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Sanskrit from Tamil Nadu: At Play in the Forests of the Lord: The *Gopalavimshati* of Vedantadeshika

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Dark Forests in Tamil Land

Standing on top of the hill overlooking the temple and the gentle curve of the blue Garuda River in the Tamil land, he thinks he can still hear the happy noise of churning curds and the tinkling of anklets, the slinking bangles and dances in the courtyards of the cowherd boys. Through the air redolent of jasmine sound the long and lovely notes of a flute, the shrieking and laughter of girls in a village tank, and the sad, painful howling of the demoness Putana. Northern Mathura and the dark mythical forests of Vrindavan are *here*, at this hal-
lowed South Indian place, Tiruvahindrapuram, looped by *areca* and coconut groves and fields of paddy: Krishna the god-king looks out from the consecrated wide-open eyes of the standing image of Lord Vishnu Devanayaka in his dim sanctum lit by ghee-lamps and heavy with the odors of camphor and *champak* and *kasturi*.

The play, the *lila*, is here, in this place, as it is in his heart, in his mind on fire with divine love. Glorious visions, the play in the forests of the Lord, are here, in the tropics of Tamil land.

He has spent long hours on this hill below the temple near the Hayagriva shrine, meditating on Him, on Vishnu/Krishna, Mayon, Trickster Lord of Jasmine, visualizing his *mantras*, mentally entering a *yantra*, a magical ritual field spread with red flowers: he had mentally constructed his images of the Lord with Sarasvati on his lap, felt his poetic and spiritual powers wax and dazzle. But one night

something else happened, something more than ritual graces, or the inevitable results of polished, disciplined meditation and practice of *Pancharatra rites*.

He was touched. Inhabited.

Late one night, long after evening worship, while he stood before the Devanayaka image in Tiruvahindrapuram temple, he was beheld by the god, and so transported—to another world, to the Krishna-world within that image of Vishnu. Held in thrall by that gaze, he saw, and he sang what he saw in verses of exquisite Sanskrit.

Though all forms of Lord Vishnu are here in this temple image and unfold in serried theological array before his willing singers, the Boar and the Warrior Brahmin, Tortoise, Man-Lion, and Dwarf, Buddha and Rama—that evening the poet Venkatesha was struck by the luminous beauty of the Lord's most sweet form as Krishna, the cowherd and king, handsome Kannan, lover of *gopis* and child-prince of thieves from the forests of Vrindavan.

It is said that then he composed this poem, the *Gopalavimshati*, at Tiruvahindrapuram. After praising the manifold forms and powers and exploits of Vishnu as Devanayaka in Sanskrit, Tamil, and Maharashtri poems of great power and theological sophistication, he also sung this praise of Vishnu as Krishna come down from the north. This Krishna who had, from an early time, already entered Tamil consciousness as the god of the jasmine landscape.

It is to this poem we will turn, after some words of introduction. We need to explore who this Venkatesha is, and the significance of his praises of Krishna in the thirteenth–fourteenth centuries in Tamil Nadu.

Vedantadeshika: A “Lion among Poets and Philosophers”

The medieval South Indian saint-poet, theologian, and philosopher Venkatanatha, or Venkatesha (c. 1268–1369) is most commonly known by his epithet Vedantadeshika (“preceptor of the Vedanta”), or Deshika. Vedantadeshika is one of the most important brahmin *acharyas* (sectarian preceptors) of the Srivaishnava community of South India, a particular Vaishnava community that worships a personal god in the form of Lord Vishnu, one of the high gods of Hindu tradition, along with his consort-goddess Sri, or Lakshmi.¹ This community, which first developed around the tenth–eleventh centuries, claims the Tamil poems of the *alvars*, especially those of the saint-poet Nammalvar, as equal in status to the Sanskrit Veda (see chapter 7 here). Long after Deshika's death, he was claimed as the founding *acharya* of the Vatakalai, or “northern” school of Srivaishnavism, centered in the ancient holy city of Kanchipuram in northern Tamil Nadu. Deshika's early association with the northern city of Kanchi would be a significant source of his broad learning, his polylinguism,

and what might be termed his “cosmopolitanism.” For Kanchipuram, even before the time of Deshika, had long been associated 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 Pali and Tamil.

Along with working in three major languages of his southern tradition, Deshika was a master of many genres of philosophical prose and poetry. He wrote long ornate religious poems (*kavyas*) in Sanskrit; a Sanskrit allegorical drama (*natyam*); long religious lyric hymns (*stotras* and *prabandhams*) in Sanskrit, Maharashtri Prakrit, and Tamil; and commentaries and original works of philosophy, theology, and logic in Sanskrit and in a hybrid combination of the Sanskrit and Tamil languages called *Manipravala* (“jewels” and “coral”). Tradition ascribes to him the resounding epithets *kavitarkikasimha*, “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. Deshika was master of all *tantras* (this term embraces multiple genres of texts); he was also both a *kavi* (master poet) and a *tarkika* (logician/debater/philosopher). Tensions and complementarities between poet and philosopher, the devotional lyric and theological prose, are enacted within the same person.

