra* and the canonical theory has been studied by Gary Tubb, 'Poetry and play in Kavikarṇapurals play within the play', see also Haberman, Acting as a way of Salvation.

Thus an ostensibly localised work such as Gangādevi's *Madhuravijaya* (mid-fourteenth century), even seen by some scholars as 'historical', in fact sacrifices nearly all its specificity on the altar of a neo-classical, heavily patterned idiom.

These features of regionality—audience, language, theme and the inescapable tension bound up with their application—all change, sometimes quite dramatically, in the course of the 'vernacular millennium'. In short, each configuration has a history. Any attempt to study a given regional universe comprehensively must account for this history. The present article has a less ambitious programme. The remaining section offers an analysis of a single, particularly charming work which played a pivotal role in the evolution of Sanskrit poetry in the Tamil country.

### Clouds are History: Fly South

Venkaṭanātha, better known by his title Vedānta Deśika (1268–1368), was one of the major Tamil Śrīvaiṣṇava *ācāryas*, the major figure in the 'northern school' (*vaṭa-kalai*) of south Indian Śrīvaiṣṇavism in its period of orthodox synthesis and systematisation. He was, as Fred Hardy has noted in a penetrating essay, at once a highly gifted theologian-philosopher and a truly great poet.<sup>20</sup> His poetic works include a considerable output in Tamil, but his main *oeuvre* is a large corpus of Sanskrit poems, including two *mahākāvyas*, a drama, and many smaller works. In this respect—as a figure creative in both literary and erudite domains, in both languages, firmly anchored in a particular regional and religious milieu and at the same time connected to a trans-regional, classical idiom—Venkaṭanātha could be seen as the founding figure for a new tradition of southern Sanskrit poetry.

He seems to have envisioned himself in some such light. At the end of his much-loved century of poems addressed to the goddess Compassion, the *Dayāsataka*, he says:

*prāyo daye tvad-anubhāva-mahāmburāśau  
prācetasā-prabhṛtayo 'pi param taṭa-sthāḥ/  
tatrāvātīrṇam atala-sprśam āplutaṃ mām  
padma-pateḥ prahasānocitam ādriyethāḥ//*

Take all those classical poets—from Vālmīki on.

They came all the way up

to a vast ocean of experience,

the experience that is you,

but they never even dipped their toes.

Compassion: shouldn't you pay me

some attention? *I* jumped in,

<sup>20</sup> Hardy, 'The philosopher as poet', p. 277. Hence his other title, *kavi-tārkika-siṃha*: see Appayya Dikṣita's commentary to *Yādavābhyudaya*, introduction, v. 13.

I can't touch bottom,  
I'm drowning, and God  
sits there smiling.<sup>21</sup>

Clearly, a rather new poetic ideal is articulated here, one based on experience before all else. Even more striking, however, is the poet's bold statement that effectively delimits the entire Sanskrit literary tradition, with its first inventor, Vālmīki, and then places himself, Veṅkaṭanātha, on the other side of this demarcation. He is, it seems, the first poet to take the jump. For the first time, real depth—indeed, infinite depth—is possible. He is not disconnecting himself from the previous literary canon, but rather transcending it. This notion is echoed by a southern tradition according to which each of Veṅkaṭanātha's Sanskrit works was composed in order to out-do a major classical prototype—thus the *Yādavābhyudaya* is a new and improved *Raghuvamśa*, the *Saṅkalpasūryodaya* recalls the *Prabodhacandrodaya* of Kṛṣṇamiśra, and so on.<sup>22</sup>

Perhaps the outstanding example of this pairing is Veṅkaṭanātha's answer to Kālidāsa's *Meghasandēśa* [hereafter MS], the *Haṃsasandēśa* or Goose-Messenger [hereafter HS].<sup>23</sup> Kālidāsa's text is arguably his strongest and most sustained metapoetic statement and, as such, serves as a template for subsequent metapoetic reflection. The *Meghasandēśa* focuses from the start on the highly valued process of poetic imagination and on the linguistic and figurative means that enable it. At the same time, through the imagined trajectory of the cloud sent as a love-messenger from Rāmagiri in the south to the mythic Alakā in the Himalayas, the poet defines the core aesthetic geography of cosmopolitan Sanskrit. Kālidāsa follows a consistent, logical pattern as the poem unfolds. His hero, the *yakṣa*-lover exiled to south India, directs the cloud step by step through a set of idealised localities. Each of these is portrayed through descriptions of its natural setting, usually eroticised in elaborate figures, its deities and temples, and, above all, its women. The descriptions intensify continuously, even as the women develop from the relatively simple village girls in the early verses—transforms of the Prakrit heroines of Hāla's *Sattasai*, some centuries before Kālidāsa—to the urbane sophisticates of Ujjayinī and beyond. These perfected vignettes supply later Sanskrit poets with some of their richest and most accessible materials.

Although it has been argued that Kālidāsa was not the first to compose a messenger-poem, there is no doubt that the tradition views the genre as we know it as originating with the *Meghasandēśa*. We are, indeed, dealing with a genre,

<sup>21</sup> *Dayāśataka* 103.

<sup>22</sup> 'To vie with *Meghasandēśa*, *Raghuvamśa*, *Kumarasambhava*, *Bharavi* and *Magha*, he is said to have composed *Haṃsasandēśa*, *Yaduvamśa* (or *Yadavabhyudaya*), *Marasambhava*, *Bharavi* and *Phalguna*, but only the first two are now available' (Krishnamachariar, *History of Classical Sanskrit Literature*, p. 208).

<sup>23</sup> The *Haṃsasandēśa* has been studied in detail by Hopkins, 'Lovers, Messengers, and Beloved, Landscapes.

quite possibly the most productive defined genre in all of Sanskrit poetry. All *sandeśa-kāvya*s are modelled after Kālidāsa's: they are usually composed in *mandākrāntā* metre like the *Meghasandeśa*; they share a set of standard *topoi*, including the usual division into two halves—a description of the imagined journey followed by the recognition of the recipient of the message and its delivery—as well as a finer structure built around certain recurrent junctures.<sup>24</sup> This genre had an uneven course of evolution: beginning around the thirteenth century, we observe a 'boom' in the production of *sandeśa-kāvya*s spreading from south India to other regions, and becoming a speciality of certain cultural zones such as Kerala. We will be arguing that this genre, more than any other, heralds the crystallisation of an independent regional Sanskrit tradition.

