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Vedāntadeśika

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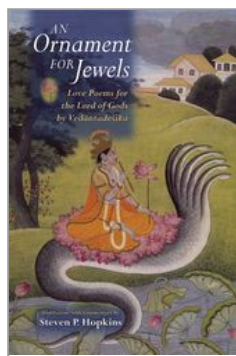


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An Ornament for Jewels: Love Poems For The Lord of Gods, by Venkatesa

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Introduction: An Ornament for Jewels

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Abstract and Keywords

A thematic introduction to the life and work of Venkatesha (Vedantadesika), with a focus on Venkatesha's sacred biographies and poetry in Sanskrit, Tamil, and Maharashtri Prakrit connected to the Devanayaka Swami temple in Tiruvahindrapuram, Tamil Nadu. Includes a detailed historical introduction to South Indian bhakti literatures that shape Venkatesha's devotional poetics and Srivaisnava sectarian identity in the "age of the Acaryas" after the twelfth century C.E. Introduction also includes a discussion of the sources of Venkatesha's texts, his rootedness in the cosmopolitan city of Kanchipuram, the thematic structure of the book and the importance of liturgical worship (*darsana* and *puja*), the themes of asymmetry and intimacy, and the "telescoping" form of the poems, to Venkatesha's bhakti poetics. Introduction concludes with a detailed section on translation, in theory and practice, pertinent to the author's goal of translating these medieval South Indian poems into contemporary American English verse.

Keywords: Venkatesha, Srivaisnava, Sacred biographies, Alvars, Acaryas, Kanchipuram, Tiruvahindrapuram, Bhakti, Darsana, Puja, Asymmetry and intimacy, Translation

Seeing your lovely body whose splendor is made even more perfect
by each perfect limb,
enjoyed by your beloved wives with unblinking
astonished eyes

and sought out by the jewels and weapons that adorn it
to increase their own radiance,
my sight O Lord of Gods
is not sated with seeing!

—Vedāntadeśika *Devanāyakapañcāsat* 14

Historically speaking, we know very little about Veṅkaṭanātha or Veṅkaṭeśa, the saint-poet, philosopher, scholar, and logician later known as Vedāntadeśika. Scraps of material testimonies; the witness of a young Telugu prince; some signature verses, panegyrics, and chronicles; an inscription on the walls of Śrīraṅgam praising the feats of a brahman general—bits and pieces of this famous teacher from humble Tūppul with his magnificent epithets. But there are stories, many stories, and a body of work praised and cited by his fourteenth-century contemporaries, chanted in temple rituals, memorized up to the present day—layers of a community's composite of images and experiences.

(p.4) For the purpose of introducing this book, I begin with a set of stories taken from the sacred biographies (the “Splendors” or *Prabhāvams*) and their evocation of experiences that shape core religious emotions of Veṅkaṭeśa's south Indian tradition. As we will see, these biographies read rather like folktales, popular narratives meant to instruct and inform but also to inspire devotion; they are filled with the conventionally miraculous, themes and motifs common to tales around the world, events and actions that lift Veṅkaṭeśa out of the merely mundane sphere of a great Indian philosopher to that of an almost semidivine figure who himself becomes the focus of religious emotions and cultic veneration.¹

Narrative and Experience

In true “once upon a time” fashion, his birth was miraculous. His mother had dreams, prophetic dreams that led her and her husband to travel from their home village of Tūppul near Kāñcīpuram to the sacred hill-shrine Tirumālai, to pray to Vishnu who dwelt there as Tirupati, Lord of the Hill, for the gift of a son. One night on the mountain she dreamed that a young boy came to her, asking her to swallow a bell that he held in his hands. That very night the shrine bell at Tirupati was stolen, and the temple priest himself had a dream. In his dream he was told a pious woman would dream of swallowing the bell, and that she would give birth to a remarkable child, an earthly incarnation of the sacred temple bell. Twelve round years later, the stories go, he was born, the temple bell in a baby's small body, the boy named after the god on the hill, Veṅkaṭanātha or Veṅkaṭeśa, “Lord of Veṅkaṭam.”

The young boy was prodigious in learning and innate spiritual wisdom: he amazed the old Ācāryas in debate, and eventually took his uncle's place as chief Ācārya (sectarian teacher) at the great temple town of Kāñcī. There he flourished as a talented debater and scholar, a master of scriptures. From there he withdrew for some years to study secret teachings associated with Vishnu's winged mount, Garuḍa, and horse-headed Hayagrīva, whose shrine sat on top of Medicine Herb Hill in the town of Tiruvahīndrapuram. The powers he attained there—scholarly, religious, ritual, magical, and literary—would hold him in good stead over the years, making him a “master of all the arts and sciences,” “a lion among poets and philosophers,” and giving him the title “Vedāntadeśika” (teacher/master of the Vedānta). And miracles multiply beyond the epithets: he is said to have healed an entire village stricken by plague; to have drawn magic circles on the ground to fight back an attack by super **(p.5)** natural snakes; and with the help of the divine Bird Garuḍa himself, called into form by a mantra, to have destroyed the most potent of serpents sent to vanquish him. In fevered debates with rival Ācāryas from the southern temple town of Śrīraṅgam, he emerged triumphant, holding fast to his “lion-seat” in the city of Kāñcī.

During his middle years, the stories speak of a pilgrimage to the north. Using purely literary journeys that are tucked into various poems, including one of his *sandēśa-kāvya*s or “messenger poems” (the *Haṃsasandēśa*) and one allegorical drama, the *San̄kalpasūryodaya* (The Dawn of Ritual Resolve), the biographies tell of Venkateśa's travel to Banaras and the holy Ganges, to Ayodhyā, Mathurā, Hardvār, places he finds hopelessly corrupted by priests who value only money and have forgotten the teachings and the proper rituals. In his pilgrimage south, like Rāma's “messenger goose” of the *Haṃsasandēśa*, he catches the sweet scent downwind of the blue Vindhya mountains, drinks in and praises in vivid poetry the land, the rivers and the pearl-beds of the deep south, the lovely women of Andhra and Karṇāṭaka, lakes, temple tanks, and holy shrines of the whole southern country, then finally, after healing a young Vijayanagar princess who was possessed by a demon, and being unsuccessfully wooed for the court and its patronage by the court-philosopher Vidyāraṇya, he comes home to Kāñcī, whose great gods, Vishnu and Śiva, in native, indigenous harmony, signal each other from their temple towers, mingling on the clear air the sounds of their bells and the odors of their lustrations.

His later years, say the narratives, are spent in turbulent debate in Śrīraṅgam. He is said to have endured the taunting and abuse of rival Ācāryas: sandals strung over his doorway—a most disgusting insult—a boycott of his father's funeral rites, the hiding of gold in his daily grain rations in the hopes that he would accidentally touch what he had vowed never to touch. But what follows in the story is far worse than sectarian debate, and brings the Ācāryas together:

Veṅkaṭeśa is associated with a narrative that is popular in various temple tales: the Muslim “sack of Śrīraṅgam,” the “invasion that took 12,000 heads.”

As Muslims advanced on Śrīraṅgam, Veṅkaṭeśa stayed behind while his Ācārya rival and friend, Piḷḷai Lokācārya, escaped north to Tirupati with the temple's festival icons. As the army began pressing into the town and into the heart of the temple complex, Veṅkaṭeśa walled up the main stone images of the shrine, and after hiding under a pile of dead bodies, finally fled to safety with a copy of a precious manuscript and headed for exile in Mysore. After long exile in Mysore and in the temple town of Melkote, he eventually returned to Śrīraṅgam on the heels of a successful campaign to retake the city led by the brahman general Gopaṇārya. It is there, in Śrīraṅgam, that he is said to **(p.6)** have lived out his years, putting final touches on his vast work of philosophical commentary, logic, original treatises, and poetry in three languages, Tamil, Sanskrit, and Māhārāṣṭrī Prākṛit. Indeed, his verses in Sanskrit to the victorious brahman general still grace the inner temple walls of Śrīraṅgam.²

Ritual Experience

To understand the poems translated in this book, their place in a tradition's self-understanding, we must know these stories, along with scraps of material histories, recognizing basic themes of a narrative, often drawn, as we have seen, from images in the poems themselves. Yet biographical folktale motifs are hardly enough. We must also understand certain structures of shaped experience within the narratives, constructions of idealized religious emotions bound up with an experience of temples, temple spaces, and above all, images (mobile and immobile icons, paintings) of a deity who is, though transcendent, thought also to be alive in a material way before the eyes of the devotee. Such experience and such emotions are embraced by the rich Sanskrit term *anubhava*, “relish,” “enjoyment,” “experience,” used in the poems, commentaries, and the narratives. Here ritual action—cult—joins with story to help contextualize the poems of this philosopher-saint and teacher.³

Taking one moment at random from Veṅkaṭeśa's poems, we must imagine it is May, the month of Vaikāsi, in Little Kāñcīpuram. The mobile image of Varadarāja Perumāḷ is carried into the inner courtyard of the temple as the devotees line up for *darśana*, a devotional viewing of the deity, when they can see and also be seen by the god. When the crowd of “fortunate ones” (*dhanyāḥ*) approaches the tall icon, stripped of all its ornaments, its jewels and silks and embossed silver, but for the yellow waistcloth and streaks of vermilion paste on its forehead, its chest and feet, some begin to weep uncontrollably. Veṅkaṭeśa the saint-poet shapes these powerful feelings, what he himself coins in a phrase in Tamilized Sanskrit as the “spontaneous overflow of emotion” (*anupava parivāhamāka*), into vivid concise verses:

Those few blessed god-lovers

their thin small bodies swelling in wave after wave of ecstasy
hair standing on end
their bud-like eyes welling with thick tears,
O Varada,
are ornaments in your assembly.
Their hearts made firm by an inner humility,
they sweeten your feet ...