Deshika’s devotional poetry combines in a dynamic way the local/regional literary prestige of Tamil with the pan-regional aesthetic prestige and power of Sanskrit (with Maharashtri as Middle Indo-Aryan literary spice). Deshika’s writings expand the linguistic field of South Indian devotion beyond the normative claims either of Sanskrit or Tamil devotional texts. 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.

Krishna in a World of Vishnu

In the Tamil religious literature of South India, Krishna rarely stands alone as an object of devotion. In the poetry of saint-poets, from the earliest Tamil *alvars* around the eighth–tenth centuries to the Sanskrit *stotras* of *acharyas* from the twelfth to the fourteenth centuries, Krishna comes, as it were, layered with other forms (*avatars*, or incarnations) of Vishnu. As Vidya Dehejia noted long ago, even in the *tirumolis* of the woman *alvar* Antal, one of the most passionate poets of Krishna the Cowherd Lover, Krishna and Vishnu are “not sharply differentiated.”² Krishna in Antal is a composite god who mirrors various forms of Vishnu, whether it be the cosmic form of Ranganatha, asleep on the ocean of milk between creations, Vamana, the Dwarf who spanned and

measured the worlds, Narasimha the Man-Lion, the Boar, or Rama of the *Ramayana*. There are also complex allusions to the ancient Tamil deity of the “jasmine landscape” (forest or pasture), the *pavai* ritual rites for rain and fertility performed by young women in the month of *Markali*, and other references that place this “Krishna” squarely within a specifically Tamil literary and cultural landscape.³ Vasudha Narayanan, in *The Way and the Goal*, her study of devotion in early Srivaishnava tradition, makes this argument also for Periyalvar, another well-known Tamil saint-poet of Krishna. She notes the oscillation between Rama and Krishna in various verses of the *Periyalvar Tirumoli*, including a set of game songs wherein the poet volleys back and forth with praises of each form of Vishnu, ending with a signature verse wherein both forms, Rama and Krishna, are praised in one breath equally: “Nanda’s son and Kakutstha.”⁴

One of the most vivid and charming evocations of the child Krishna in *alvar* Tamil literature and the later Sanskrit *stotras* of the *acharyas* is of the child-god tied (impossibly!) to a mortar by a “tight-knotted string” (*kanninunciruttampu*). One of the most extended meditations on this image is in the *Atimanusha Stava* of Kurattalvan, where the butter-thief of Yashoda’s house, his hair smeared with the mud of grazing cows, is inseparable in the poet’s vision from other *avataras* of Vishnu, for they are all present before the poet’s eyes in the temple image of Vishnu (the *archavataram*), the supreme center of gravity of most Tamil and Sanskrit poems in early Vaishnava literature.⁵

This kind of layering, where “Krishna” is but one form of Vishnu being praised, even in verses dominated by images of the Cowherd Boy or the Mountain Lifter, is also common in the Sanskrit *stotras* and Tamil *prabandhams* of Vedantadeshika. Verse 9 from his Tamil *Meyviratamanmiyam* (to Varadaraja Perumal at Kanchi) is characteristic of this multiple layering: first we have Rama, then the child-god Krishna, and then, in a funneling motion, an evocation of place and specific temple *archavataram* (here Varadaraja Perumal at Kanchi).⁶

The hero
 who felled in one cluster
 the ten heads
 of the well-armed demon
 with an arrow
 let loose
 from the lovely graceful bow
 fitted
 for the exalted field
 of battle;

our great father
 who ate the sweet butter spread
 on the surface

of brimming jars fit
for churning:

he is here,
on Elephant Hill,
that cuts to the root
more cleanly
than his Discus—
that mere ornament—
the sins
of the devotees!

In the Sanskrit *stotra* to Devanayaka Swami at Tiruvahindrapuram, amid verses filled with allusions to every *avatara*, there comes this verse that could have almost come out of Antal:⁷

O Lord of immortals,
mad with love,
my mind kisses your lower lip red as *bimba* fruit,
as the tender young shoots
from the coral tree
of paradise:
your lips enjoyed by young cowgirls,
by your flute
and by the prince
of conch-shells.

This being said, Deshika also wrote in Sanskrit some distinguished poetry focused on Krishna and Krishna-*lila* alone. First, there is his long *mahakavya* on the “life” of Krishna, the *Yadavabhyudayam*, or “Glory of the Yadavas,” and second, his *stotra* composed at Tiruvahindrapuram for Devanayaka, the *Gopalavimshati*, a cycle of “twenty” verses (plus a *phalashruti* or concluding signature verse) for Gopala, the Cowherd God.

