

INTRODUCTION

Lovers, Messengers, and Beloved Landscapes

I. ROYAL PILGRIM IN THE NORTH AND SOUTH

*sphuradarapariṣṭācāruśaile viśāle guruṇi dharaṇicakre
cakravālādrinemaṁ . . .*

*With bright hills its shining spokes and its circumference
the borders of the great Circle Mountains
the earth below us is like a vast and massive wheel . . .*

— SAṄKALPASŪRYODAYA 6.7

Imagine yourself a character in an allegorical play, one of the personified attributes of the erstwhile seeker Puruṣa, the Everyman who has fallen into ignorance and is desperately seeking liberation. You are Viveka: discernment, discrimination, the intellectual power to see the splits and crevasses, the grains, of thought. You are the Descrier of Truth for the Learned, Beneficent Logic Chopper, the mind's keenest instrument. Even more, you are a King, King Discernment, wary of the spies that your rival, King Great Delusion, may send into your ranks. You fly over the earth in your Sky Ship called Desire, driven by Tārka, Logic, in search of the perfect place for the hero Puruṣa's meditation.

Your avian chariot Desire glides along the air in silence, you can hear only its banners fluttering, no sound from Logic's reins, from the winged horses of Thought. You fly above a landscape, first precipitously mountainous, from mythical Mount Meru, from whose tops the earth is a massive jewel-studded wheel, to the peaks and foothills of white, cold Himālaya, with its braids of foamy blue Gaṅgā, then slowly the curve of hills and groves and the warm sun-saturated flatlands of paddy fields, the holy places where gods have become human.

You mark the landscape from above, places known and unknown, favored, beloved, and hated. The shadow world and the beloved forests spread below you, and you duly note them. What you see is colored by where you come from, over whom you rule, by your enemies, by the spirits of your hometown, and the little tributary kings who owe you homage. For you are more than just some generic King Discrimination, pure and simple, as if such an abstraction were possible, even in this allegorical performance. Each King is individual, and every rule and piece of hallowed soil is particular.

In this play written by the medieval South Indian Brahman saint-poet Veṅkaṭanātha or Veṅkaṭeśa—a man of many epithets, the most famous being Vedāntadeśika, the preceptor of Vedānta—you are a good South Indian king, and so your mind makes a map whose contours gain detail as you fly south through vernacular “dravidian” spaces, past the heretical rivers of the north, places reviled even by your archenemy, Great Delusion: forests of thieves, false yogis and rapists, the solitary half-naked wretched traveler, highway robbers busy with their phony prayers and ochre road gods. Though your knowledge and your loves certainly extend beyond the borders of your native, vernacular spaces, and, like your author, O cosmopolitan king, you do speak more than one language, your eyes soften as Logic carefully guides the passions down the perfumed air just south of

the Vindhyas, tracing the wanderings of legendary Agastya with his pot, watering the soil of the south with tawny Vedic ambrosia, rain on red earth.

“Vernacular Political Space” in the King’s Aerial Tour

*vivekaḥ: (sarvato nirvarṇya) hanta
elāliṅgitacandanā vanabhuvo muktāprasūtirnadī . . .*

King Discrimination, rapt, gazing about him:

*O in these woods creepers of cardamom embrace sandalwood trees
and the river is a birth-place of pearls . . .*

— SAṄKALPASŪRYODAYA 6.60

King Discrimination’s aerial tour in Act 6 of Veṅkaṭeśa’s *Saṅkalpasūryodaya*, “The Dawn of Ritual Resolve,” along with King Great Delusion’s own brief tour in Act 5, is thought by Veṅkaṭeśa’s Śrīvaiṣṇava tradition to be based upon the poet-saint’s own pilgrimage to the “north” (*vaṭa nāṭu*), including a visit to *vaṭa maturai*, Krishna’s “northern” Mathurā.¹ Traditional narrative accounts of Veṅkaṭeśa’s life are laced with quotations from the play.² The play’s account of both the good and bad kings’ aerial tours greatly favors the lands and shrines south of the Vindhyas (where the “true devotees” are born) and laments what it sees as the past glories of sacred cities such as Ayodhyā (a place of past glory), Mathurā (become a seat of “adharmā”), and Vārāṇasī (stained by sin and loss of “caste rules”).³ King Discrimination charts a journey that begins in the airy regions of Mount Meru, where he has a vision of the heavenly Gaṅgā, and on down the slopes of Mount Mandara to Kailāsa and Himālaya. But his descent into Āryavarta, the region between the Himālaya and the Vindhyas brings disappointment and even shock: the pilgrims he sees seem filled with