(p.7) Here living, vulnerable human bodies come in contact with a seemingly alive, though impassible and perfected divine body in the heart of the temple and in the heart of the *pūjā* or ritual veneration of the god. Such a *pūjā* for the saint-poet is an elaborately layered experience; it is about formal prestations, offerings and formal exchange of “blessings,” but it is also always the site of devotional vision: though the concrete site of the poem is a crowded temple sanctum, the poet imagines himself an ornament at the feet of the handsome god-king, watching as the god rises at dawn from his royal bed, bearing on his throat the marks of Queen Indirā's gold bangles. This god-king is Vishnu, and she, of many names—Indirā, Śrī, Lakṣmī—Queen and Goddess:

Those few blessed O Varada
see your dark blue body stripped of ornaments
and silver armor—
the original model for Elephant Hill,
its blue made deeper blue
by fragrant *kasturi*.

Bearing O Varada
on your throat the marks of Indirā's gold bracelets
left by her tight embraces
you rise at dawn
from your serpent bed—
may you always be present in my mind's inner core.⁴

Asymmetry and Intimacy: Devotional Poetics and the Body of God

Icons here are far more than mere pointers to or reminders of their divine referent; rather, they are seen in the eyes of the saint-poet as living “bodies” of the deity, the concentrated form of the godhead in the small space of a precious metal (mobile bronze “festival image,” the *utsavamūrti*) or stone figure (the sanctum image or *mūlabera*). In the saint-poet's “devotional eye,” to use a phrase of Richard Davis, they are “pieces” of heaven on earth, and in some instances make earth—for the other gods as well as for human devotees—preferable to heaven.⁵ In Veṅkaṭeśa's devotional poetics, “holy seeing” (*darśana*)—seeing and being seen by God—is the experience of a perfected, transcendental beauty (Tamil: *aḷaku*; Sanskrit: *lāvaṇya*, glowing loveliness) that saves. For Deśika, what we might term the “aesthetic” and “religious” mutually

inhere in the vision of the body of god, both on a theoretical and on an experiential level.

This devotional encounter in the sanctum, this seeing and being seen, also points to a structural asymmetry that is critical to our understanding of **(p.8)** particular and ideal forms of love in Veṅkaṭeṣa's poetry. The poems often enact the dialectic of an unruly, vulnerable, emotionally fragile, volatile, and liquid love (the weepy, horripilating bodies of the “blessed ones”), with the perfected, contained and ideal body of the god, a god who is loving and who is sometimes *in love* with selected devotees, but who is always also in control—a dialectic of the chaos and cosmos of devotion. The texts, and the saint-poet, strive, of course, for that transcendental cosmicized love embodied in the idealized body of Vishnu, a refinement of simple material emotions. At the same time, they valorize, in their conventional emotional overflow (*anubhava parivāha*), the vulnerable human lover, in all his or her extravagance of desire and vulnerability of feeling. We will see this asymmetrical structure in the poet's constant oscillation between the experience of divine presence and absence, intimacy and distance, in verses that move from ecstatic praise of the Lord's proximity to complaint and lament over separation. Such a coexistence of asymmetry and intimacy in love, this willed ambiguity, is most complexly inscribed in Veṅkaṭeṣa's literary uses of the *akam* or “interior” love motifs in his Tamil poems, in their conventional female personae and expressive fragile emotions, and in formal *anubhavas*, or stepwise image-rich and sensuous descriptions of the body of Vishnu from head to foot in his Sanskrit and Prākṛit lyrics—a motif that holds in tension together the loving particularity and transcendent impassibility of the god.⁶

The Telescope of Experience/Telescope of the Poem

Though commonly, and in the manner of the Provençal troubadour lyric of medieval Europe, each stanza of Veṅkaṭeṣa's long poetry sequences is a praise-poem or singular word picture that stands on its own, again and again we are struck by an overall telescoping structure of this experience of *darśana*, emotional beholding, in the poems and in the descriptions in the narratives. In pulsating dynamic rhythm, in a quasi-musical structure of theme and variations, what is far in the mythic past becomes concrete and totally present in the transfigured time and space of the *pūjā* and in the experience (*anubhava*) of the saint-poet who stands there, in front of the temple image. The great god who willed this world into being, who has taken the forms of so many gods—the hero Rāma, Krishna, the lover of the cowgirls, butter thief, killer of King Kaṃsa—who has for millennia, long before this age, defeated so many enemies of the earth and who is also identified as *Brahman*, the impersonal “ground of being,” has taken on a beautiful body of bronze and gold or a mysterious image of black stone, to stand here before the saint-poet, now, *in this very place*, for the sake of the devotees. And the god stood and still stands not only in “this” place, **(p.9)**

but also, as the poet rediscovers (after forgetting) over and over again, in his own heart.

These are the three spatial and temporal worlds—cosmic, terrestrial, interior/individual—traced in each of Veṅkaṭeśa's poems. They are made present, to use the coinage of Raimon Panikkar, in the “tempiternal present” of *darśana* in the shrine or simply in the reading/recitation/chanting/singing of the praise-poem that reproduces, in literary form, this experience for the reader/reciter/singer.⁷ We are able to gaze, simultaneously, through the ground glass of the praise-poem, at eons of past, present, and even future time and space. As an astonishing final realization, built into the poem itself, we are made to realize that all this, however apart from us, is also, paradoxically, within us.

I might also mention here that this pattern reproduces, within the sacred (oral/aural/audial) space of the poem, the slow physical progress of a devotee as she (or he) approaches the temple. Noting the landscape around it—marked with shrines of ancillary gods, the shrine to the nine planets, the holy river and sacred tree, shrines related to various place-narratives of the temple—she works her way from the exterior courtyards and their shrines, step by step, *pradakṣiṇa*, (with her right side facing the temple), until she enters the darkest, smallest, and often the oldest part of the temple complex, the so-called *garbha gr̥ha*, the “womb-house” of the temple where the central sanctum image “stands.” It is in this smallest, most spiritually condensed place that the saint-poet, gazing at the image of the living heart of the temple complex, experiences that all of this—the temple spaces, the gods and goddesses, the shrines, and even this god that she gazes upon—is also in the heart.

In the individual afterword to each poem I will note this recurring threefold telescoping structure as it unfolds in Veṅkaṭeśa's literary art, often within each verse as well as in the sequences—the *stotras* and *prabandhams*—as a whole. I will also note the various registers of asymmetry and intimacy present in the literary and theological structures of certain individual verses, as well as in the overarching framework of entire cycles.

Love Poems for the Lord of Gods at Tiruvahīndrapuram

One of the most powerful of all places of divine presence for Veṅkaṭeśa is on a hill near an ancient Serpent Well, where the form of Vishnu as the Lord of Gods, Devanāyaka at Tiruvahīndrapuram (Sacred Town of the King of Serpents), dwells in icon form. Veṅkaṭeśa's sacred narratives speak of this place as a kind of interregnum place of peace and spiritual development. It is also the place associated in the biographies with important ritual initiations. Long ago, before the hard debates at Kāñcī and Śrīraṅgam, before the painful morning **(p.10)** when his wife found the gold pieces in the bowl of grain, and he made her throw each precious glittering piece in the gutter, it was at Tiruvahīndrapuram where he was taught the mantras, the spells of power, where he sat at the feet of Lord

Hayagrīva and learned the rituals. And this was where, just as he was about to return to Kāñcīpuram, in dead of night, the Lord of Tiruvahīndrapuram came to him—a temple image taken animate form, walking on the red road like a man—and told him not to leave before he had composed for him “in his own words” what was sung in the “old Veda.” Veṅkaṭeśa then returned to the village and praised Devanāyaka, the Lord of Tiruvahīndrapuram, in Tamil, his mother-tongue; in Prākṛit, the tongue of southern singers and the child-goddess Sarasvatī; and in his own vivid Sanskrit. It is this god and this icon that he praises in his poems as the equal of its own jewels: even more, Veṅkaṭeśa says, this body of Vishnu is itself an ornament for the jewels.

These poems and the narratives that surround them make up this volume—these complex literary acts of devotion and offering to Devanāyaka Swāmi at Tiruvahīndrapuram that we seek to understand and to read in American English. But before I touch upon the themes of sources, structure, and translation, we still need to fill in, beyond the portraits in the sacred narratives and the thematic structures of the poems themselves, the social/historical and religious background of the work of this saint-poet of Tūppul.