The Splendor of the Yadavas: A *Kavya* for Krishna

The *Yadavabhyudayam* is quite a virtuosic performance in the grand style of the *mahakavya*. Its twenty-four *sargas* contain all requisite literary and cosmological elements of a grand *kavya* as set down in Dandin’s *Kavyadarsha*, including the most elaborate, mind-numbing word-plays and pictures (*chitra-kavya*); various delights and diversions, along with “instruction” (*upadesha*); the goals of *dharma*, *artha*, *kama*, and *moksha*; creation narratives; dynastic genealogies; and the full arsenal of *rasas* (conventional aesthetic emotional states) and *alamkaras*

(literary ornamentations/figures of speech).⁸ A luminous work on the model of Kalidasa's *Raghuvamsha* on the life of Rama and the *Krishnakarnamritam*, a South Indian Krishna *kavya* that became so influential in later Bengali Vaisnavism,⁹ Deshika's *kavya* on Krishna is an encyclopedic treatment of the Krishna-*katha* (narrative) and *lila* (divine "play"). The poem mingles religious and "secular" forms of love and separation, the erotic (*shringara*), the heroic (*vira*), and awesome (*adbhuta*) forms of aesthetic experience (*rasa*), the royal and pastoral forms of narrative, and charm and gravity in ways distinctly suited to this polymorphous child-cowherd-lover-god-king.

After a first *sarga* of praise-verses (*stotras*), Deshika depicts, in the meticulous word-pictures of *kavya* style, the remarkable progress of Devaki's pregnancy, with descriptions of twilight (*samdhya*), the moon, and the cries of *chakravaka* birds. The third and fourth *sargas* speak, respectively, of Krishna's coming to Gokula, his substitution for the girl-child Maya, and the destruction of various demons and pests sent to kill him, such as Putana, the "false mother" demoness (*rakshasi*) and the great *naga* Kaliya. *Sarga* 5 is an exquisite description of the seasons (*ritumala*), replete with descriptions of the paddy harvest, red *indragopa* bugs, dark monsoon clouds, dark hills, rain and rushing rivers in autumn, and intoxicated peahens. *Sarga* 6 is a *chitra-kavya*, filled with word-pictures, puns, and all manner of verbal conceits, including the visualization of *yantras*, or ritual devices for meditation. The seventh *sarga* describes Krishna lifting up Govardhan Hill—with expansive natural description—and the eighth contains the famous *ras-lila*, Krishna's circle-dance with the *gopis*, and their subsequent "watersports" (*jalakrida*). The latter *sarga* contains many technical references to dance and to music, consonant with the encyclopedic spirit of the *mahakavya*. Later *sargas* deal with various seminal events, such as Krishna's return to Mathura after the message of Akrura; his conquering of Kamsa; his kingship in Dvaraka and his marriage to Rukmini; the killing of Narakasura and his marriage to the sixteen thousand women; the theft of the *parijata* from Indra's realm and his return by "aerial car" over a dizzying landscape; a series of vivid "waking verses" in the erotic mode (*tiruppalliyelucci* in Tamil), and a remarkable *digvijaya*, or royal progress through his lands that includes a virtual social and political map of the North. Next comes a summary of the Mahabharata war, and finally, in *sarga* 24, a auspicious description of Krishna with his innumerable wives at home in Dvaraka, stopping short before his legendary ignominious death at the hands of a hunter in the epic *Mahabharata* account.

The Yadava *kavya* ends, unlike the *Mahabharata*, with auspicious images of Krishna as loving householder and husband; it also qualifies his worldly pleasures with the chastening warning that, while Krishna seems to be one whose mind is bent on sense-pleasures (*sambhoge ca pravanamanasah*), he is (at the same time) "perpetually" celibate (*brahmacharyam*). This is no worldly story of love, loss, and recovery: Dvaraka is not only some North Indian

kingdom but is the “entire universe” (*sarvalokam*). One who knows this will ford the unfordable river of Maya, the splendid “illusion” of *samsara*.¹⁰

This tension between ascetic and erotic modes of discourse is one that runs through all of the Krishna literature. Yet in Deshika’s *kavya* itself, as in the *Bhagavata Purana* and in various other Sanskrit or vernacular devotional texts, it is finally the sensuous vigor of the verses that belies any easy reduction of the Krishna-*lila* to some intellectualized and normative ascetic form of *bhakti*, or some kind of purely spiritual detachment, untethered from eros: in Krishna, as with the god Shiva, the erotic and ascetic dimensions are of course distinct, but inseparable; they interanimate, informing and, in many ways, defining each other.

The following verse from the last *sarga* of the *Yadavabhyudaya* is similar in vocabulary and syntactic structure to one of the most famous descriptions of loving embrace in Sanskrit literature, the great eighth-century playwright and poet Bhavabhuti’s verse on Rama and Sita’s loving “close embrace” that takes place as the night watches pass by “unnoticed,” a verse that knits together the religious and the human language of love. Here we are with Krishna in his “inner apartments.”¹¹

The fierce chill of winter air
unchecked
even by little clay pots
with their red eyes
of coal
that burned between their heavy breasts
was suddenly
cut off
by the heat of the Lord’s
passionate
close
embrace.