joy, though they wander in lands corrupted by heretics and thievish hunters out for gold. After the terrible spectacle of once holy northern cities, from Dvārakā to Mathurā, Vārāṇasī, Prayāga, ruled by “yavanas,” “turuṣkas,” Greeks, Turks, foreigners, outsiders, and men of mongrel classes, those who have no knowledge of Vedas or of rites and duties of the Lord’s devotees;⁴ and after seeing the lost pilgrims in the wilderness of the “middle country” (*madhyadeśa*), his first glances of the southern “drāviḍa” places (*dramiḍeṣu deśāḥ*), from Tirunārāyaṇapuram (Melkoṭe in what is now Karṇāṭaka) to luminous Cēra, Pāñṭiya, and Cōla lands, bring refreshment and spiritual peace. Here, in the south, beyond the dark forests of the middle country, the Kāvērī River shines, superior to the Gaṅgā, and Agastya’s hermitage, where even parrots chant the Veda, is a heaven on earth. Here is the place suitable for “Puruṣa,” the play’s allegory of the “ideal person,” the spiritual pilgrim seeker Everyman, to perform austerities and to make spiritual progress. By the time we fly over lush, beloved landscapes surrounding Veṅkaṭeśa’s own favored shrines—Śrīraṅgam, Kāñcīpuram, and Tirumālai (Tirupati)—we enter a landscape that maps not only an aesthetic or religious vision but also one with ideological and sectarian resonances. Though the ultimate conclusion of King Discrimination is that the only true refuge for Puruṣa is within the cave of his own heart, and the “exterior spaces” of traditional pilgrimage merely secondary, another very important point has been made: southern country, whatever its reputed weakness as purely physical, *external* holy space, is “god’s (Bhagavān’s) good country.”⁵

The trope of a king’s aerial tour is not the only creative use in Veṅkaṭeśa’s work of what Sheldon Pollock calls, in a linguistic context, “vernacular political space.”⁶ It is also interesting to note that Veṅkaṭeśa’s description of Govardhana in Sarga 6 of his *mahākāvya* on the life of Krishna, the *Yādavābhyudaya*, is a transparent description not of that northern site in holy Braj but of Tirupati in South India, “god’s good southern country.” Veṅkaṭeśa’s Krishna does his heavy lifting of Mt. Govardhana

at the Tirumala shrine and its chain of hills in the south whose central deity gave him his birth name, Veṅkaṭanātha or, in shorter form, Veṅkaṭeśa. We have in the Tamil saint-poet and philosopher Veṅkaṭeśa a most powerful example of a southern refashioning of sacred space, a vernacularization of original northern, primarily Sanskrit sources, but *in Sanskrit itself*, what might be termed a decidedly “southern” Sanskrit.⁷

The king’s aerial tour, its trope of flight over an ideologically (religiously and politically) charged landscape, with its bias toward the south, and the local southern geocultural “overlays” of the Krishna *mahākāvya*, follow the general patterns of another major Sanskrit *kāvya* by Veṅkaṭeśa: his *sandēśakāvya* or “messenger poem,” the *Haṃsasandēśa*, or “Message for the Goose,” where southern sacred geography is also privileged.

It is first to this latter genre, in general, and then to this saint-poet and to his particular messenger poem that we now turn.

II. THE FLIGHT OF LOVE: MESSENGER POEMS

*patyurdevi praṇayasacivaṃ vidhi dīrghāyūṣo mām
jīvātum te daghatamanaghaṃ tasya sandēśamantaḥ*

*Then you say, o goddess know me to be the beloved friend and
councilor*

*of your long-lived lord husband,
bearing in my heart his most pure and noble message,
good medicine for your ears . . .*

—HAMŚASANDEŚA 2.28

The *sandēśakāvya* is a major transregional and multireligious poetic genre in South Asian literature that has its roots as early

as the fifth century C.E. in Sanskrit, flourishing in many different languages from the twelfth to the eighteenth centuries, yet also common, right up to the present day. There are variations—some subtle, some striking—on the *sandేశakāvya* in several South Asian languages, from Sanskrit, Pāli, Telugu, Kannaḍa, Malayālam (in its Hindu contexts), Judeo-Malayālam, and Tamil, to Sinhala and various North Indian Prākṛts, and in several different religious traditions: Hindu, Buddhist, Jain, Muslim, Jewish, and Christian. In the root forms of *sandēśa-* or *dūta-kavyas*, an exiled lover (human or divine) sends a message to a distant beloved via a messenger—a starling, a goose, a bee, a cuckoo, a parrot, a peacock, a language (Tamil), or in the case of Kālidāsa’s seminal fourth- to fifth-century Sanskrit text, the *Meghadūta*, a cloud. The *sandēśa* links the powerful emotions of love, separation, and the desire for reunion to beloved landscapes, literary visions of the natural world that echo the separated lovers’ frustrated present, their remembered past, and anticipated future union. And not only the natural world, of flora and fauna, idealized nature in its fecundities and its dangers, but also landscapes marked by culture, by religion, and by the values—social, political, and sectarian—of the poet who writes the poem. The *sandēśakāvya* is not only about love, the eternal, ahistorical truths of longing that effect even the gods like Rāma in his desire for his absent wife Sītā, the beauties of nature, or the transfigured time of eventual reunion; but it is also about the individual poet’s religio-geocultural imaginary, reflecting regional identity and royal or sectarian patronage.