Veṅkaṭanātha's *Haṃsasandeśa* is a superb example of this trend. Like all the other message-poems, it follows Kālidāsa's prototype in metre, structure, size and narrative logic. Indeed, the first thing that strikes the reader is a truly astonishing parallelism on all levels, right down to that of actual phrasing. Veṅkaṭanātha employs words, compounds, idioms and phrases that are immediately recognisable by anyone who knows the *Meghasandeśa*. Moreover, this linguistic repetition often comes in precisely parallel verses or even identical or nearly identical metrical placement. Look at the first few verses: in verse 1 of HS, we find *janaka-tanayā\**, which famously appears in the first verse of MS; the sequence *sa kāmī* (HS 1) repeats MS 2 (in both cases at the end of a *pāda*); verse 2 in both poems ends with *dadarśa*; *kāntāśleṣād* in HS 4 echoes *kaṅṭhāśleṣa-[praṇayini]* in MS 3 (in both cases at the opening of *pāda* 4), and so on. This is not a merely linguistic or formal matter; the familiar vocabulary with its set phrases serves closely corresponding expressive purposes and a shared, repeated progression. Thus the first verse tells us of the male lover's separation from his beloved; in the second he catches sight of a potential messenger; the fifth verse explicitly addresses the surprising choice of such a messenger (a cloud, a goose); and so on. This correspondence in structure does not always work on a verse-to-verse basis, but it consistently operates at highly-charged junctures and transitions and, more generally, produces a pattern of reflections, echoes and dense intertextuality. In short, the MS is a powerful presence throughout the HS, moment by moment; in a sense, it supplies the material from which much of the HS is formed.

But such similarities should not mislead us. Veṅkaṭanātha's acts of repetition are often acts of meaningful and purposeful inversion. Take the simple, obvious matter of directionality: both poems begin somewhere in the middle of the Indian subcontinent (Rāmagiri for the MS, Kiṣkindhā for HS); but the messengers go in opposite directions. The cloud heads north to Alakā; the goose flies south to Laṅkā. One reason for this distinction lies in another significant inversion—that of figure and ground. In the background of Kālidāsa's basic situation of love-in-separation

<sup>24</sup> See the list by Dharmagupta, a commentator on *Śukasandeśa*, cited by Unni, *Meghasandeśa of Kalidāsa*, 16–21.

we find the separated lovers of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, Rāma and Sītā (also the messenger Hanumān); several allusions, beginning with the very first verse, ensure that the listener gets the intertextual point. This background reemerges as the central framework for the HS. Here the isolated, lonely lover is, in fact, Rāma—just after Hanumān has brought him news of Sītā, who will now become the projected listener of the message. The poem opens on the morning after an endless night, ‘long as an eon’ (*kalpākāram*), in which Rāma has been processing what Hanumān has reported, and also making plans for immediate action. This is the moment when Rāma sees the goose.

A whole set of further transformations follows from the above. The MS begins at the onset of the monsoon and is dominated by the thematics of the rainy season. The HS opens with the end of the monsoon and is pervaded by the imagery of *śarad*, ‘autumn’. Geese conventionally fly north to Mānasa Lake in Tibet during the monsoon and return south in *śarad*. Thus while Kālidāsa repeatedly mentions geese as the companions of the north-bound cloud, Veṅkaṭanātha inverts this relation: autumn clouds now accompany the south-bound goose. Indeed, he takes pains to make this reversal unambiguous, explicit and conspicuous. For example, look at MS 11 and HS 13:

*kartuṃ yac ca prabhavati mahīm ucchilīndhrām avandhyām  
tac chrutvā te śravaṇa-subhagaṃ garjitaṃ mānasotkāḥ/  
ā kailāsād bisa-kisalaya-ccheda-pātheyavantaḥ  
sampatsyante nabhasi bhavato rāja-haṃsāḥ sahāyaḥ// [MS 1.11]<sup>25</sup>*

Your thunder alone makes the earth teem  
with mushrooms. Its roar music to their ears,  
kindling a yearning for Lake Manasa,  
the regal geese, bearing bits of lotus fiber  
for the journey, will keep you company in the sky  
all the way to Mount Kailasa.

*sūkṣmākārair dinakara-karaiḥ kalpitāntaś-śalākāḥ  
śāropāntāś śatamakha-dhanuś-śeṣa-citrāṃśukena/  
ūdhāḥ paścād ucita-gatinā vāyunā rāja-haṃsa  
chatrāyeraṇ nabhasi bhavataś śāradā vārivāhāḥ// [HS 1.13]*

With the thin rays of sunlight as its ribs  
and bits of Indra’s rainbow to dye the cloth  
at its outer rim, and Wind to carry it behind you,  
regal goose,  
at a stately pace, the autumn clouds  
will turn themselves into a royal parasol  
that fills the sky.

<sup>25</sup> Citations from MS refer to the Kale, 1991 edition, with Mallinātha’s commentary.

Perhaps the key to the formal affinity between the two verses lies in the shared formula *nabhasi bhavataḥ*, found in the identical slot in the middle of the fourth *pāda*. It seems as if Veṅkaṭanātha planted this phrase with the express aim of calling attention to the close inversion: in Kālidāsa's verse the sky is dominated by the monsoon cloud with its resonant thunder, which fertilises the entire earth and signals to the geese that it is time to pack for their journey; in the HS, this same royal goose, *rājahaṃsa*, takes over the sky as if he were a real king progressing in ritual procession through his kingdom. The goose occupies the centre with the cloud enfolding him from all sides, driven from behind by the wind, a servant bearing the regal parasol. Note that Kālidāsa's image of the convex mushroom has expanded to gigantic proportions as the imagined heavenly parasol, *chatra*—appearing here as an eloquent denominative verb at the juncture of *pāda* 4. Even the 'bits of Indra's rainbow' are lifted from the MS (verse 15), which has a 'bit of Indra's rainbow' (*dhanuṣ-khaṇḍam ākhaṇḍalasya*) emerging from an anthill, *valmīkāgra*, and serving to dye the dark cloud with many colours.