Veṅkaṭeśa: A “Lion among Poets and Philosophers”

The medieval south Indian saint-poet, theologian, and philosopher Veṅkaṭanātha or Veṅkaṭeśa (ca. 1268–1369), commonly known by his epithet Vedāntadeśika (“Preceptor of the Vedānta”), is one of the most important brahman Ācāryas (sectarian preceptors) of the Śrīvaiṣṇava community of south India. This particular Vaiṣṇava community worships a personal god in the form of Lord Vishnu, one of the high gods of Hindu tradition, along with his consort-goddess Śrī or Lakṣmī.⁸ The Śrīvaiṣṇava community, which first developed around the tenth to eleventh centuries, claims the Tamil poems of the Ālvārs, especially those of the saint-poet Nammālvār, as equal in status to the Sanskrit Veda. Long after Veṅkaṭeśa's death, he was claimed as the founding Ācārya of the Vaṭakalai or “northern” school of Śrīvaiṣṇavism, centered in the ancient holy city of Kāñcīpuram in northern Tamil Nadu. Veṅkaṭeśa's early association with the northern city of Kāñcī would be a significant source of his broad learning, his polylinguism, and what might be termed his cosmopolitanism. For Kāñcīpuram, even before the time of Veṅkaṭeśa, had long been associated **(p.11)** with multiple religious communities—Buddhist, Jain, Hindu—and a decidedly cosmopolitan atmosphere. The city had deep roots in transregional brahminical Sanskrit learning, though it also fostered the development of regional cosmopolitan literatures, most notably in Pāli and Tamil.

Along with working in three major languages of his southern tradition—Sanskrit, Tamil, and Māhārāṣṭrī Prākṛit—Veṅkaṭeśa was a master of many genres of philosophical prose and poetry. He wrote long ornate religious poems (*kāvya*s) in Sanskrit; a Sanskrit allegorical drama (*nāṭaka*); long religious lyric hymns (*stotras* and *prabandhams*) in Sanskrit, Māhārāṣṭrī Prākṛit, and in Tamil; as well

as commentaries and original works of philosophy, theology, and logic in Sanskrit and in a hybrid combination of the Sanskrit and Tamil languages called *maṇipravāḷa* (“jewels and coral”). Tradition ascribes to him the resounding epithets of *kavitārkikasimha*, “a lion among poets and philosophers (or logicians),” and *sarvatantrasvatantra*, “master of all the arts and sciences.” Such epithets embody a certain spirit of creative cultural and linguistic synthesis. Veṅkaṭeśa was master of all “tantras” (this term embraces multiple genres of texts); he was also both a *kavi* (a master poet) and a *tārkika* (logician/debater/philosopher). Tensions and complementarities between poet and philosopher, the devotional lyric and theological prose, are enacted within the same person.

Veṅkaṭeśa's devotional poetry combines in a dynamic way the local/regional literary prestige of Tamil with the panregional aesthetic prestige and power of Sanskrit (with Māhārāṣṭrī as Middle Indo-Āryan literary spice). His writings expand the linguistic field of south Indian devotion beyond the normative claims either of Sanskrit or Tamil devotional texts, and his language choices embrace both the singularity of Sanskrit as divine “primordial tongue” and the subordinate but equally divine claims of his mother tongue, Tamil.

Veṅkaṭeśa in South Indian Bhakti Literature

Any reading of Veṅkaṭeśa's poetic work in Sanskrit, Tamil, and Prākṛit must include an account of the religiohistorical and literary streams in which it is situated and of which it is, in great measure, a late flowering. Such an account must begin with the extraordinary rise of Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava devotional movements in the deep south during the reign of the Pallavas of Kāñcī and the Pāṇḍiyas of Madurai.⁹

Between the sixth and ninth centuries C.E. there occurred in south India what A. K. Ramanujan has called “a great, many-sided shift in Hindu culture (p.12) and sensibility.”¹⁰ This shift consisted in the rise of a new kind of religious devotion (*bhakti*), rooted in the renewal of an activist sectarian temple cult and the emotionally charged Tamil poetry of the Śaiva Nāyaṇārs (Masters) and the Vaiṣṇava Ālvārs.¹¹ This by no means marks the beginnings of Indian bhakti per se. Highly developed forms of devotional worship and literature had of course been around for quite some time, as widespread among Buddhist and Jain communities as they were among Hindus.¹² Moreover, bhakti as a full-blown spiritual path linked to certain meditative and ritual practices had received its Hindu apotheosis centuries before Pallava times in the Sanskrit *Bhagavad Gītā*, the *Harivaṃśa*, the still-mysterious plays of Bhāsa, and the early Purāṇas.¹³ What Ramanujan refers to, however, as a “shift” in the south during the Pallava and Pāṇḍiya dynasties meant bhakti with an ideological difference. Both god and devotee were made to speak in a distinctly new idiom, and with a Tamil accent. This shift in the poetics of devotion offered an alternative form of sacredness to the dominant one shaped by Jains and Buddhists before the seventh century.

Before the advent of this new Hindu devotional orthodoxy, according to Burton Stein, in the centuries between the period of classical Tamil literature (first to third centuries C.E.) and the rise of the Pallavas, “the zenith of Jaina and Buddhist influence in South India was achieved.”¹⁴ This was the period of the so-called “Kaḷabhra interregnum” when nonpeasant warrior-caste peoples had wrested power away from the lowland peasant population.¹⁵ This period also witnessed the growing influence of northern Āryan cults. It was a time of great cultural pluralism, social change, and yet relative peace in the south. For it appears, as Stein notes, that “these cults coexisted peacefully with each other and with indigenous forms of religion and that the Jaina and Buddhist sects of South India were as successful as Śaivite and Vaiṣṇavite sects in winning the allegiance of leaders in South Indian society.”¹⁶ By the seventh century, as several inscriptions and the accounts of the Chinese pilgrim Hsüang-tsang attest, the Jains seemed to have had the advantage over the Buddhists and Hindus; they were most favored by the dominant urban, nonpeasant warrior classes that controlled the plains.¹⁷ During the seventh and eighth centuries this period of peaceful coexistence came to an end, as did the dominance of urban warriors.¹⁸

The very symbols of the end of peaceful coexistence, and of “the bitterness and violence” of the sectarian controversies that erupted with the rise of the bhakti cults, are in Śaiva sources on the conversions of kings. The Pallava monarch Mahendravarman I, said to have once been a persecutor of Śaivas, turned his vehemence on the Jains at his conversion to Śaivism.¹⁹ An even **(p.13)** more infamous story, for which there is no solid material evidence, is told in Śaiva literary sources such as the twelfth-century *Periyapurāṇam* of Cēkkiḷār and in a series of vivid frescoes on the *maṇḍapam* walls of the Mīṇākṣī temple tank. It is the story of the newly converted Pāṇḍiya king of Madurai.

First a Jain, Sundarapāṇṭiya is said to have been converted to Śaivism by the Nāyaṇār child saint-poet Campantar. Presumably on the saint's urging (or without his resistance), the newly converted king had 8,000 Jains impaled on stakes—an event (a legend rather)—that is still celebrated in an annual festival at Mīṇākṣī Temple in Madurai.²⁰ Later, in the eighth century, the Vaiṣṇava king Nandivarman II Pallavamalla carried out systematic persecutions of Buddhists and Jains, inspired in great measure by the fervor of the bhakti revival. It is about this time, according to a later hagiographical tradition, that the Vaiṣṇava saint-poet Tirumaṅkaiyālvār (Parakāla) is said to have plundered the Buddhist *vihāra* at Nāgapaṭṭinam and melted down the golden Buddha image to cover the walls of Śrīraṅgam with gold.²¹

Throughout this period, the Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava Tamil saints either reconsecrated or virtually sang into existence a complex network of sacred places, temples, and shrines that would grow in size and political influence by royal patronage throughout the next four centuries.²² The saints in both

communities hailed from all social strata, from brahman to untouchable. Their poems, though of mixed genres, are generally simple and direct in style; they are marked by their stress on Tamil as a sacred tongue equal to the Veda.²³ The poems combine, in an original way, emotional directness and a vocabulary imbued with cultic terminology and imagery that witness their use in and influence by esoteric and public temple ritual.²⁴ Some of these poems, especially those of the Vaiṣṇava Ālvārs, self-consciously use the conventions of classical Tamil love poetry to describe the passionate (even erotic) relationship between devotee and deity.²⁵

The Ālvārs' First Ācāryas and Veṅkaṭeśa's Cosmopolitan Age

There began in the period of the Ālvārs what would become throughout Cōla times a more and more intimate alliance between brahmans, their ritually dependent kings, and high-caste, nonbrahman peasants. The Hindu devotional movements swept the plains and swiftly won over converts from their nearest competition, the popular Jain goddess (*yakṣiṇī*) cults that had held sway up until the eighth century.²⁶ The urban, nonpeasant Jain and Buddhist communities never recovered the ideological, economic, or religious power they had enjoyed in the south before the seventh century.

(p.14) The next period is marked by a more self-conscious brahman consolidation of power and of intellectual and institutional synthesis. Whereas the Ālvārs emphasized solely the regional Tamil tongue in their hymns, the early Vaiṣṇava Ācāryas or sectarian teachers, such as Yāmunācārya, Kūreśa (Kūrattālvāṇ), and Parāśara Bhāṭṭar, active from the tenth century on, wrote Sanskrit hymns (*stotras*) in praise of specific icons of Vishnu modeled after the vivid Tamil of the Ālvārs.²⁷ As Nancy Nayar has convincingly shown, the poems of Ācāryas Kūreśa and Parāśara Bhāṭṭar are filled with allusions to the Tamil of the Ālvārs (*the drāviḍa veda*) in their devotional imagery and use of place names.²⁸ The Ācāryas, addressing a thoroughly bilingual audience, made various attempts, in Friedhelm Hardy's words, to "achieve a reconciliation between brahminical orthodoxy, the Pāñcarātra and typically Southern factors like the mysticism of the Ālvārs and their belief in a personal absolute."²⁹ We see here the beginnings of a tradition of the "Dual" or "Ubhaya Vedānta," the "jewels-and-coral" synthesis that reached its acme in the development of Śrīvaiṣṇava *maṇipravāḷa*.³⁰ This era of Rāmānuja and the early Ācāryas produced both commentarial and original works; it saw the composition of voluminous theological commentaries on Tamil hymns as well as the composition of sophisticated Sanskrit *stotras* that combined classical Sanskrit poetics with the emotional bhakti of the Ālvārs. From here, we move on to the divisive but religiously rich centuries during and after the time of Veṅkaṭeśa.