A Praise-Poem for Krishna as “Lord of Gods”

The *Yadavabhyudayam* itself, of course, is far too long to translate for a volume such as this. Even selections from this sprawling work would give little sense of its cumulative power and richly configured world, something only experienced in a full reading, and best left for a separate study, which would include detailed treatment of the influential commentary of the Shaiva philosopher-poet Appaya Dikshita.¹² What follows is a complete translation, with detailed thematic, grammatical, and philological notes, of Deshika’s other Sanskrit poem for Krishna, the *Gopalavimshati*.

The *Gopalavimshati* is a praise-poem (*stotra*) and not a *kavya*. It is said to have been composed by Deshika for Vishnu as Devanayaka, or “Lord of Gods,” at Tiruvahindrapuram, the “town of the Serpent King,” near the coastal town of Cuddalore in Tamil Nadu. This *stotra* has a rich liturgical history at Devanayaka Swami Temple, which includes its use as a marriage hymn and as a blessing over food offered to the temple image (the *tadiyaradhanams*). On Krishna Jayanti, the image (*murti*; *archa*) of Devanayaka is taken in procession to the chanting of this hymn. Deshika composed for Devanayaka other very important Sanskrit *stotras*, Tamil *prabandhams*, and one long Maharashtri Prakrit *stotra*, poems I have analyzed in some detail elsewhere.¹³ They are distinctive in their passionate devotion to this particular form of Vishnu and for their use of the first person and various erotic motifs from Sanskrit literature and *akam* conventions of classical love poetry in ancient Tamil. It thus comes as no surprise that Deshika identified this particularly beloved form of Vishnu as Gopala, the sensually evocative and emotionally accessible cowherd youth and god of the Vrindavan pastorage.

This comparatively short *stotra* gives the reader a very vivid sense of Krishna in the Tamil Land through one of South India’s most gifted medieval saint-poets. It includes set descriptions and “enjoyments” of the body of Krishna that are meant to inspire devotional feeling (*bhava*) in the hearer: we move from the cosmological, in the evocation of the birth date, to ritual forms of meditation, the shining *yantra* of many colors: soon we are at the heart of the emotional *imaginaire* of Vrindavan pastorage, where the transcendent *Brahman*, inconceivable, unknowable, formless Being, has become a tiny, cranky baby, a toddler butter thief and trickster, a dancer in the courtyard, a flute-playing cowherd, a merciless killer of demons, a handsome lover who plays at concealing and revealing his divine power. Like so many poets in South Indian *bhakti* tradition from the earliest period, Deshika delights in juxtaposing the Lord’s awesome extremes: the big and the little, child and primal being, unknown god and intimate friend and lover, extremes that meet in this god of love, and *in love* (*kami*).

I hope, in the translation that follows, to bring into contemporary American English verse something of the energies, the audacity, and literary elegance of the original Sanskrit.¹⁴ (The text is taken from the 1966 *Sri Tecikastotramala*, Sanskrit text with Tamil commentary, by Sri Ramatecicacaryar.)¹⁵

I

His shining body lights up the woods
of Vrindavan;

cherished lover of the simple
cowherd girls,¹⁶

he was born on Jayanti
 when Rohini touches,
 on the eighth day,
 the waning moon
 in *Avani*.¹⁷

this luminous power¹⁸
 that wears *Vaijayanti*,
 the long garland of victory,
 I praise Him!¹⁹

2

We see him
 as he fills with delight,
 on his very own lap,
 Sarasvati
 goddess of speech;²⁰
 as he raises to his lotus lips
 the royal conch shell,
Panchajanya.
 Seated firm
 in a lotus flower
 set in the center
 of a shining *yantra* of many colors,²¹
 praise him,
 great monarch of cowherds!²²

3

His lower lip trembles
 as he begins
 to cry—
 the air fills
 with the fragrance
 of Veda;
 at one moment
 he is all sweet smiles,
 then
 suddenly

his eyes
 fill with tears:²³
 I know him,
 who took on the tiny infant body
 of a cowherd²⁴
 who sucked the milk
 and the very life-breath²⁵
 from the false mother Putana:
 I know this Gopala,
 the Cowherd King,
 as Most High
 Supreme Being!²⁶

4
 May I see it with my own eyes:
 first,
 the threshing ring
 of jeweled anklets—²⁷
 the raised leg,
 bent,
 one foot,
 turning in the air!
 —the other firm
 on the floor—
 then the throbbing
 clipped
 rhythms
 to the thwacking ruckus
 of churning
 curds!²⁸
 —this sweet butter dance of the Lord
 in Nanda's
 house.