There is much more to this technique of calling attention to what we might term *inversive*—or even *subversive*—intertextual reference. Clouds, for instance, turn up repeatedly, and never innocently, in the HS. Consider the famous meta-poetic verse at the opening of the MS where the narrator deliberately comments on the sheer madness of the conceit of sending a cloud as a messenger:

*dhūma-jyotiḥ-salila-marutāṃ saṃnipātaḥ kva meghaḥ  
sandeśārthāḥ kva paṭu-karaṇaiḥ prāṇibhiḥ prāpaṇṭyāḥ/  
ity autsukyād aparigaṇayan guhyakas taṃ yayāce  
kāmārtā hi praṇaya-kṛpaṇāś cetanācetanēṣu// 1.5*

Smoke, light, water and wind put together:  
what does a cloud have to do with such a serious matter?  
Doesn't it take a person, fully awake, to deliver a message?  
But the Yakṣa didn't think it through when he made his request.  
Lovers, if they're miserable enough, can't tell  
the living from the still.

Here is Veṅkaṭanātha's response to the same challenge:

*kṛtvā tasmin bahumatim asau bhūyasīm añjaneyād  
gādhonmādaḥ praṇaya-padavīm prāpa vārtānabhiḥ/  
viśleṣeṇa kṣubhita-manasāṃ megha-sāila-drumādau  
yācñā-dainyaṃ bhavati kim uta kvāpi saṃvedanārhe// 1.5*

A goose knows nothing of messages, yet  
Rāma approached him with great respect.  
(Not even Hanumān received such honour.)  
In his utter madness, he found a way

into the bird's heart. People shaken by separation  
are reduced to begging help from clouds,  
mountains, trees, and so on—to say nothing  
of sentient creatures.

We have the same question, the same logical structure, the same poetic figure (*arthântara-nyāsa*); some of the vocabulary is shared; even the verse number is the same. And yet—there is a subtle difference in tone. For all the pathos, Veṅkaṭanātha's verse also makes us smile. We happen to know of a case where someone asked even a cloud to be his messenger. In fact, as will become clear later on, this obvious reference to the famous intertext also includes a slight 'dig'. Rāma's choice of messenger, we are told, actually makes better sense. And in the course of noticing this similarity and this difference, including the irony that accompanies the intertextual conversation, one begins to sense the opening up of a certain unfamiliar, promising space.

The irony soon deepens. Clouds keep turning up in pointed reference. Look at verse 1.10:

vācālānām iva jaḍa-dhiyām. sat-kavau dūra-yāte  
kailāsāya tvayi gatavati kṣībatām āśritānām/  
sammodas te pathi pariṇamec candrakair ujjhitānām  
*meghâpāye vipina-śikhinām. vīkṣya vācam. -yamatvam//*

In the absence of any noble bird,  
these bird-brained peacocks  
never shut up. They go mad.  
It happened when you took off  
for Kailāsa. But clouds are history.  
As you make your way south,  
you'll have the utter pleasure  
of seeing these peacocks, shorn of their feathers  
and silent.

Sanskrit peacocks screech and dance in ecstasy as soon as they catch sight of the monsoon clouds. This verse seemingly celebrates the relief one gets when the rains subside and the peacocks stop their annoying clamour. However, there is another, highly conspicuous linguistic register operating in the verse. *Sat-kavi*, 'noble bird' (in *pāda* 1) normally means 'a good poet'—so, in the absence of such a poet, the *vipina-śikhinaḥ* or 'boorish Brahmins', have a field day, chattering idiocies that deafen the ears. They only quieten down when the clouds—or *the* Cloud—retreat and the true poet returns. Suddenly they are shorn of their phony feathers, and the real poet can enjoy their naked silence.

Once again Veṅkaṭanātha highlights an inversion in space and time. We are, in effect, in a sequel to the MS; the season has changed from monsoon to autumn,

and the goose is now headed back south after his north-bound flight during the rains. On top of this change we have a rather direct attack on a whole crowd of lousy poets, a common topos in *kāvya*.<sup>26</sup> However, the most striking feature of this verse is the strategically placed phrase *meghâpāye*, literally ‘at the departure of the cloud’, at the start of *pāda* 4—always the point of greatest emphasis in a Tamil poem—which quite explicitly names the significant intertext and at the same time sets it aside. Kālidāsa and his cloud are history. So are the chatterbox-poets who followed in Kālidāsa’s path, like the peacocks that welcome the cloud-messenger in his MS (1.23, 1.35). (Recall Venkaṭanātha’s boast about plunging into the ocean that none of his predecessors dared enter.) It is as if Venkaṭanātha were telling us that the MS had to be superseded so that his own composition could emerge in all its uniqueness. The Cloud is gone, although its absence remains as a constant presence.

Pointed references to clouds continue to appear throughout the poem. For instance, the goose is given a choice of two routes to Lanka—one, the easy and safe one along the western coast of India (Kerala), is nonetheless *nitya-varṣa*, always rainy, and thus, like everything else that has to do with clouds, to be avoided (1.18). In verse 1.50 the auspicious Pāṇḍya land is well-watered by clouds that are ‘nervous because they remember the fact that they were once imprisoned by a local king’ (as we know from the Madurai tradition).<sup>27</sup> Verse 4 of the second section (*āśvāsa*) describes the tears shed by the women of heaven, who have been abducted and imprisoned by Rāvaṇa, at a moment defined as *vyapagata-ghane*—the disappearance of the clouds. And so on—we will cite another striking example shortly. A certain fascination with clouds and the rainy season, usually mentioned with a somewhat ironic twist or a slight edge, comes through in a manner perhaps emblematic of the wider intertextual relationship and sustains the general inversion of season and direction.

### Deep Space and Heavy Time

Of the two possible routes that Rāma outlines for the goose, the second (less water-soaked one) carries the messenger over the Tamil country; this trajectory is dangerously fascinating, and Rāma has to beg the goose not to lose too much time enjoying its various attractions. Needless to say, his supplication has, for the poem’s readers or listeners, the opposite effect of Rāma’s intention; the subsequent verses will linger over these very attractions, thereby fully mapping the imagined cultural space that will displace Kālidāsa’s poetic geography.<sup>28</sup> We begin to see that the temporal and spatial shifts we have mentioned go hand-in-hand with the explicit

<sup>26</sup> Eg. *Vāsavadattā* of Subandhu, *pīṭhikā*, 7–8; *Kādambarī* of Bāṇa, 5–6; in Telugu, this topos became a standard convention, the *ku-kavi-ninda*, at the opening of *kavya* texts.

<sup>27</sup> See, eg., *Tiruvilaiyāṭar-purāṇam* of Parañcōti Muṇivar, 19.