Veṅkaṭeśa's life spans the waning of the Cōla dynasty and the beginnings of Vijayanagar, where the expansion of the Telugu warriors into the Tamil land created a new set of alliances. His rich poetic and philosophical output in Tamil,

Sanskrit, Māhārāṣṭrī Prākṛit, and *maṇipravāḷa*, as well as his conscious synthesis of regional and panregional idioms, accurately reflects the religious and ideological pluralism of the emerging Vijayanagar empire. In Veṅkaṭeśa we also have a living embodiment of a twin process active during this period as well: the revival of Sanskrit textual production in courtly and religious circles in an age also defined by forces of vernacularization.³¹ We find in Veṅkaṭeśa's time a cultural atmosphere analogous in its cosmopolitanism and interreligious and interlinguistic contacts to that of the still-mysterious Kaḷabhra interregnum—but this time under Hindu rule and a peasant-Telugu warrior alliance.³²

In a synthesis that reflects his time, Veṅkaṭeśa moves the “Tamil tradition” of passionate devotion forward from its local and regional focus to a broader, translocal context through his Sanskrit and Prākṛit compositions; but at the same time he composes his own original Tamil poems that expand and affirm Tamil literary tradition, and its own regional ambitions as a divine tongue of saint-poets, without being diluted or muted by Sanskrit.

(p.15) Poems for the Lord of Gods: Devanāyaka's Shrine as Microcosm
My earlier study, *Singing the Body of God*, focused its textual analyses on Veṅkaṭeśa's praise-poems to three iconic forms of Vishnu, *mūrtis* or *arcāvatāras*: the shrine and icons of Varadarājaperumāḷ in the northern temple town of Kāñcīpuram; those of Lord Devanāyaka at the small village of Tiruvahīndrapuram near the southeastern coastal town of Cuddalore (Kaṭalūr); and finally, the shrine and icons of Lord Raṅganātha at Śrīraṅgam, a temple complex that became, by the tenth century, the most important southern center of power in Veṅkaṭeśa's community. As I argued in some detail in *Singing the Body of God*, and touched on above, these poems are complex theological and philosophical constructions in lyric/hymnic form, each unfolding Veṅkaṭeśa's full theological vision in an individual way suited to its particular sacred object or image and place.

This volume of translations focuses on such poems written to only one form of Vishnu, that of Devanāyaka, the Lord of Gods at Tiruvahīndrapuram. The poems written at this sacred place, in character with others of the same genre—though emphasizing a certain “emotionalism” toward this form of Vishnu—form a kind of microcosm of the saint-poet's work, and compress within their compass most of the central themes in Veṅkaṭeśa's devotional poetics. These include the union of intellect and emotion; the idea of a “beauty that saves,” a certain theological aesthetics; the dynamic, sometimes contrary relationship between poetry and philosophy (with poetry adding dimensions of fluidity to the philosopher's formulations); and the play of divine absence and radical presence in the sacred place, in images and in temple ritual (*pūjā*). Moreover, the poems to this Lord of Gods at Tiruvahīndrapuram form more than a thematic microcosm; they also

embrace all three of the poet's working languages, forming a linguistic microcosm as well.

Veṅkaṭeśa wrote praise-poems for Devanāyaka in Sanskrit, Tamil, and Māhārāṣṭrī Prākṛit, for good reason—indeed, as the place-legend describes, by divine command. One of the core stories of the place-legend of Tiruvahīndrapuram describes the moment when these poems—and this self-conscious work—were born. Veṅkaṭeśa was heading out of town, on the road back to Kāñcīpuram, when the Lord of Gods, Vishnu at Tiruvahīndrapuram shrine, came to him in the dark of night as he slept near the river Peṇṇai. I have already noted how the god commanded the poet not to leave the town and the shrine until he had sung “in his own words” what is sung about Him “in the old Veda.” One of the concluding verses of these poems makes it clear what his “own words” were to be: praises in the “old tongue,” Sanskrit, in “charming, heart-warming” Prākṛit, and in “pure, graceful Tamil.”³³

(p.16) Thus this selection, by focusing not only on full translations of individual poems, themselves coherent theological “visions” in verse, but also on poems written in praise of a single god in a single place, will give the reader a sense of Veṅkaṭeśa's whole project, his linguistic, emotional, and intellectual registers. It will have the advantage of focus and literary elegance; like the remembered world of Proust's Combray in the taste of madeleine dipped in tea, or his experience of the sea at Balbec, the aquarium windows of the Grand Hotel and its “frieze” of girls distilled in the astringent feel of a starched napkin, and like Blake's World in a Grain of Sand, we taste and see, in this one particular place, and in this one particular form of Vishnu, various protean forms and powers of the divine, and trace a veritable summa of theological, philosophical, and literary designs.

These hymns of Veṅkaṭeśa to the beautiful icon-bodies of Devanāyaka at Tiruvahīndrapuram both reflect his rootedness in the icon-based poems of the Ālvār and Ācārya traditions and express some of the most emotional aspects of Veṅkaṭeśa's own devotional poetics. In such poems that “sing the body of God” we can most vividly see his distinctive contributions to the south Indian Vaiṣṇava tradition he inherited. Both similarities and differences with regard to Ālvār and Ācārya bhakti are most clearly inscribed in these particular kinds of hymns. Moreover, such icons in “beloved places” inspire some of Veṅkaṭeśa's finest poetry.

Sources, Structure, and Translation

Sources

I will not reproduce here my detailed analyses in *Singing the Body of God* of the various editions of Veṅkaṭeśa's Sanskrit and Prākṛit *stotras* and Tamil *prabandhams*, or the significance of dates, particular commentator/editors, and provenance to the “Tamil consciousness” movements in the Tamil Nadu of the

1930s and 1940s. I refer the reader to the full-length study for textual, linguistic, and historiographical issues.³⁴ For the purpose of this thematic collection of translations, I want to simply make mention of my basic sources for these poems to Devanāyaka Swāmi. I have utilized throughout two editions of Veṅkaṭeśa's poems: the *Śrīdeśīkastotramālā*, *uraiyuṭaṇ*, edited with a modern Tamil commentary and word gloss of V. N. Śrī Rāmatēcikācāryar for the Sanskrit and Prākṛit poems, and Rāmatēcikācāryar's edited collection of the "Deśīka Prabandham" with "simple" Tamil commentary, individual word glosses, indices of first lines, and detailed glossaries (*Śrītēcikappirapantam*, (p.17) *uraiyuṭaṇ*), for the Tamil poems. Although many of the Sanskrit *stotras* collected by Rāmatēcikācāryar have a rich liturgical history at temples associated with Veṅkaṭeśa, or have roots in separate manuscript traditions, most of the Tamil *prabandhams* are extracted from Veṅkaṭeśa's longer prose *rahasyas* ("secrets") or elaborate esoteric texts enumerating points of Śrīvaiṣṇava doctrine. The poems collected in this volume, including the *Gopālavimśati* to Devanāyaka as the pan-Indian Krishna, Tirumaṅkaiyālvār's decad of verses in praise of Tiruvahīndrapuram, and the Tamil *prabandhams* (the *Mummaṅikkō-vai* and the *Navamaṅimālai*) all have liturgical significance at the temple of Devanāyaka Swāmi. The Tamil *prabandhams*, along with the Sanskrit *stotra Devanāyakapañcāśat*, are chanted at Veṅkaṭeśa's feast days. As the first part of this introduction expresses in a lyrical mode, these praises of this "body of god," a very "ornament for the jewels," are far more than metaphorical products of religious imagination alone: they have a concrete referent, a material, cultic center of gravity, an icon in the temple, around which swirls a plethora of metaphors and emotions, of dissembling similes and extravagant hyperbole. We will have the opportunity to explore the significance of this in more detail in the afterwords to each poem.

The Structure of the Book

This collection consists of complete translations of five long poems of Veṅkaṭeśa: two from the Tamil, *Mummaṅikkōvai* and *Navamaṅimālai*, and two, *Devanāyakapañcāśat* and *Gopālavimśati*, from the Sanskrit. Selected verses from these poems are analyzed in the larger study, as luminous details that condense various semantic registers and theological colors of the whole, but here the reader can encounter these individual verses set within the larger canvas of the entire visionary cycle. I also include a full translation of the Prākṛit *Acyutaśatakam*, also selected in *Singing the Body of God*. Finally, I conclude, for comparative reasons, with a translation of the only praise of Tiruvahīndrapuram written by a poet of the Tamil Ālvār generation, Tirumaṅkaiyālvār's luminous decad of verses for Devanāyaka from the *Periyatirumoli* (III: 1-10). Each poem forms a chapter in itself, and has its own individual short afterword (or foreword in the case of Tirumaṅkai), along with detailed linguistic and thematic notes and commentary. The ultimate goal of this volume is to focus on Veṅkaṭeśa's remarkable poems themselves, their argument in images in an anthology setting,

set side by side with sister poems in the other languages, in translations that seek to bring the Sanskrit, Tamil, and Prākṛit originals into readable American English verse forms.