5
 Plunging his little hand deep into the big jar,
 he steals sweet

new butter
 fresh from the churning:²⁹
 then, seeing his mother come running,
 burning with anger,
 a rope
 in her hand,
 he neither flees nor stands still
 but trembling,
 just a little,³⁰
 and squinting,
 quickly closes
 his eyes:
 Protector of the World,
 clever
 false
 cowboy,³¹
 may He protect us!

6

He is stung by sharp sidelong glances
 of the Braj girls;
 treasure of Mathura,
 sweetest enjoyment
 for those who love
 no other.

I sing of that inconceivable supreme *Brahman*³²
 —who can know it?
 whom we see
 suckling at the breasts of Vasudeva's wife,
 playing in the lovely body
 of this charming
 young boy.

7

He twists his neck backward
 out of fear,
 then the bud
 of his pouting lower lip

blooms
 into a smile:
 I recall in silence³³
 that young prince
 who drags the big mortar
 through the garden
 and tearing the trees from their roots
 frees
 the two spirits.

8

I see him here always
 before my eyes.³⁴
 This lovely boy
 whom even the highest wisdom
 of the Veda
 seeks to have
 by its side:
 the two Arjuna trees
 were witness
 to his childish pranks
 and the Yamuna
 the long days
 of his youth.³⁵

9

You are the shortest path
 to liberation,
 a dark monsoon cloud
 that hangs over the forest
 raining
 joy and wealth.³⁶
 A bamboo flute thrills at the touch
 of your ruddy
 lower lip:³⁷
 I love you
 and worship you,³⁸
 root cause of creation,
 pure compassion
 in the body
 of a man.³⁹

10

We must honor him
 with unblinking eyes:
 eternally youthful,⁴⁰
 his curly locks of black hair
 vie in battle
 with the black eyes
 of peacock feathers:
 may this luminous beauty
 whose intensity
 maddens my senses⁴¹
 be always
 present
 in my mind!

11

The sweet reed flute calls them,
 sending every cowherd girl
 it touches
 with its music
 into ecstasies;⁴²
 the flood of his glancing
 eyes,
 red lilies
 in the river of his mercy,
 cooled by his flawless
 smile:⁴³
 may He protect me.

12

The lovely reed flute
 that presses
 against his lower lip;
 the garland of peacock feathers
 that adorn his crown;
 a darkness luminous
 as shards of cool
 blue
 sapphire:⁴⁴

may these glorious visions⁴⁵
 appear
 before my eyes
 at my journey's
 end.

13

Each and every hour—
 waking or sleeping—⁴⁶
 I gaze on the beauty
 of this young man
 with the Lady Lakshmi on his chest
 who is loved
 by the long-limbed girls
 of Braj—
 his beauty⁴⁷
 far beyond the scope
 of my singing!⁴⁸

14

What artist has painted this young man
 in my heart⁴⁹
 who wears in his hair
 the lovely feathers
 of a peacock
 who is the sun
 to the lotus faces
 of the cowherd girls
 of Braj
 sick with love.⁵⁰

15

With head bowed low
 hands pressed together
 in prayer
 I salute
 this luminous darkness
 shining black as kohl
 under women's eyes:⁵¹

he plays a lovely flute
 that breathes
 in tune⁵²
 with the lispings bangles
 of the cowherd girls
 crazy
 in love.

16

The cowherd girls' hands
 clap the beats
 cooled by the touch of their slinking,
 loose
 bangles⁵³
 as they teach the flute
 the graceful *lalita*
 dance.

Hail to that flute
 that shares sweet nectar
 from the lips
 of Vishnu,
 red as coral,
 who took the form
 of a cowherd boy
 to protect
 the whole world!

17

On his ears hang rings
 of *langali* flowers;⁵⁴
 his dark hair shines
 with feathers
 of a peacock
 and thick red *bandhujiva*
 blossoms;⁵⁵
 on his chest,
 the long
 necklace of yellow
gunja-beads:⁵⁶

praise him,
 adorned
 in so many ways,
 some strange kind of Trickster⁵⁷
 who steals
 the youth
 of the cowherd
 girls.⁵⁸

18

He holds the playful shepherd's crook
 in the tender sprout
 of his right hand;
 his other hand
 fondles
 the slender
 shoulders
 of the lady
 who trills at his touch—
 the hairs on her body
 shining
 stand erect.⁵⁹

Lovely, dark as the monsoon cloud,
 his flute
 tucked into the folds
 of his yellow
 waist-cloth,
 and his hair shimmering
 with garlands
 of *gunja*-
 beads,
 praise Him,
 tender lover of the *gopis*.⁶⁰

19

He gazes at his lover,
 her eyes
 half-

closed
 in ecstasy,
 whom he embraced
 from behind—
 his hands tightly
 circling
 the curve of her waist—
 as she struck a pose
 to shoot
 the sweet water.⁶¹
 In one hand
 he grasps his own
 long syringe,⁶²
 and with the other
 he cinches
 tight
 his dress
 for water-sports:⁶³
 cherished lover of simple cowherd girls,⁶⁴
 good life-giving
 medicine
 for the devotees,⁶⁵
 may he protect us!