<sup>28</sup> See discussion by Hopkins, ‘Lovers, Messengers’.



thematisation of the southern (Tamil) region with a select set of landscapes, communities, narratives, divinities and pilgrimage sites. Thus the goose is directed to fly southeast towards Tirupati and Kālahasti (the latter mentioned only by implication), and thence to Kāñcīpuram (described at some length), the Chola region, Śrīraṅgam and Tiruccirāppallī, the no-man's land of Kaḷḷar bandits, Madurai, the Tāmraparṇi River basin, and finally the ocean that separates the Tamil zone from the ultimate destination, Laṅkā.

There are several things to be said about this route and the selectivity it implies. The flight of the goose weaves together elements belonging to distinct registers of regional identity—the major polities that came to be seen as constituting the Tamil political order (Pallavas/Tuṅḍīras, Cholas and Pāṇḍyas); the conventionalised landscapes (*tiṇai*) of old Tamil poetry (thus the mountain region of Tirupati fits the ancient *kuṛiṅci* landscape; the Kaḷḷar land is a direct transposition of the *pālai* wilderness; the Chola delta is the prototypical *marutam* zone; and the exquisite description of the southern coast is *neytal*); an idealised social spectrum including peasant women, pearl-fishers, thieves, Yogis, warriors and gods; the great Vaiṣṇava temples beginning, appropriately, with Tirupati and moving through the Varadarāja shrine at Kāñcīpuram (Hastigiri) and Śrīraṅgam to Aḷakarmalai outside Madurai. All this is plotted on the grid of major rivers, mountains and cities.

Here too, in the very heart of a specifically southern trajectory, Kālidāsa's intertext retains its vitality. Consider the following verse:

*ikṣu-cchāye kisalaya-mayaṃ talpam ātasthuṣhṅām  
sallāpais tair mudita-manasām śāli-samrakṣikānām/  
karnāṅdhra-vyatikara-vaśāt karbure gūti-bhede  
muhyantīnām madana-kaluṣaṃ maugdham āsvādayethāḥ// 1.20*

In the shade of the sugar-cane,  
lying on flower-beds,  
women who guard the paddy fields,  
happily chatting about this and that,  
get carried away singing songs spiced  
with a mix of Kannada and Telugu.  
You should savour their innocence  
with its tinge of eros.

The deep structure of this verse is fashioned by reference to several verses in the MS which mention women from the geographical and social periphery—the innocent Siddha women who think the cloud is a piece of the mountain torn off by the wind (1.14), the country girls (*janapada-vadhū*) who work in the fields (1.16), the tribal women (*vanacara-vadhū*) who live in mountain shacks (1.19), and the flower-pickers (*puṣpa-lāvī*) on the outskirts of Vidiśā who enjoy the shade offered by the cloud (*chāyā-dāna*, 1.27). The latter theme is picked up directly by

the opening compound of HS 1.20, *ikṣu-cchāye*. In all the messenger's encounters with these women, there is a clear erotic dimension; the cloud exchanges looks and liquids with the young women down below. The HS has its own set of encounters, similarly structured, but with a very different flavour (including a somewhat puritanical note, appropriate to the orthodox Srivaisnava matrix).

However, the transformation is, as always, no mere technicality. Kālidāsa has a vision of the central path or way, *marga*, from its periphery in the Deccan plateau in the south via its centre in Ujjayinī and the plains to the northern mountain ranges. It is even possible that the starting point in the Deccan is implicitly associated, in a metapoetic perspective, with the Prakrit poetry of Hāla and his successors. For Veṅkaṭanātha by contrast, the *marga* has been radically reconfigured, oriented southwards, and made to incorporate a very different conceptual scheme of centre and periphery—one that specifically includes the south Indian linguistic regions and their poems. Recall that, to begin with, the goose was given a choice between two itineraries (*mārgau ... dvau*), the western and the eastern, with a strong recommendation that he choose the latter. Here there is an explicit, realistic reference to popular songs in Telugu and Kannada, along with a suggestion that these languages have their own genre-ecology (*gīti-bheda*). But the full resonance of such a choice, or of such observations, depends on the juxtaposition with Kalidasa's northern route and its social landscape. The result is a verse which is not merely beautiful in its own right—note the subtle and moving progression from *ikṣu-*, sugarcane, at the very beginning to the optative verb of savouring, *āsvadayethāḥ*, at the very end—but also saturated with overtones emanating from Kālidāsa's poem. In short, we have a perfectly constructed vignette articulated in the classical syntactic-metrical patterns of the MS, which is at once convincingly local in topos and image and yet expanded vertically and topologically. It is almost as if a vector that begins somewhere near Tirupati spins northwards to include the outskirts of Vidiśā, which it enfolds in its arc, before turning back to the Tamil country. We are looking at but one small example; such spatial effects, with their inherent dynamism and depth, pervade the HS.

This spatial depth is constantly accompanied by similar temporal complexities. Let us think, for a moment, about the time-frame of Kālidāsa's MS: the poem unfolds in what appears to be an extended present moment, in which the poet imagines the *yakṣa* hero imagining the route of his cloud-messenger in what is primarily a forward movement into the projected future. One simple indication of this mode is the frequent use of the optative and the future. Of course, this poetic present is enriched by continuous reference to a familiar mythic past, which has left concrete remnants at nearly every stage of the journey. Thus the footprints of Rāma are evident on the slopes of Rāmagiri (MS 1.12) where the water of the mountain streams is still fragrant with the memory of Sitā's bathing (1.1); at Ujjayinī, Śiva's *tāṇḍava* dance is just about to begin as evening falls (1.37); the battlefield of Kurukṣetra bears even now the arrows shot by Arjuna in the *Mahābhārata* war (1.51); and as the cloud reaches the Himalayan region, he can still see the damage

that Rāvaṇa inflicted on Mount Kailāsa by lifting and shaking it with his many arms (1.61). This mythic past becomes an integral part of present experience; but the temporal trajectory is, nonetheless, relatively simple.

Not so in the HS. Here we have at least two, sometimes conflicting, present ‘tenses’. The poet, like Kālidāsa, composes his work and communicates to us in his own poetic present reality. The local world he portrays is, after all, one he knows intimately, from direct experience. Again and again the reader hears about something that he or she recognises as corresponding to a familiar reality. But the poem’s imagined present is retrojected precisely into that mythic past that informs the MS. We are back with Rāma, at a very specific juncture in the *Rāmāyaṇa* narrative—the morning after the long night following Hanumān’s return from Lankā. From this point in time, the poem’s hero or speaker, Rāma, projects a future flight-plan and arrival, including a message to Sītā which promises future events that we, the listeners, know to be far in the past (and to have been described in later sections of the epic itself). Rāma assures Sītā that he will soon kill Rāvaṇa and rescue her. But these concurrent presents are only the external contours for the dizzying temporal movements of this text. For one thing, Kālidāsa’s intertext, which we have seen to be continuously and explicitly active within the HS, is positioned somewhere *between* the two present modes we have just described, referring simultaneously back to the *Rāmāyaṇa* and, as it were, forward to the goose.