(p.18) *At the Edge of the Woods: Thoughts about Translation*

In the context of fidelity in translation, I never fail to think of the great *ficción* of Borges about Pierre Menard, “Author of the Quixote.” Borges, as usual, is one of the best tonics for those who take themselves too seriously. Menard's desire was not to compose another *Quixote*, but to compose *the* Quixote; to get at the heart of what Cervantes himself meant in his great seventeenth-century work, to write the Quixote *through the experiences of Pierre Menard*, “to produce a number of pages” as the narrator of the *ficción* tells us, “which coincided—word for word and line for line—with those of Miguel de Cervantes.”³⁵ As absurd as this may seem, here is a temptation that haunts every translator and translation (the act that, by its strange determined nature, takes us over). We seek, though we know that this is impossible, and perhaps not at all desirable, some kind of radical transparency—in rhythm of phrasing, alliteration, meter, conceit—a moment of almost mystical kinship, where two languages meet to such an extent that, say, Veṅkaṭeśa—or Kabīr, Aimé Césaire, Arnaut Daniel, Biatritz de Dia, Proust—*becomes* American English. Borges's fabula about Pierre Menard goes several steps further; it pushes the limits of this desire for fidelity, containing the lovely irony that, finally, after Herculean labors and innumerable drafts, thousands of ripped up or burned handwritten pages, Menard's Quixote and the Cervantes text were indeed “identical,” though the narrator remarks that the twentieth-century French novelist/critic Menard's text (in flawless seventeenth-century Castilian) is “almost infinitely richer.” I sometimes laugh, thinking of this, after working long hours on Veṅkaṭeśa's Tamil, Prākṛit, or Sanskrit verses: the most nearly perfect “translation,” the most accurate “reading,” will be to have labored with draft on draft of English, only, after so many missteps, to arrive “back” at the Tamil, Prākṛit, or Sanskrit text.

But practically speaking my goals, and those of most translators, are far less ambitious than Menard's; they are more immediate and practical, though for that no less critical for my immediate context, the rather checkered history of translations from South Asian languages.

I seek to avoid here what Hank Heifetz has called the “tradition of the bad” in translation from South Asian languages, particularly from Sanskrit, a style he refers to as “Indologese,” a blend of the artificial and archaic with the obsessively literal, translations salt-and-peppered by parentheses and variant phrases that obscure the fact that the originals are vivid, powerful, elegant poems.³⁶ As a scholar of South Asian Religion, Languages, and Literatures, as well as a poet who has written and published poems that speak in my own American English voice of south Indian landscapes, of people I have known, **(p. 19)** of images and forms of deities in various temples in Tamil Nadu, I attempt a

double task here: to provide translations that are both scholarly—informed by and accurate to the original—and readable in English. I trust that my translations will repay close scrutiny and rereading, and that they will read well aloud; but also it is my hope that, through the detailed notes provided for individual verses, phrases, or words, with sometimes extensive quotations from the original texts, the reader will get a sense of the originals. In this foreign terrain, the ideational content, can be rather easily transferred from language to language; but I hope to convey in the sometimes rather idiomatic English of the translations—through alliteration, internal rhyme, an unusually long-limbed line with little punctuation, and at times the clipped, uneven spacing on the page—a bodily sense of the rhythms, the line, the internal semantic and syntactic movement (breath line and measure) of the original. It is my hope that, to make good translations, one does not need to be so free as to obliterate any sense of an “original.” I am confident that one can compose a “new” English poem that creatively mediates the message and linguistic textures of its “original.”

This is a difficult balance to strike. As Paul Blackburn, the great translator of Occitan (Old Provençal) troubadour lyrics, noted some years ago in an interview:

[Question:] What is the difference between free and strict, literal translation? Between free translation and outright adaptation?

[Answer:] Very often readability. Strict translation usually makes for stiff English, or forced and un-english rhythms. Outright adaptation is perfectly valid if it makes a good, modern poem. Occasionally, an adaptation will translate the spirit of the original to better use than any other method: at other times, it will falsify the original beyond measure. Much depends upon the translator (also upon the reader).³⁷

As the reader will see from the notes, these are far from “free” translations or “adaptations,” and I do not aspire to Walter Benjamin's fascinating but perilous Kabbalistic evocation of the “task of the translator” as releasing “in his own language that pure language which is under the spell of another, to liberate the language imprisoned in a work in his re-creation of that work.”³⁸ As translations, these English poems are not, again to use the vivid vocabulary of Benjamin, “at the center of the language forest”: they are, of necessity, “on the outside facing the wooded ridge,” calling into the woods of the original languages “without entering”; they aim, in Benjamin's words, “at that single spot where the echo is able to give, in its own language, the reverberation of the work **(p.20)** in the alien one.”³⁹ These are echoes, verbal reverberations, of the originals, and so are derivative, secondary, loyal to their models in various ways that sometimes stretch the norms of English syntax, but also they seek to be poems in English that stand on the page as poetry in their own right. In George Steiner's

formulation, these translations are echoes, indeed, but echoes that hope to enrich, far more than “shadow and inert simulacrum.”⁴⁰

Most realistically and most practically speaking, to borrow the insights of historian of religion Jonathan Z. Smith, the cognitive power of the best translations lies in their incongruity, their surprise, in their *difference* from the original.⁴¹ Partial, corrigible, never wholly adequate, translation is always a kind of “redescription,” a *reinscription* of difference. Otherwise, we are back to the impossible transparencies of Borges's *Menard*, his comic though quietly terrifying book of mirrors, a total introjection of the other. Difference and even a certain incongruity in translation need hardly be betrayal (alone), but is, potentially—as an act of beholding that preserves the ongoing particularity of the original while creating something new in the receiving language, most loyal and, strangely perhaps, most loving. Meaning-content of the work translated can be enhanced by the very motion of linguistic transfer, however free or literal, and each (potential) return to the original is made richer by contact with other tongues in the charged fields of its translations. Dissemination in the acts of translation need not be dissimulation, an erosion of the power of the “original”; it can also imply a kind of generative *jouissance*, a multiplicity that increases pleasure. To quote Smith, in the broader context of intercultural translations, it may be true that *traduttori traditori*, but “in culture as in language, it is difference that generates meaning.”⁴²

Beyond Indologese

Issues of translation, particularly literary translation, are notoriously complex, particularly between languages as fundamentally different in syntax and prosody from English as Sanskrit, Tamil, and Prākṛit. Formally there are many choices one has to make, from vocabulary, tone, word order, meter (if any), to line length and spacing. One has to constantly balance the sense of loyalty to the original text with the goal of producing a verse in English, something that will serve as more than a simple trot for the scholar-reader. I will simply quote one example to give these reflections practical grounding for readers of this book.⁴³

Veṅkaṭeśa has been particularly badly served by various forms of “Indologese,” verse-forms dominated by Victorian vocabulary or indigestible prose summaries in archaic styles riddled with parentheses. The following is an example from a translation of *Devanāyakaṇṭāśat* (verse 40): **(p.21)**

O Devapati! Victory be to Your shanks which helped You in carrying messages (as the ambassador of Pāṇdavas), in carrying away the clothes of the cowherdesses and in following (hunting down) the asuras. They shine like (= are shaped like) Manmatha's bugles, quivers and vessels called Kalāchī.⁴⁴

This is supposed to translate the following elegant, playful Sanskrit stanza, full of charm and a certain subtle power:

dūtye dukūlaharaṇe vrajasundarīṇām /
in being a messenger / in stealing the fine cloth *dukūla* dresses / of
the lovely girls of Vraj
daityānudhāvana vidhau api labdhasāhyam //
pursuing the daityas / in being expedient / also/[they] helped you
obtain
kandarpa-kāhala-niṣaṅga-kalācika-ābham /
of Kāma-viṇā / stringed instrument or drum-quiver-waterpot-like /
resembling
jaṅghāyugam jayati devapati tvadīyam //
pair of calves / victory! / O Lord of Gods / of you.

I have rendered this verse as follows, trying to hold to word order, and to a certain suspense—to the string of descriptive phrases in the original that leads, at the end, in a funneling motion, to the object of the verse: the calves of the deity/temple image:

When you ran as messenger
between armies
or when you snatched the fine *dukūla* dresses
from the pretty cowgirls
of Vraj—

even when you ran down
the fleeing daityas,
they were there
to help you.
They shine like the slender *vīṇā*, the drum,
the quiver,

and golden waterpot
of Kāma,
divine Lord of desire:
May your two fine calves be victorious!

(p.22) Prosody and the Lines on the Page

As is obvious from the above example, though I try to hold in general to word order, and even in many cases, to the “left-branching” syntax of Sanskrit and Tamil poetry, I do not attempt to translate into English some version of the meter, rhyme pattern, or line length of the original. I have attempted to match, throughout these translations, the varying complex and densely configured semantic, syntactic, metric rhythms of the originals in the *visual* placement of words on the page, to mime the breath-lines—slow and loping, or swift, and clean—of Tamil, Sanskrit, or Prākṛit meters by placement on the page. Though my translations have no fixed meter, they are certainly far from random or “free”

in the loose sense of the term. I have thought long and hard on the spacing of English phrases, and it is the original that has guided me in my choices in English, even when the translation seems to differ most from the original *in form*. For instance, in the first verse of the Tamil *Navamaṇimālai*, Veṅkaṭeśa writes a clipped rhythmic, internally rhyming, alliterative and elliptical phrase *oru caṭai oṇṇiya kaṅkai tantana*—literally [the “Lord’s flower feet”] that gave the Gaṅgā, [that was] mingled in a lock [of Śiva’s matted hair].” In my English this becomes a line broken into visual rhythmic fragments:

they gave us the Gaṅgā
who fell, caught
by a single lock
of Śiva’s
matted
hair ...