20

After stealing the cowherd girls' dresses
 as they lay
 strewn along the banks
 of the Yamuna,
 bright river-daughter of the Sun,⁶⁶
 smiling playfully,⁶⁷
 he sat in the branches
 of a lovely Kunda tree.
 And when,
 burning with shame,
 they pleaded
 for their clothes,
 he commanded they come
 one by one

out of the water,
 their lotus hands raised high
 over their
 heads
 in prayer:
 Praise this fabulous lover,
 this god
 in love!⁶⁸

21

Those who study with one-pointed mind
 this praise-poem
 composed by
 Venkatesha
 will see
 before their very eyes
 this inconceivable
 unknowable god⁶⁹
 who is so dear to young girls,
 deft connoisseur
 of the holy
 reed
 flute!⁷⁰

NOTES

1. See my full-length study of Vedantadesika, *Singing the Body of God: The Hymns of Vedantadesika in Their South Indian Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), and my anthology of translations, *An Ornament for Jewels: Poems for the Lord of Gods by Vedantadesika* (New York: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

2. See Vidya Dehejia, *Antal and Her Path of Love: Poems of a Woman Saint from South India* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1990), 14–15.

3. For an elaborate argument for a specifically southern Tamil “Krishnaism” and its subsequent influence in the *Bhagavata Purana* and northern Krishna devotion, see Friedhelm Hardy, *Viraha-Bhakti: The Early History of Kṛṣṇa Devotion in South India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983), especially pt. 4, “Mayon Mysticism: The Alvars.”

4. See Vasudha Narayanan, *The Way and the Goal: Expressions of Devotion in Early Sri Vaisnava Tradition* (Washington, D.C.: Institute for Vaishnava Studies, 1987), 25–26. Narayanan goes on to argue the importance of the figure of Rama in Alvar devotion.

5. See Narayanan, *The Way and the Goal*, 106–112. See also, for this kind of layering, where images of Rama, Krishna, and other *avatars* intermingle, the great

Tamil praise-poem of Tiruppanalvar, the *Amalanatipiran*, translated in my study of Deshika, *Singing the Body of God*, 141–144.

6. See full translation of poem and discussion in my *Singing the Body of God*, 93–94. His other Tamil *prabandhams*, such as *Mummanikkovai* and *Navamanimalai*, are strewn with references to Krishna, mingled with other *avataras*, all present in his experience of the specific temple image being praised. See “The Fruits of Mukunda’s Mercy,” chap. 4 in *Singing the Body of God*.

7. From *Devanayakapanchashat* 27, cited in *Singing the Body of God*, 208–209.

8. See discussion in A. K. Warder, *Indian Kavya Literature* (1972; reprint, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1989), 1:1–53.

9. See Francis Wilson, *The Love of Krishna: The Krsnakarnamrta of Lilasuka Bilvamangala* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1975), for a translation and critical study of this remarkable devotional text, so close in spirit and style to Deshika.

10. *Yadavabhyudayam* 24:93. For verses of the *Yadavabhyudayam* see *Shri-matvedantadeshikagranthamala*, edited by K. P. B. Annankaracariyar and Shri Sampatkumaracaryasvamin, 3 vols. (Kanchi: 1940–58), the collected Sanskrit works of Deshika without commentary. See also text of *sargas* 9–12, with the Sanskrit commentary of Appaya Dikshita: *Yadavabhyudaya by Sriman Vedanta Desika* (Sri Rangam: Sri Vani Vilas Press, 1924), and cantos 13–18: *Yadavabhyudayam*, with Apayya Dikshita’s commentary, edited by Vidvan T. T. Srinivasa Gopalachar (Mysore: Government Oriental Library, 1944). See also *Yadavabhyudayam: A Kavya on the Life of Lord Krishna*, edited with Sanskrit text and translation of first seven cantos by K. S. Krishna Thathachariar (Madras: Vedanta Desika Research Society, 1976), which includes eight essays by various scholars. For a brief discussion of the poem in relation to Deshika’s life narrative, see my *Singing the Body of God*, 66–67.

11. *Yadavabhyudayam* 24:38. The phrase “passionate close embrace” (*aviralaparirambhalambhaniyaih*) is close to a phrase in Bhavabhuti’s verse that describes Rama and Sita’s arms as “busy in close embrace” (*ashithilaparirambha*). For a discussion on the Shrivaisnava use of Bhavabhuti’s love lyric in commentaries on Deshika’s *stotras*, see my *Singing the Body of God*, 162–163.

12. I plan some day to tackle just such a study.

13. See the introduction to my *Singing the Body of God*, and especially chaps. 4 and 7, 115–134 and 199–231. See also my *An Ornament for Jewels* (Oxford, forthcoming), which will include full translations of the Devanayaka *stotras* and *prabhandams*, along with the *Gopalavimshati*.