Take one striking example:

*lakṣmī-vidyul-lalita-vapuṣaṃ tatra kāruṇya-pūrṇaṃ  
mā bhaiṣīs tvam marakata-śilā-mecaḥkaṃ vīkṣya megham/  
śuddhair nityaṃ paricita-padas tvādrśair deva-haṃsair  
haṃsī-bhūtas sa khalu bhavatām anvavāyāgra-janmā// 1.33*

Lakṣmī, a streak of lightning, graces a body  
full of compassion and dark as emerald.

Don’t be afraid when you see  
*that* cloud, at whose feet  
great seers, birds of your feather,  
cluster in worship.

It’s a cloud turned goose—  
the firstborn in your line.

If it sounds strange to you, so it should. The cloud in question, at least on one level, is the dark icon of Varadarāja-svāmi/Viṣṇu in Kāñcīpuram, where our travelling goose arrives as a pilgrim at Rāma’s suggestion. On the breast of this image we find Lakṣmī, who is thus appropriately likened to a flash of lightning within the dark monsoon cloud. At the feet of this emerald-coloured Viṣṇu lie the most accomplished Śrīvaiṣṇava devotees, the *nitya-sūris*, who have been granted

the honorific title of *deva-haṃsa*, ‘heavenly geese’ (*haṃsa* or *paramahaṃsa* are common titles for advanced ascetics or seers). What is more, the cloud-cum-god himself has become yet another goose in the sense that he is identical to the supreme reality, referred to already in the Upanisads by this same word, *haṃsa*. As such, he must be the First Goose, and hence the founder of the entire species of which our messenger is the latest representative. So, as the modern commentator S. Narayana Iyengar remarks, there are three conspicuous meanings for the word *haṃsa* in this one verse: ‘a swan [sic], a pure ascetic, [and] the Supreme Spirit’.<sup>29</sup> But there is a fourth one as well: for clearly Kālidāsa’s cloud is once again invoked in the most direct metapoetic manner conceivable. The cloud-messenger has truly become a goose, after serving as the firstborn in the line or genre of messenger-poems.

Consider the breathtaking temporal shifts in this verse. Rāma directs the goose to another form of himself. The goose goes there only to find a *haṃsa* already (potentially) there. The cloud is both history and future—also present. Even on the most basic linguistic level, these temporal modes are conflated: the goose sees (*vikṣya*) the ‘cloud’ (in the absolute), and is told not to be afraid (imperative directed towards the future, *mā bhaiṣīḥ*), for the cloud has already become, in the past, a goose (*haṃsī-bhūtaḥ*). But this act of becoming in effect states very strongly Vēnkaṭanātha’s claim for poetic superiority—at the same time acknowledging the enormous debt he owes to the original model. It is also very striking that a description of the current iconic image of the god in Kāñcīpuram is given to us as a future projection from out the past which is the poem’s present.

Sometimes this kind of temporal looping is even more intricate. Consider the following description of the Śrīraṅga-vimāna situated on the edge of the Candrapuṣkariṇī tank in Śrīraṅgam:

*tīre tasyā viracita-padaṃ sādhubhir sevyamānaṃ  
śraddhā-yogad vinamita-tanuś śeṣa-pūṭhaṃ bhajethāḥ/  
yasminn asmat-kula-dhanatayā saumya sāketa-bhājah  
sthānaṃ bhāvyaṃ munibhir uditam śrīmato raṅga-dhāmaḥ// 1.45*

It was installed on the bank of this lake.

It is worshipped by good people.

Make sure you go there, too,

my friend,

and bow in good faith

to the Śeṣa Throne.

For, as the sages have predicted,

Śrī Ranganātha—now stationed in Ayodhyā,

fortunately for my family—

will come to sit there

some day.

<sup>29</sup> Notes to *Haṃsasandeśa* 1955, pp. 35–36.

The verse starts off with a simple, linear progression of the Śeṣa Throne through time. It was once installed beside the Candra-puṣkariṇī. It is currently being worshipped by *sādhus*. The goose would do well to pay it a visit on his route. All this is reported from the perspective of the poetic present, i.e., Rāma's perspective as he sends the goose off to Laṅkā. However, this poetic present stands in stark contrast to the poet's own present, in which the Śrīraṅga-vimāna is perfectly in place as one of the two most significant Vaiṣṇava pilgrimage sites in the southern peninsula. Veṅkaṭanātha, like everyone in his intended audience, knows very well how the *vimāna* arrived there: after having been kept for years in Ayodhyā, it was given by Rāma to Vibhīṣaṇa as a gift in return for his help and loyalty in the Laṅkā war. Vibhīṣaṇa tried to take it south to Laṅkā, but on the way he put it down in Śrīraṅgam in order to celebrate a festival with the Chola king. When he tried to pick it up, he could not move it; the god appeared and informed him that the *vimāna* would remain permanently at Śrīraṅgam as a result of *tapas* performed by the Kāveṛī River, and that he himself intended to stay there, too.<sup>30</sup> The only problem is that this entire prior history of the *vimāna* still lies in Rāma's future. Rāma has yet to meet Vibhīṣaṇa, so the Śeṣa Throne should, in theory, be empty. Indeed, the *vimāna* is still parked in Ayodhyā, with the god's image inside it.

On the other hand, the goose has no reason to visit the Śrīraṅgam temple if it is not the home of Śrī Raṅganātha. So the two presents, with their separate needs and realities, conflict. A solution is found by positing Rāma's prior knowledge, based on what the sages have predicted, of the future to be enacted at this site. This makes the goose a time-traveller who is, in effect, visiting the future. And once again he is about to visit the very person who is sending him off—for Rāma is contemplating the future of another aspect of himself, an aspect he apparently values and even worships. He is directing the goose to perform a prophetic or proleptic act of *pūjā* to his currently unoccupied throne—to bow to someone who is not yet there. We might say that Rāma is sending regards to other parts of himself that will come into existence in a future time that we, the listeners or readers, already inhabit. In this sense, we are living in the future.