This being said, I often construct densely spaced English verse-lines to match, for instance, a tightly constructed wall of Veṅkaṭeśa’s Tamil verses in the rich and complex *ācīriyappā* meter. At other times, my English verse is lean, elegant, and simple, matching the more economical original Tamil *veṇṇpā* meter.⁴⁵ Veṅkaṭeśa’s Tamil *Mumaṇikkōvai* and *Navamaṇimālai*, and his Sanskrit *Devanāyakaṇcāśat* and *Gopālavimśati* are all in mixed meters, and the reader will notice that I vary the form of each verse on the page in English, variations that are meant to mirror the different syntactic and semantic registers in the original verses, their metrical densities or transparencies. As for the Prākṛit *Acyutaśatakam*, it is composed in a single meter, the elegant, compact, often luminously simple *āryā* meter, and for this reason, though I use line breaks, indentations, and breath spacing on the page when appropriate to **(p.23)** semantic content, the verse forms will seem more uniform and compact. In general, the thinness of my English verse-stanzas is meant here to reflect the leaner, more compact, simpler structure of the *āryā* meter.

Most commonly, the translations in this book take a middle path between literal fidelity to the originals on the page and adapting the meter (but not the meaning) of the originals—their own internal tensions, the slow or speeded up rhythm of consonants, long or short vowels, consonant clusters, line and syllable length—utilizing oral, audial, and visual conventions of contemporary American verse.⁴⁶

Mumaṇikkōvai 4, for instance, more literally on the page, might look like this:

When the worlds are destroyed like bubbles that swell and burst in
the rains
only you are not destroyed, O Lord true to your servants;
when we set ourselves to work testing what is true we find that you
alone
are the truth of the precious Veda. O Devanāyaka, you dwell with Śrī,

your own divine splendor; you *are* the Śrī for she who adorns you;
your good nature shines like the moon with its light
a lovely well-oiled lamp of inextinguishable splendor;
you abide standing here a shoreless sea of nectar infinite
accessibility joined with auspicious qualities like many jewels in the
waters of the Milk Ocean;
you are a king who rules his subjects with grace choosing to ignore
the faults of your servants; exalted Lord, you mingle with us here
becoming for our sake
the Lord who lives in Ahindra town; you have clothed yourself in all
the *tattvas*:
the essential truths are the ornaments and weapons you wear on
your great body
that glimmers like a dark multicolored gem;
you are the body of the most high vast Lord in the sky, inscrutable
Vāsudeva;
you, his four *vyūhas*, transformations seen in deepest meditation:
assuming many other forms, the twelve names and the rest abiding,
your fine sweet forms are everywhere: Matsya the Fish the Tortoise
the Boar

(p.24)

the Man-Lion and the Dwarf who measured the sky; the brahmin
with the axe
Paraśurāma the Sage and then two Rāmas the god-king and his
brother;
as Kaṇṇaṇ of Dvāraka to ease Earth's burden,
and in time to come Kalki who will out of grace call an end to this
Kali Age.

After taking on many holy forms to destroy powerful karmas eager to
spread, you have come to this place so your good servants might
taste here the perfect sweetness of heaven. You along with Śrī are
the one life-breath of the world;
your bliss is to give life to all growing things;
you hide in all things, though no one knows the secret; pervading
every perfect and suitable body you yet surpass yourself, you stand
beyond it all
you fill us with wonder.
We do not see any other way or goal in this world but you alone who
accept our surrender. The pure Veda discerns infinite means and
forms of existence
all of which are your forms, you, abiding
the many means to the one goal.

Although this kind of placement of lines in English does potentially work in its
own way, and would demand its own aesthetic conventions in English, the final
form of the translation, forming breath-lines, and a certain visualization of pace
and syntactic tension, mediates between various forces of new creation and
mimesis across very different languages.

Only rarely do I add an extra English word or phrase to fill out the original. This would be to give the reader a sense of a rich image or set of images that are contained in a single Sanskrit, Tamil, or Prākṛit word or phrase, or to fill out a too-elliptical phrase (as the one above about the god Śiva). Such a fill-in occurs in my translation of verse 49 of the Prākṛit *Acyutaśatakam*. The phrase is *ghaṇakandalikandakaalīkhambhasamāim*: “resembling the [soft] stems of plantain (*kadalī*) and roots of thick *kandalī*.” Both these images are meant to evoke frailty and transience—for some commentators *ghaṇa* also has the separate meaning of “cloud”—but *kandalikanda* houses a particularly evocative image. In Tamil, as the commentators note, white-flowering *kandalī* evokes *nāykkuṭai*, a small frail growth seen in fields after rain.

I have tried in my translation of this Prākṛit verse to foreground this image, which has called for a bit of padding. I quote below the original verse, and my translation. Note also, following the discussion above, the economical **(p.25)** *āryā* meter in the original, and, even with the addition of a phrase, the corresponding tightness of the English verse lines:

na mahenti ṇaṇavantā taraṅgaḍiṇḍirabubbuasaricchāim /
do not take as great / those who know / of waves in the sea / foam /
bubbles / resembling
vihipamuhāṇa paāim ghaṇakandalikandakaalīkhambhasamāim:
beginning with Brahmā and others / realms: stations / thick: or
clouds / *kandalī* roots / *kadalī* or plantain stems / resembling.

Those who know think little of the starry realms of Brahmā
and the others

those places like the bubbles and spume of waves or clouds
the soft stems of plantain

or the frail roots of white-flowering *kandalī*

thick in fields
after rain.

This Book and Its Tradition

I see this book ideally side by side with other translations of Indian literature that I have long admired, and that have provided for me various, sometimes opposed, models of translation. In the acknowledgments I have already spoken of the work of A. K. Ramanujan, and above, of Hank Heifetz; there is also the work of Martha Selby in Sanskrit, Prākṛit, and Tamil; and that of David Shulman, Indira Peterson, and particularly of George Hart, whose commitment to an English style that better reflects the densely woven, compact syntactic and semantic structures of Tamil and Sanskrit in the original poems continues to challenge me to move closer to original line breaks and rhythm while preserving a contemporary free-verse form.⁴⁷ As any translator will admit, this is an

ongoing process, and one that rather haunts the writer than consoles. As for older influences, the translations of Panikkar's *Mantramañjarī* and the still-compelling, more poetically idiosyncratic, versions of Sanskrit and Prākṛit poems in Masson and Merwin's collection, *The Peacock's Egg*, first inspired me to want to study Sanskrit and Prākṛit.⁴⁸ I read and savored the English translations of *Rg Veda* and the luminous poetry of the Upaniṣads, the Sanskrit love lyrics of Kālidāsa, Bhavabhūti, and the *Amaruśatakam*, and the Prākṛit love poetry of Hāla's *Sattasāī*, all of which in turn invited me deeper into the poems and languages that were their sources.

(p.26) It is my hope that the translations in this book will inspire readers not only who know something of Veṅkaṭeśa's languages and south Indian devotional tradition, but will inspire those who have not yet studied the three magnificent languages used here by one of the most remarkable poets of medieval south India.

Notes:

(1.) See Rebecca Manring, *Reconstructing Tradition: Advaita Ācārya and Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism at the Cusp of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 17–43, for a detailed discussion of the uses of hagiography to understand the internal historical and theological development of a tradition, in this case, the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava tradition through narratives of the holy life of sixteenth-century sectarian teacher Advaita Ācārya. Manring is also preparing a volume of translations from the Middle Bengali *Advaita Prakāśa*, hagiographical narratives about Advaita Ācārya.

(2.) For a detailed treatment of narrative sources in the life of Veṅkaṭeśa, see my full-length study of the poet-philosopher, *Singing the Body of God*, 48–75. See also Satyavrata Singh, *Vedānta Deśika*, and Friedhelm Hardy, “The Philosopher as Poet—A Study of Vedāntadeśika's *Dehalīśastuti*.” For a reference to the few historical/epigraphical sources we have of the poet's dates, provenance, and possible religiopolitical affiliations with Telugu kings and princes, see Filliozat's introduction to his translation of Veṅkaṭeśa's *Varadarājapañcāśat*. I quote in full a passage on Veṅkaṭeśa and the Telugu prince, cited at the beginning of this introduction: “A tradition recorded by Śrīnivāsaśūri in his *Ratnapreṭika*, a commentary on [Veṅkaṭeśa's] *Subhāṣitanīvī* says that the king Śiṅga in Rājamahendra (Rajamundry), a distant disciple, by a desire to learn the tenets of Śrīvaiṣṇavas, sent śrīvaiṣṇava [sic] Brahmins to Vedānta Deśika in Śrīraṅgam, who received them and wrote for their king *Rahasyasaṃdeśa*, *Tattvasaṃdeśa* and one verse. This king can be identified with Śiṅgaya Nāyaka who belonged to a royal family ruling at Koṛukuḷḍa (Rajamundry taluk) in the 14th century. The connection of this family with śrīvaiṣṇava [sic] teachers is also known by other inscriptional sources. Śiṅgaya Nāyaka appears in an inscription in 1368.” The other source is the Śrī-raṅgam inscription, treated in some detail in *Singing the*

Body of God, and the colophon of a Telugu *kāvya*. See *Vedāntadeśika's Varadarājapañcāśat*, with Sanskrit Commentary by Karūr Śrīnivāsācārya, x.