14. For a detailed account of my method of translation, including my use of visual spacing of phrases and individual words on the page, see the discussion in my *Singing the Body of God*, 15–21.

15. (1966; reprint, Chennai: Lifco, 1982), 637–657.

16. “Cherished lover of simple cowherd girls” *Vallavijanavallabham*, a phrase with a certain alliterative charm. This phrase is also said to point to Krishna’s *saushilya*, or “gracious condescension.”

17. *Jayantisambhavam*: I have expanded this phrase for clarity and detail, following the commentators. “*Jayanti*” is an astrological conjunction that can be described with some poetic grace. Ramatecickacharyar’s Tamil gloss describes *Jayanti* as

the time when “the constellation *Rohini* is united with the eighth day of the dark of the moon in the month of *Simha Shravana*, or *Avani*:" *jayanti enpatu simha cravana (avani) mattatil kirushnapakshattu ashtamiyutan cerukinra rohini nakshtra matum*. This descriptive epithet is said to refer to Krishna's *saulahbhyam*, or “easy accessibility.”

18. “Luminous power” and “shining body” both translate the rich word *dhama*, meaning “majesty,” “glory,” “luminary,” “effulgence,” “power.” I follow commentators in identifying this luminous power with the beautiful body of the Lord Krishna that “moves about” or “wanders” in Vrindavan, implied in the phrase *vrindava-nacharam* in the first *pada* of the verse. This can also imply the “feet” of the Lord. In Ramatecicacharyar's Tamil gloss, *dhama* is a kind of *jyoti*, or radiant light, identified with Lord Krishna's “lovely body” (*vativu*): *Kannapiranenapatum oru coti vativai tolu-kinren* (“I adore/worship the lovely form/body, a radiant light that is called Lord Krishna”). The mention of Vrindavan here is said to index Krishna's *vatsalyam*, “tender loving affection [of a cow for her calf].”

19. The image of Krishna as wearing the “victory” garland indexes his *sva-mitvam*, his “independent mastery” or “supreme lordship.” The entire verse, in its simple compass, is said to embrace various attributes of Krishna, from the tender love of a mother or a lover, and easy accessibility, to supreme lordship of the universe. The verse is also analyzed by commentators to include three major *rasas* (aesthetic “flavors” or experience) that are important to Krishna's “play” in the world: *shringara*, the “erotic” (in the allusion to *gopis*); *vira*, the “heroic,” indicated by the *vaijayanti* garland; and *adbhuta*, or “wonder,” indexed by his “moving about” in the forests, where, as we will see in the body of the *stotra*, he performs a variety of awesome feats of divine power. See Appayya Dikshita's commentary on this verse where it also appears as the first verse of Deshika's *Yadavabhyudayam*.

20. The identification of Deshika himself with *vach*, speech (glossed here and in the commentaries as Sarasvati), who “delights” (Tamil gloss *mukil*) or “relishes” being on the very lap of the Lord, is a common one in praise-verses of the poet, and points to his eloquence and mastery of language.

21. *Varnatrikonaruchire varapundarike*.

22. This verse has the flavor of a visualization used in ritual meditation of the Lord and his powers.

23. This descending, broken episodic phrase translates the first four *padas* of the verse, two long, elegant, and alliterative compounds in Sanskrit:

*Amnayagandhiruditaspuritagaroshtham asravilekshanam
anukshanamandahasyam.*

24. *Gopaladimbhavapusham*.

25. *Pranastanandhayam*.

26. *Param pumamsam*, glossed as the more common epithet *parama purusha*, or “Supreme Person,” a phrase that hearkens back to the Upanishads and the *Bhagavad Gita*. This of course stresses the wonder of Krishna's play, which brings together opposing forms of the big and the little, the earthly and the cosmic, the awesome and powerful and the tiny and vulnerable: Krishna is no less than the Supreme Person in the tiny body of an infant who cries and fusses and suckles, but when he breathes,

one smells the fragrance of *Vedas*, and when the breasts he happens to suckle are those of the demon Putana, he kills without mercy.

27. *Anibhritabharanam*: “ornaments/jewels that tremble/move/stir.” Tamil gloss: *anikal achaiyapperrataḥ*. Because the dancing feet are being described, I take this reference to mean the anklets on the feet: see subsequent verses describing the rattling of jewels in anklets.

28. *Dadhna nimithamukharena nibadhatalam*: a vivid, vigorous phrase, literally: “unrestrained/vigorous rhythms with noisy/talkative [‘mouthy’] churning of curds.” I try in my translation to capture the clever use in this phrase of *mukharena* (noisy/talkative, “mouthy”) with an aural/audial and rather fanciful phrase “thwacking ruckus.”