Note that the goose is moving in at least two temporal vectors at once. The poet has, as it were, sent him backwards into the past, while the hero of the poem propels him into the future. 'Goose-time' apparently is capable of such loops. Think again of the relative temporality of this *sandeśa-kāvya* vis-à-vis its model. It takes place both before and after the MS. On the one hand, the *Rāmāyaṇa* lies in the mythic memory of the *yakṣa* who, at one point, even compares *his* messenger, the cloud, to Rāma's original messenger, Hanumān (2.40). Thus the HS throws us back in time to a point before the cloud's mission—indeed, to that point in time when Hanumān's mission has just taken place. On the other hand, the HS is clearly a sequel to the MS and structures itself on all levels accordingly. Moreover, it takes place, as the poet repeatedly tells us, when clouds have 'become history'.

<sup>30</sup> Śrīraṅga-māhātmya 7–9; Irāmāvatāram of Kampan 6.38., 17–20; Shulman, *Tamil Temple Myths*, pp. 49–50.

To complicate matters still further, in the very next verse of the HS Rāma tells the goose that he, Rāma, is full of longing for this primordial divinity ‘lying on Śeṣa, like an emerald in a box, together with the daughter of the ocean’ (*mañjūṣāyām marakataṃ iva bhrājamānaṃ tad-antaḥ/ ceto dhāvaty upahita-bhujaṃ śeṣa-bhoge sayānaṃ dirghâpâṅgaṃ jaladhi-tanayâ-jîvitam devam âdyam*, 1.46). The box containing the emerald is this same Śrīraṅga *vimāna*—still not in place in the previous verse. Sītā, who in ‘reality’ is languishing in captivity in Laṅkā, far from Rāma, is actually united with him in Śrīraṅgam, as Rāma envisages the future shrine. The box is both there and not there, both empty and full. Moreover, the theme of separation, embodied so dramatically by Rāma and Sītā at this point in the epic, has here been transposed into the longing that (i) any devotee feels for Viṣṇu at Śrīraṅgam, and (ii) that Viṣṇu himself, in his Rāma avatar, feels for this other, perhaps fuller, yet fully localised part of himself.

Time, in this text, is heavily saturated with multi-directional movement. It enfolds the reader in loop after loop. This temporal richness is in part an outcome of the coming together of precisely those three intertextual canons with which, following Veṅkaṭâdhvarin, we began this essay—the great Sanskrit epics (here the story of Rāma), the Sanskrit classics (Kâlidâsa’s MS), and vernacular poetry (in this case the *sthala-purâṇas* of temples like Varadarâja-svâmi at Kâñcipuram or Śrī Raṅga-nâtha as well as Kampan’s *Irâmâvatâram* and, less explicitly, the Śrīvaiṣṇava Tamil *Divya-prabandham*). When all three layers mix in a single poetic moment, immense depth becomes possible in terms of both time and space. Among other things, this depth enables a certain freedom; the skilled poet takes us very far, and in radically different directions simultaneously—and this at a time when the actual circulation of such works is becoming increasingly restricted in sheer geographic terms. We postulate that such ‘vertical’ effects, with their astonishing temporal and spatial richness, are characteristic of regional Sanskrit poetry. In the particular case we are examining, this richness can also serve a further experiential, religious purpose. The fractured, highly complex, multi-directional temporality opened up for the listener changes his or her awareness and thereby situates this listener within, or closer to, the competing, richly interwoven, paradoxically concurrent temporal dimensions of the god himself.

### ‘We Live Together in a Single Home’

Veṅkaṭanâtha’s change of direction—the southward thrust—leads to one complication. The poem reaches its culmination in Laṅkā, as imagined by Rāma, a Laṅkā constructed by the poet in exact parallel to Kâlidâsa’s Himalayan Alakâ. Verse by verse, the second half of the HS takes up verbal, figurative and syntactic patterns from the second half of the MS. For Kâlidâsa, Alakâ is in all respects the highest point—in terms of physical elevation, divine presences and emotional intensity. This is where the *yakṣiṇī* beloved lives, and Śiva, too, Kâlidâsa’s *iṣṭa-devatâ*, is personally present there. For Veṅkaṭanâtha, things are not so straightforward.

True, Laṅkā is a site of remarkable beauty and opulence and that of Sītā's enforced residence. Like Alakā, Laṅkā is situated on the slopes of a jewelled mountain (Suvela); it rivals the heavenly city of the gods in brilliance and fragrance; in fact, elements of that divine city, such as the Mandāra trees or the gods' wives and courtesans, have been physically transplanted to Laṅkā by Rāvaṇa, the half-brother of Kubera, who rules the sister-city of Alakā.

However, once again a surprising complexity comes through. The emotional climax of the HS unfolds in a setting primarily associated with the moral depravity of the Rākṣasa demons. Laṅkā is the Rākṣasa capital of the world. Thus, from the very beginning of the poem, some ambivalence colours the destination:

*sthānair divyair upacita-guṇām candanāraṇya-ramyām  
muktā-sūtiṃ malaya-marutām mātaram dakṣiṇâśām/  
asmat-prītyai janaka-tanayā-jīvitârthaṃ ca gacchann  
ekam rakṣaḥ-padam iti sakhe doṣa-leśam sahetāḥ// 1.9*

Fly to the South.

It has plenty of fantastic temples.

Beautiful sandalwood groves.

It's the birthplace of pearls

and the mother of the Malaya breeze.

Go there and save the life of Janaka's daughter.

Do it for me.

There's only one little thing I should mention:

It's crawling with Rākṣasas.

We have no doubt that the slightly ironic tone is entirely intentional. This poet is both self-aware and open about the twist he gives to the journey's terminal stop. In fact, the irony and the ambivalence become stronger in the second half of the poem, when the goose is given specific directions about Laṅkā. Each verse is finely nuanced to accommodate this complexity. To give one example, Laṅkā has both been reduced to ash (by Hanumān's burning tail, a fire that is a transposition of Sītā's fiery grief: *maithilī-śoka-vahner bhasmī-bhūtām pavana-tanayā-snehinā pāvakena*) and instantly rebuilt by the architect of the gods, Viśvakarman, whose restoration of the city outdoes his earlier architectural achievements (*pratyādiṣṭa-prathama-racanam*, 2.5).<sup>31</sup> Or take the verse that immediately follows:

*madhye tasyā niśicara-pates sadma ruddhāntarikṣam  
yugmaṃ neyair divi sumanasām. sevyamānaṃ vimānaiḥ/  
kārâgāraṃ vibudha-sudrśāṃ vīkṣamāmo vicitraṃ  
śoka-prīti-vyatikaravatīṃ vakṣyase citta-vṛttim// 2.6*

<sup>31</sup> Note that Rāma assumes that Viśvakarman and others *will have rebuilt* the city, *samvidhasyanti*—a simple future clearly meant as predictive or future perfect, a common Tamil construction.