(3.) See, for an exhaustive treatment of *anubhava* as devotional and ritual “experience,” but even more as gestural commentary and “exegetis,” see Archana Venkatesan, “Āṭṭāl and Her Magic Mirror: Her Life as a Poet in the Guises of the Goddess. The Exegetical Strategies of Tamil Śrīvaiṣṭavas in the Apotheosis of Āṭṭāl.” (Ph.D. dissertation, Department of South and Southeast Asian Studies, University of California, Berkeley, Fall 2004). For a brief but important treatment of *anubhava* as performance, as acts of devotion, mimesis, and memory, see Daves Soneji, “Performing Satyabhāmā: Text, Context, Memory, and Mimesis in Telugu-Speaking South India” (Ph.D. dissertation, Faculty of Religious Studies, McGill University, Montreal, April 2004).

(4.) From Veṅkaṭeśa's *Varadarājapañcāśat*, 45–47. Text taken from *Śrīdeśikastotramālā*, by Śrī Rāmatēcikācāryar. See discussion in *Singing the Body of God*, 193–194.

(5.) See Davis, *Lives of Indian Images*. I utilize the theoretical perspectives of Davis, along with the work of David Freedberg, C. F. Fuller, and Gérard Colas, among others, in my discussion of Veṅkaṭeśa's poems for icons in *Singing the Body of God*.

(6.) There is an intriguing functional equivalent to such a structure of asymmetry in the work of the great fourth-century CE. Eastern Orthodox Christian mystical theologian from Cappadocia, Gregory of Nyssa. In Gregory's *Dialogue on the Soul and the Resurrection*, and also in his vivid and elegant *Vitae* of his sister Macrina, such asymmetry of lover and beloved is represented, on the one hand, by “Gregory” himself as the weepy, emotionally vulnerable and needy lover, and on the other, his sister Macrina, as the ideal body of the saint, the *telos* of Christian experience, “dry” and impassible, whose transcendent *erōs* is channeled upward to god. I link these texts of Gregory to forms of “extravagant beholding” in the sequential bodily descriptions (*waṣf*; *awṣāf*) of the Hebrew *Song of Songs* and Arabic *nasīb-ghazals*, and in Veṅkaṭeśa's Śrīvaiṣṭava *anubhavas*, in a forthcoming comparative study of love, ideal bodies, and particularity. For a relevant discussion of Gregory, see Virginia Burrus, “A Son's Legacy: Gregory of Nyssa,” in *Begotten Not Made: Conceiving Manhood in Late Antiquity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 80–133. See also my article “Extravagant Beholding: Love, Ideal Bodies and Particularity.”

(7.) See, among Panikkar's various articles and books that deal with this theme of the “tempiternal present,” “El presente tempiterno.” I also treat the theme of a transfigured time (and space) in the literary structure of Sanskrit poetry in “Lovers, Messengers, and Beloved Landscapes.”

(8.) For a more detailed introduction to Veṅkaṭeśa as philosopher and poet, along with the significance of the themes of shrines, icons, and religious cosmopolitanism, see *Singing the Body of God*, 6-12.

(9.) See also *Singing the Body of God*, 80-82.

(10.) See his "Afterword" in *Hymns for the Drowning*, 103.

(11.) See Hardy, *Viraha-bhakti*, 241-280 and passim for an exhaustive literary, stylistic and structural analysis of the Āḷvār corpus of poems, the *Diviyapirapantam* (Skt: *Divyaprabandham*). The corpus itself, though it contained poems whose dates span the period between the sixth and ninth centuries, was itself compiled by the Ācārya Nāthamuni in the tenth century.

(12.) "Devotion" in the widest sense of the term would include Buddhist ritual veneration of images, texts, stūpas, and relics as well as Jain veneration of texts, Tīrthāṅkaras, goddesses (*yakṣiṅīs*), and teachers (*guru vandana*).

(13.) Any dating of the *Gītā* is by necessity only tentative. Van Buitenen dates its composition in circa 200 BCE. See *The Bhagavadgītā in the Mahābhārata*, translated and edited by J.A.B. van Buitenen (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 6. For a discussion of the bhakti context of the *Harivaṃśa*, a post-*Mahābhārata* chronicle about the Vṛṣṇis and Andhakas that focuses on the Krishna legend, and early Purāṇas such as the *Viṣṇu* and *Brahma Purāṇas*, and Bhāsa's *Bālacarita-nāṭaka*, see Hardy, *Viraha-bhakti*, 65-104. For an excellent overview of theories on the development of various forms of bhakti, from Birardeau's global theory of bhakti that sees continuity from the Vedic *Yajur Veda*, Upaniṣads such as the *Kaṭha* and *Śvetāśvatara*, and the *Gītā*, to later forms of devotion, to those more recent approaches that emphasize localization that focus on "emotionalism," see Prentiss, *The Embodiment of Bhakti*, esp. the Introduction and 17-41.

(14.) See Stein, *Peasant, State, and Society in Medieval South India*, 78.

(15.) It is not entirely clear who these nonpeasant adversaries of the peasants of the Coromandel plain actually were. They are variously called by the name *kaḷabhra* (Pali: *kalabba*) or *kaḷavar*. Stein summarizes: "When, for how long, by whom and which of the Coromandel peasantry were subjugated is not clear. Whether it was a single conquering people from beyond the Tamil plain, as has been suggested, or from within the region, and whether the conquest was that of a single people or many, are queries unanswerable from the extant evidence" (*ibid.*, 76-77).

(16.) *Ibid.*, 78.

(17.) Ibid., 78–79. Stein quotes as sources for his remarks on Hsüang-tsang and inscriptional evidence on the ascendancy of “heretical” groups: K. A. Nilakanta Sastri, *The Culture and History of the Tamils* (Calcutta: Firma K. L. Mukhopadhyay, 1965), 113–114, and C. Minakshi, *Administraion and Social Life under the Pallavas* (Madras: University of Madras, 1938), 213–238.

(18.) For background on the period just before and after the ascendancy of Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava sectarian movements, see Leslie Orr, “Jain and Hindu ‘Religious Women’ in Early Medieval Tamil Nadu.” Orr's richly documented discussion of Jain and Hindu women during this period belies any sense that Jains were either “foreigners” in the Tamil land, or somehow—as a persistent Hindu narrative would have it—“pessimistic, antisocial, anti-woman, puritanical, and un-Tamil” (187). For an attempt to reconstruct the lineaments of Tamil Buddhism during this period through a close reading of texts such as the *Maḷimēkalai*; one of the surviving Tamil Buddhist grammars, the *Vīracōḷiyam*, and its commentary; various commentaries on *caṅkam* poetry; and a Tamil “translation” of Daḍḍin, see Ann E. Monius, *Imagining a Place for Buddhism*.

(19.) Stein, *Peasant, State, and Society in Medieval South India*, 80–81.

(20.) The Jains, according to the *Periyapurāṇam* account, lost two wagers with Campantar after the child saint had successfully cured the Pāḍḍiyaṅ of his sickness by singing a decad of praises to Śiva. One had to do with a test of fire, and another of water. In the first test, Campantar's verses inscribed on palm leaves survived a fire intact, while the inscribed leaves of the Jains burned to ashes; in the second test, yet another decad of Campantar's verses successfully drifted upstream against the powerful currents of the Vaikai River, while the Jains' inscribed leaves were hopelessly washed downstream. It is after these two losses that the Jains were impaled. For an English summary of this episode, see *Periya Puranam: A Tamil Classic on the Great Saiva Saints of South India* by Sekkizhaar, Condensed English Version by G. Vanmikanathan (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1985), 245–262. There is also a striking fresco panel (ca. sixteenth-century Nayak) depicting the bonfire of the palm leaves, the river, and the impaled Jain monks on the outer walls of the Bṛhadīśvara temple in Tanjore. Whatever the veracity of this episode (it is Śaiva and Cōḷa in origin, and does not appear in Jain sources), it is a powerful index of the vehemence of this steady “shift” in power. See Chakravarti, *Jaina Literature in Tamil*, 31. For a detailed treatment of Tamil Śaiva constructions of Jains from the twelfth century, see Peterson, “Śramaṇas against the Tamil Way.” See also Davis, “The Story of the Disappearing Jains,” 213–224, and Prentiss, *The Embodiment of Bhakti*, 61–76.

(21.) For a nuanced treatment of Parakāla's hagiographical sources, see Hardy, “The Śrīvaiṣṇava Hagiography of Parakāla.” For the general context, see Dehejia, “The Persistence of Buddhism in Tamil Nadu,” esp. 58. See also, along with Parakāla's hagiography and the end-verses in his own poetry, the poems of

Tirumaḷicaiyālvār (who is said to have been a Jain before his conversion to Vaiṣṇavism), and those of Tolṭaratippotiālvār for attacks and invectives against the Jains and Buddhists.