29. In the loping *mandakranta* meter: *hartum kumbhe vinihitakarah svadu haiyangavinam*.

30. *Ishat pracalitapado napagacchan na tishthan*: “neither fleeing nor standing still, trembling just a little.” The sense of the verse is that this god-child pretends to be frightened, or perhaps more accurately, “plays” (*lila*) at being frightened.

31. *Mithyagopah*. Verses 3, 4 and 5 are all in the long-lined, loping, rhythmic *mandakranta* meter, suitable to its subject: the dancing and pranks of the child Krishna. I have tried, in my translation, mostly visually on the page, to reproduce this loping, shifting rhythm, in the spacing of broken words and phrases. See also verses 17–20.

32. *Tat kimapi brahma*: literally, “that I-don’t-know-what-kind of *Brahman*,” a deceptively short phrase that appears in other *stotras* of Deshika, where it is used to evoke the unknowable, inconceivable, and “transcendent” ultimate reality of the *Upa-nishads*. The power of this verse, of course, lies in Deshika’s juxtaposition of this phrase with the erotic and maternal affective dimensions of this “lovable” *Brahman*.

33. *Smarami*, “I remember, visualize”; “I meditate on”—a verb commonly used in texts describing devotional meditations/visualizations of the qualities of a god (or of the Buddha in the Buddhist context). To “remember” here is to evoke the meditative *presence*, the presentational reality, of the god or Buddha.

34. *Nishamayami nityam*.

35. *Yamalarjunadrishtabalakelim yamunasakshikayauvanam yuwanam*.

36. “Joy and wealth,” *sampadam*.

37. The original phrase contains, like so much of Deshika’s Sanskrit, some lovely music: *arunadharasabhilashavamsham*.

38. *Bhajami*.

39. *Karunam karanamanushim*.

40. *Ajahadyauvanam*.

41. *Karanonmadakavibhramam maho*.

42. “Sweet reed flute,” *manojnavamshanalaha*. Tamil gloss: *iniya kulalin*. “Ecstasies,” *vimoha* (Tamil *mayakkam*).

43. “Flood,” *rasa*, water.

44. *Harinilashilavibhanganilah*.

45. “Glorious visions”: *pratibhah*, “images,” “appearances.”

46. *Akhilan . . . kalan*: “at every moment/time/waking hour.”

47. “Beauty”: *abhirupyam*. Salvation and aesthetic beauty are deeply twined together in the poetics of Deshika’s *stotras*. See my *Singing the Body of God*, 101–109, 130–133, 195–197, 238–239.

48. *Abhilapakramaduram*: “far beyond the scope of my words/language/expression.”

49. *Hridi . . . likhitah kena mamaisha shilpina*. “young man,” literally “youth,” *yuva*, a common word used, and played upon, in these verses.

50. *Madanatura*.

51. *Anjanam*; “collyrium,/eye-black,” often compared to the shiny-blue-black body of Vishnu/Krishna in Deshika’s *stotras*.

52. “Breathes in tune. “ Literally, *bhashita*, which “speaks” in unison with (the bangles). The stanza plays with the sounds of the consonant cluster *anj-* in *anjali*, the greeting/salute with hands pressed; *manju*, lovely, charming; and *anjanam*, kohl, to mime the threshing sound of the jeweled anklets.

53. Again, my English translation seeks to match the sounds of the original, here *shithilavalayashinja*, to mime the “slinking” sound of loose bangles on the dancing arms. The verse is in the long-lined, finely detailed musical *malini* meter.

54. *Langali*: flowers from the sheaves of the coconut palm. Tamil: *tennampalai*.

55. *Bandhujiva*: red hibiscus.

56. *Gunja*-beads: Tamil: *kunrimani*.

57. *Kitavah ko’pi*.

58. Verses 17–20 are composed in the rhythmic *mandakranta* meter, which slows the reader’s eye and ear, suitable for these detailed “thick” descriptions of Krishna. See also verse 5 and note 31.

59. *Pulakaruchire*: the shoulder of the lady “shines with horripilation.” The lady/goddess here is identified in the commentaries as Nappinnai, Vishnu/Krishna’s Tamil wife/lover.

60. *Gopakanyabhujangah*.

61. *Pratyalida*-posture: the left foot forward, right backward, an attitude in archery. The context here is that she is making ready to shoot colored water from her “syringe” in the “water sports” of the Holi festival when people throw colors at one another.

62. “Long syringe”: *bhastrayantra*: vessel, pouch (with bellows), or “syringe” filled with colored water.

63. *Varikrida*.

64. *Vallavivalabho*. See verse 1.

65. *Bhaktajivatuh*.

66. Yamuna’s epithet has a lovely musicality in the original: *dinakar-asutasamnidhau*.

67. *Lilasmero*.

68. *Kami kashchit*: “what kind of (mysterious, unfathomable) lover/one in love.” *Kami* here implies Krishna’s twofold dimension as beloved, the object of love, and one who is also *in* love.

69. *Daivatam kimapi*.

70. *Divyavenurasikam*.