At the centre of town, you'll see  
 the palace of the demon king, so high  
 it dominates the sky.  
 Outside are parked his fancy  
 double-seated private jets,  
 stolen from the gods.  
 Nearby is the splendid prison  
 where the women of heaven are inmates.  
 Don't be surprised if you feel confused  
 by a mixture of sorrow and fascination.

The mixture is real and consistent and contrasts with the wholly positive image of Alakā in the MS. At the same time, the parallelism persists (note that the *vimāna*-jets, including the most famous of them all, the Puṣpaka-*vimāna*, actually belong to Kubera of Alakā). Laṅkā seems to be physically reaching up towards heaven; Rāvaṇa's tall mansion is a replica of the skyscrapers (*abhraṇ-lihâgrâḥ prāsādâḥ*, 2.1) in Kālidāsa's Alakā. Still, the irony is somewhat tongue in cheek, and the ambivalence subsides as the poem zooms in on Sīta and the message is delivered.

Let us sample two verses from the end of the masterful, profound depiction of Sītā's state, which begins with the verb *manye*—'I think she must be ...'—in verse 2.13 and runs through verse 2.22:

*vaktuṃ mārgaṃ kila vasumatīm jagmuṣas tat-padâbjād  
 mañjīrasya tvad-upama-ruter dakṣiṇasyâsya tulyam/  
 aṅkârūdhe caraṇa-kamale mat-kareṇopadheyam  
 vāmaṃ Śākhā-śikhara-nihitaṃ vīksya gāḍhaṃ viṣaṇṇām // 2.20*

This right anklet of hers—  
 the one that rings like *your* voice—  
 walked away from her foot  
 and came down to earth as if to show me  
 the way. Its twin—the one that I  
 should be tying to her lotus-like foot  
 when it comes to rest on my lap—  
 is hidden high on a branch above her.  
 I'm sure that whenever she looks at it,  
 her heart sinks.

Follow the movement. We now have two eloquent messengers—the goose, whose call recalls the tingling of Sītā's anklets (as we were informed already in verse 1.3, *tan-mañjīra-pratīma-ninada*), and the right anklet itself, which Sītā cast off from her foot while being kidnapped by Rāvaṇa in order to give Rāma some sign of her whereabouts. These messengers fly off in opposite directions. The anklet 'walked away' towards Rāma, somewhere over Kiṣkindhā in the Deccan;



the goose will shortly be taking off in a southerly direction. We also have two anklets—the right one, which Rāma holds in his hand, restored to him by Sugrīva, and the left one that is secretly kept by Sītā, hidden on a branch of the *śimśapā* tree in Lañkā under which she is kept captive. Rāma looks down at ‘his’ anklet; Sītā looks up at hers. Moreover, each anklet belongs to a different temporal direction. The right one points backwards in time to the moment of kidnapping; the left one embodies the future moment of intimate reunion, when Rāma will tie it to Sītā’s foot.<sup>32</sup> Taken together, we have in concrete form both separation and union, despair and hope. To our taste, this verse has a power, derived from the amazing condensation of contrastive vectors that goes beyond even Kālidāsa’s beautiful description of the *yakṣiṇī* in Alakā.

Rāma’s ultimate visualisation of Sītā in this series takes us inwards to *her* intense visualisation of him:

*ceto-vṛttiṃ śamayati bahis sārva-bhaume nirodhe  
mayy ekasmin praṇihita-dhiyaṃ mānmathenâgamenā/  
abhyasyantīm an-itara-juṣo bhāvanāyāḥ prakarsāt  
svāntenântar-vilaya-mṛdunā nirvikalpaṃ samādhim// 2.22*

I’m sure she’s practising Yoga—  
calming the mind by blocking everything external,  
focusing her awareness entirely on one thing,  
me.

The text she follows is the Scripture of Love.  
In the vast power of her imagination  
which has no other object,  
her heart melting,  
she is dissolving  
into the deepest place.

Was all the journey but a circle? Is it at all necessary? Rāma is, in fact, deep inside Sītā and has always been there. It is perhaps only a question of her finding him there—following the right scripture. When she does, in his imagination of her imagining him, the union or even fusion is already complete.

This realisation finds its ultimate expression in verse 2.40, perhaps the most beautiful of the entire poem, clearly meant to be paired with Kālidāsa’s famous MS 2.42. For the sake of comparison, we first translate Kālidāsa’s verse:

*aṅgenângaṃ pratanu tanunā gāḍha-taptena taptam  
sasreṇāśrudrutam aviratotkaṅṭham utkaṅṭhitena/*

<sup>32</sup> This contrasting temporality is nicely stated by the modal *upadheyam*—the left anklet ‘should be tied’ by Rāma in the hoped-for, envisaged future.

*uṣnocchvāsaṃ samadhikatarocchvāsinā dūravartī  
saṅkalpais te viśati vidhinā vairinā ruddha-mārgaḥ// MS 2.42*

Body into body,  
the lean to the lean,  
fierce fire into fire,  
tears into flowing tears,  
longing into ceaseless longing,  
heavy sigh to endless sigh:  
he who is far  
enters you  
in his thoughts,  
while hostile fate blocks his path.

Now Veṅkaṭanātha's creative equivalent to this powerful poem:

*deha-sparśaṃ malaya-pavane dṛṣṭi-sambhedam indau  
dhāmaikatvaṃ jagati bhuvī cābhinna-paryaṅka-yogam/  
tārā-citre viyati vitatiṃ śrīvītānasya paśyan  
dūrī-bhūtāṃ sutanu vidhinā tvām ahaṃ nirviśāmi// 2.40*

Our bodies touch  
in the southern wind.  
Our eyes meet  
in the moon.  
We live together in a single home—  
the world, and the earth  
is the one bed we share.  
The sky scattered with stars  
is a canopy stretched above us.  
Think of this, my lean beauty:  
However far away  
you may be,  
I still find my way  
into you.