(22.) See Hardy, *Viraha-bhakti*, 242: “About ninety-five temples provide the external structure for this bhakti, and one could in fact define the ‘movement’ as the totality of Kṛṣṇaite bhakti culture associated with the ninety-five temples, from about the sixth to about the tenth century.” For a discussion of the geography and chronology of the religious environments of the Ālvār corpus, see *ibid.*, 256–270. For a fine survey of the development of Śaiva self-identity from the Pallava period to the consolidation of the community with the *Periya Purāḷam*, see Prentiss, *The Embodiment of Bhakti*, 81ff. For an excellent treatment of pilgrimage in the Śaiva tradition and its role in the development of the poetry, see Peterson, “Singing of a Place.” See also Gros and Gopal Iyer, *Tēvāram: Hymns śaivites du pays tamoul*, lvii–lxi. For a thematic anthology of the Śaiva saint-poets, see Peterson's *Poems to Śiva*. For an overview of the Vaiṣṇava Ālvārs and their sacred geography, see Ramanujan's “Afterword” to *Hymns for the Drowning*, and Hardy, *Viraha-bhakti*, 241–480. See also Cutler's study of both Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava materials in *Songs of Experience*.

(23.) In the case of the Vaiṣṇava *Divyaprabandham*, Hardy (*Viraha-bhakti*, 270–271) finds three different groups of poems: 1) reflective poetry in the *veḷpā* meter, each stanza being linked to the previous one by *antāti*, i.e., where the last word of each stanza is repeated as the first word in the next, etc. This form has exacting rules of rhyme, assonance, and so on; 2) the “emotional song-poem” or *tirumoḷi*—a “sacred word-of-mouth”—what we might call “hymn”; each *tirumoḷi* contains nine or ten stanzas and a *phalaśruti* or final verse describing the merit accrued by listening to or reading the song; and 3) “experimental poems” that appropriate the idioms and images of earlier Tamil classical love poetry of the *Caṅkam* period (first to third centuries C.E.). Most notable is the *Tiruviruttam* of Nammālvār which, in Hardy's words, “replaces the *veḷpā* metre by the *viruttam* in the *antāti* structure, while experimenting with *akattiṇai* themes.” *Akattiṇai* refers to the *akam*-style love poems of classical Tamil, a model for Ālvār religious poetry (see discussion, particularly of Veṅkaṭeśa's Tamil *prabandhams* for Devanāyaka in chapter 4 of *Singing the Body of God*, 115–118, and below, “A Necklace of Three Jewels for the Lord of Gods: The *Mumaḷikkōvai*”).

(24.) See Gros and Iyer, *Tēvāram*, for a discussion of the place of Āgamic ritual and esoterism in the poems of the Nāyaṇmār. Dennis Hudson for many years traced the Pāñcarātra ritual and esoteric elements in the poetry of the Ālvārs through his study of the eighth-century Vaikuḷṭha Perumāl temple in Kāñcī. See *The Body of God: An Emperor's Palace for Krishna in Eighth-Century Kanchipuram* (forthcoming).

(25.) Most of these poems form Hardy's third group of poems in the Āḷvār corpus, though these motifs also appear in the *tirumolis* as well (see note 23 above).

(26.) See Stein, *Peasant, State, and Society in Medieval South India*, 83.

(27.) For a discussion of the early Ācāryas and their Sanskrit bhakti poetics, see Narayanan, *The Way and Goal*, and Nayar, *Poetry as Theology*. See also Gonda, *Medieval Religious Literature in Sanskrit*, 256-257, for a very short account of the Śrīvaiṣṇava *stotra* tradition with no reference to Tamil models. On p. 241 Gonda does mention, in a general way, possible Āḷvār influences on a genre of Sanskrit descriptive poetry.

(28.) Nayar, *Poetry as Theology*.

(29.) See Hardy, "The Philosopher as Poet," 278-279.

(30.) See *Singing the Body of God*, chapter 1, esp. 30-38, for a detailed account of the development of this tradition.

(31.) This combines two of Sheldon Pollock's theses on the flourishing of the Sanskrit "cosmopolis" in South Asia up to 1100, and his theories of the "vernacular millennium" and the "cosmopolitan vernacular." I treat in some detail these theories as they apply to Veṅkaṭeśa's use of Tamil, Sanskrit, and Prākṛit throughout *Singing the Body of God* (see esp. 10-11 and Conclusion, 233-234). For Pollock's seminal essays, see "The Cosmopolitan Vernacular," "India in the Vernacular Millennium," and "The Sanskrit Cosmopolis, 300-1300."

(32.) See *Singing the Body of God*, chapter 2: 48-75, for a detailed account of the historiographical and hagiographical sources of Veṅkaṭeśa's life.

(33.) See the introductory sections of *Singing the Body of God*, 3-6, for a full account of this richly evocative scene, and the significance of these three languages.

(34.) See *ibid.*, 12-15.

(35.) See Jorge Luis Borges, "Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote," in *Collected Fictions*, translated by Andrew Hurley (New York: Penguin, 1999), 88-95.

(36.) For a detailed discussion of ideas about translation of Veṅkaṭeśa's poetry, see *Singing the Body of God*, 15-21.

(37.) See *Proensa: An Anthology of Troubadour Poetry*, translated by Paul Blackburn, xviii.

(38.) See Benjamin's seminal essay "The Task of the Translator," 69–82; for quotation, see p. 80. Cf. also Benjamin's early essay "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man," where all names are merely a reflection (*Abbild*) of the singular transcendental divine Word, and all human languages, "naming words" (*nennendes Wort*), are "translations," in various orders of accuracy and magnitude, of that Word of God. See also Introduction to Benjamin, *Reflections*, xxiii.

(39.) Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," 76.

(40.) See Steiner, *After Babel*, 302: "But there can be no doubt that echo enriches, that it is more than shadow and inert simulacrum. We are back at the problem of the mirror which not only reflects but also generates light. The original text gains from the orders of diverse relationship and distance established between itself and the translations. The reciprocity is dialectic: new formats of significance are initiated by distance and by contiguity. Some translations edge us away from the canvas, others brings us close." See also his concept of "vitalizing responses" in *Real Presences*, 17. Cf. also my discussion of Venkateśa's "reflexivity" in *Singing the Body of God*, 242–243. For an excellent discussion of translation as an art that affirms the original while creating a new poem, art translated as art, see Willis Barnstone, *The Poetics of Translation*, esp: 88–107.

(41.) See Smith, "A Twice-Told Tale: The History of the History of Religions' History," in *Relating Religion*, 362–374: "Indeed, the cognitive power of any translation, model, map, generalization or redescription—as, for example, in the imagination of 'religion'—is, by this understanding, a result of its difference from the subject matter in question and not its congruence. This conclusion has, by and large, been resisted throughout the history of the history of religions. But this resistance has carried a price. Too much work by scholars of religion takes the form of a paraphrase, our style of ritual repetition, which is a particularly weak mode of translation, insufficiently different from its subject matter for purposes of thought" (372). See also Smith's introduction to *Relating Religion*, "When the Chips Are Down," 28–32.

(42.) See Smith, "Close Encounters of Diverse Kinds," in *Relating Religion*, 303–322.

(43.) See *Singing the Body of God*, 15–21, from which some of this discussion is adapted.

(44.) From *Śrī Vedānta Deśika's Stotras (with English Translation)* by Late Sriman S. S. Raghavan et al.

(45.) For an excellent discussion of Tamil prosody that also points to parallels in Sanskrit and Prākṛit, see Hart, *The Poems of Ancient Tamil*, 197–210.

(46.) One of the most extraordinary examples of the marriage of meters in two different poetic languages—a seventeen-syllable unrhymed modern Greek and English unrhymed hexameters (with some variation)—is Kimon Friar's magnificent translation of Nikos Kazantzakis's *The Odyssey: A Modern Sequel* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1958). See especially the Introduction, xxvi-xxxvi, and "An Additional Note on Prosody," 814-817.

(47.) See Hank Heifetz's *The Origin of the Young God*, his translation, with introduction, of Kālidāsa's *Kumārasambhava*, a seminal early Sanskrit *kāvya*, and one of Veṅkaṭeśa's models. For south Indian bhakti poetry, there is Ramanujan's anthology of Nammālvār's Tamil poems, *Hymns for the Drowning*; Indira Peterson's anthology of Tamil Śaiva poems from the *Tēvāram*, *Poems to Śiva*; David Shulman's vigorous translations of Śaiva saint-poet Cuntaramūrṭti, *Songs of the Harsh Devotee*, and Ramanujan's *Speaking of Śiva*, from the Kannaḍa *vacanas*. See also George Hart and Hank Heifetz's translations from the twelfth-century Tamil poet Kambaṅ, *The Forest Book of the Rāmāyaḷa of Kambaṅ*; Heifetz and Narayana Rao's *For the Lord of Animals*, poems from the Telugu of Dhūrjati; and, for all three of the language traditions important to Veṅkaṭeśa, Martha Selby's *Grow Long, Blessed Night*, an elegantly translated anthology of love poems from Sanskrit, Tamil, and Māhārāṣṭrī Prākṛit. Cf. also, for north Indian texts, Vinay Dharwadker's *Kabīr*, Dilip Chitre's *Tukaram*, Chase Twitchell and Tony Stewart's *Lover of God*; and for a model outside of Indian literary tradition, see Michael Sells's translations of Arabic *qaṣīdas* and the *nasīb-ghazals* of Sufi poet Ibn 'Arabī: *Desert Traces*, "Ibn 'Arabī's 'Gentle Now'" and *Stations of Desire*.

(48.) See Panikkar, with the collaboration of N. Shanta, M.A.R. Rogers, B. Baumer, and M. Bidoli, *The Vedic Experience: Mantramañjarī*, and Merwin and Masson, *The Peacock's Egg*.

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