The echoes are insistent, as we expect them to be. Where Kālidāsa begins with *aṅga*, the body, Veṅkaṭanātha begins with a synonym, *deha*. The intense interweaving of the Kālidāsa verse is clearly also the theme in Veṅkaṭanātha's. Both verses end with a complaint against fate, *vidhi*, which is responsible for the distance separating the lovers (*dūravartī*, *dūrī-bhūtā*). Yet the contrast is no less striking. Look, for example, at the word order of the final *pāda*: Kālidāsa moves from the imagined fusion embodied in the verb *viśati*, 'enters', to the harsh reality of blockage

(*ruddha-mārgaḥ*). Veṅkaṭanātha builds up, in a fantastic crescendo, to the final verb *nirvisami*, ‘I enter’, ‘delight in’, ‘make love to’. On the way up we have the juxtaposed pronouns—inseparably conjoined, almost an irregular compound or an Upaniṣadic-style *mahāvākya*—*tvām aham*, ‘I-you’. You could say that this moment is one of the points of the entire text. Remember that this is God speaking to his beloved, with whom he does, truly, share a single universe, despite the undeniable experience of distance.

Both poems envisage the lovers’ union—but how different it is! For Kālidāsa, the togetherness can come about only in the imagination (*saṅkalpaiḥ*), which stands to be frustrated or contradicted by reality. Once again we are in a metapoetic mode; the author, at the very end of his work, calls attention to the liberating power of poetic fancy. But in the HS, with its concrete reference to all the components of a physical world, the union is factual and real. Moreover, the very simplicity of reference—to the wind, the moon, the earth, the stars—both domesticates and endears. We, the listeners, also experience a magical intimacy with the divine. We, too, live in his home and sleep in his bed.

One can also read this exquisite verse as a condensed culmination of this entire poetic exercise. The whole movement into a local, southern reality constantly deepened by the complex intertextual echoes we have analysed finally opens up to the greatest (deepest) expanse of all. The entire universe is present in this verse. Veṅkaṭanātha has found a path that allows him, however deeply embedded he is in his local context, to go wherever he wants, as far as he wants. The Path, *mārga*, has been superimposed on the Place, *deśa*. Let us state the driving, paradoxical principle as boldly as possible: the greater the localisation, the wider the scope.

### What is Good for the Goose

Recently Sheldon Pollock has argued that Sanskrit ‘died’ as a vital literary medium sometime around the turn of the second millennium A.D.—‘at dates that vary in different regions and cultural formations’—and that

Sanskrit literature ended when it became a practice of repetition and not renewal, when the writers themselves no longer evinced commitment to a central value of the tradition and a feature that defined literature itself: the ability to make literary newness, ‘the capacity,’ as a great Kashmiri writer put it ‘to continually reimagine the world’.

Or, this time in relation to the Sanskrit production at the Vijayanagara court in the sixteenth century:

Something else—something terribly important—about Sanskrit literature here seems moribund. The realm of experience for which Sanskrit could speak literarily had palpably shrunk, as if somehow human life beyond the imperial

stage had outgrown Sanskrit and required a vernacular voice. This shrinkage accelerated throughout the medieval period, leaving the concerns of empire, and finally the concerns of heaven, as the sole thematic.<sup>33</sup>

We disagree.

We have looked mostly at one example—and we are very far from exhausting it. But what is good for the goose may be good for a whole gaggle of ganders. No one would claim that all second-millennium Sanskrit *kāvya*s are masterpieces. Some, however, clearly are. Beyond this question of aesthetic judgement, and beyond the sheer impressive volume of Sanskrit production over this long period, there are certain analytic features of historical consequence that deserve to be stated.

First among them is the issue of ‘newness’. A work like the HS is obviously in no sense a dull repetition of an earlier model. As we have seen, it uses the intertextual component in order to reach a powerful new goal—all this with awareness, irony and a sense of humour. There is also the matter of scope or, if one prefers, of boldness, originality and intensity. On all these accounts, Veṅkaṭanātha comes through as a master. However, even this statement fails to capture the radical depth of innovation. ‘Depth’, however, is a metaphor. It is possible to spell out what we mean by it.

We experience depth in reading when we meet with certain types of complexities—for example, when the mind is thrown backwards and forwards simultaneously, or when it swerves, swivels, or loops as it follows the paradoxical directionalities of time and space. Depth results from the superimposition of the universal on the particular, of the macro on the micro, and from their strong interweaving. Depth is created by the concurrent existence of several literary canons, activated and brought into resonant relation with one another. Such activation anticipates an audience well-versed in and sensitive to the rich intertexts. It also reflects the organic fusion of scholar and poet—two roles that were occasionally, but not commonly, conflated in earlier periods. In the literature we are examining, such a merger is perhaps normative. Depth is also a dependable product of repetition, which always tends towards variation, not mechanical reproduction. Indeed, variant repetition is one prominent technique for achieving defamiliarisation or estrangement within even the most intimately familiar literary or cultural patterns. Depth suggests movement—or a particular kind of restlessness—within a space open to experience, some of it probably unpredictable, waiting to be explored, perhaps including a strong personal element. This may be what Veṅkaṭanātha means when he speaks of that ‘vast ocean of experience’ (*tvad-anubhāva-mahāmburāśi*) and of his part in it: ‘I jumped in, I can’t touch bottom’.

Within this range we find the peculiar expressive power of Sanskrit, still vital and available throughout the second millennium in much of India. True, Sanskrit is now but one of several literary options. But it brings with it unique assets such

<sup>33</sup> Pollock, ‘Sanskrit Literary Culture’, pp. 100, 95.

as the direct verbal and thematic continuities that transcend local contexts and that, for that very reason, enable a powerful articulation of the regional in its true fullness. As we saw in the opening example from Veṅkaṭādhvarin as well as in the *Haṃsasandeśa*, such Sanskrit offers a wide-angled map, marked with the living traces of the classical past which serves as a starting point for the inversions, reconfigurations, or distortions that go into the creation of a new, local sense of self. This new 'self', of course, also expresses itself in the vernaculars, which have their own peculiar expressivity. Interacting with these vernaculars, Sanskrit is itself continuously changing, stretching the boundaries of the sayable, thinking new thoughts, searching for ways to formulate this newness. As such, its history remains to be studied. But that Sanskrit continues to be so productive, and so inventive, speaks to the specificity of the space and freedom that it still offers. In fact, for reasons we have suggested, that space and freedom have, if anything, dramatically expanded.

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