Religion and Place: Place-Names and Prestige

At times *sandēśa* poets will be rigorously sectarian in their approach, emphasizing the superiority of a single temple, zeroing in on its specific god or goddess, and/or a single royal/political center, but more often than not, the chosen beloved

landscape, though it is certainly most intimately connected with the powers of a particular god or king, shares its charisma with all gods, goddesses, tributary kings, and peoples who live and work within its blessed environs. Regional identity and prestige may hold sway over a more narrowly conceived sectarian affiliation. It is the place then that makes the gods so magical. Ultimately, when one compares *sandēśas* from different regional traditions of South Asia, in different historical periods, and within different religious and royal traditions, in all their variations, the genre as a whole, while internally complex, provides a rich transregional literary resource not only for mapping premodern sectarian boundaries (or the apparent lack or fluidity of them) but, in the right scholarly hands, can also be carefully utilized in reconstructing premodern, pre-nation-state histories of South Asia. To cite Claude Lévi-Strauss's well-known coinage, modifying an alimentary image—the *sandēśa* as a comparative theme, is “good to think” for any scholar of South Asian literary histories.⁸

***Sandēśakāvya*: Antecedents and Transregional Forms**

There are many antecedents of the messenger poem in early Indian literatures, from the Ṛg Veda, where the sage's son Śyāvāśva sends a message to his beloved Rathavīthī by way of Rātrī, “Night,” to the message sent by Rāma to Sītā via the monkey-warrior friend Hanumān in the *Rāmāyaṇa*, and the Nala and Damayantī episode in the *Māhābhārata*, where the messenger of love is a goose (*haṃsa*).⁹ There are also proto-*sandēśa* motifs scattered throughout the early Tamil Caṅkam literature in the first three centuries C.E., in both the *puṛam* and *akam* collections (poems of “exterior” and “interior,” respectively), both in the forms of the messengers—clouds, birds, the north wind—and in descriptions of beloved landscapes the

messenger will encounter.¹⁰ One well-known example from Caṅkam Tamil, with a gander as a messenger, anticipates many conventions of the later genre:

Gander! I call out to you! Gander! I call out to you!
 Here I stand idle in the evening when things become unclear
 and the blossoming light of the moon once it has united
 its two horns shines out like the glowing face of that hero
 triumphant, murderous in battle, bestowing grace on his
 own land!
 If you, after feeding on loaches from the great bay
 of Kanyakumari
 should fly off to the mountain of the far north and stopping
 on your way
 in the fine land of the king of the Cholas you should go to
 the towering
 mansion at Kōli accompanied by your youthful beloved and
 enter that palace
 without even stopping at the gate and if you should say,
 loud enough
 for the great king Kiḷli to hear you, “Āntai of Picir is your
 humble servant!” then when you have done that he will
 give you
 the gift of a fine ornament he treasures
 so that your beautiful mate may wear it and she will be filled
 with delight!¹¹

Through such sources *sandēśa* motifs find their way into the later ninth- to tenth-century poems of the Tamil saint-poets, the Āḷvārs and the Nāyaṇmār. There are some striking images in the *tirumōḷis* of the female Āḷvār Āṇḍāl in the 5th and 8th decades of the *Nācciyār Tirumōḷi*, where the girl sends the *kuyil* (koel) bird and clouds, respectively, as messengers to the absent beloved.¹² Āṇḍāl’s verses are saturated with erotic

energies; the *sandēśa* motifs combine suffering in separation and desire (*viraha*) and the urgency of love lamented. Here's one for the cloud, a lovely verse skillfully translated by Archana Venkatesan:

O cool clouds, place the plea of this servant
 at the feet of the one with the beautiful lotus eyes
 the one who churned the ocean filled with conch.
 Beseech him to enter me for a single day
 and wipe away the vermilion smeared upon my breasts.
 Only then can I survive.¹³

And one for rain, from the 10th decad, again from Venkatesan:

Rain, O rain! Rain down on Vēṅkaṭam
 where my beautiful lord lives
 like hot wax into a clay mold.
 Show him how to enter my heart and melt me.
 Make him caress me and hold me tight
 so that my beautiful lord lodges in my heart.
 Can you rain down this way?¹⁴

Landscape motifs are reserved for special treatment in separate *tirumoliś*, the groves of Tirumāliṛuñcōlai in decads 9 and 12 for “sacred places,” though these are hardly more than place-names. As we will see, Veṅkaṭeśa the poet will often be compared with Āṇḍāḷ by his later Śrīvaiṣṇava commentators.¹⁵

It is the form of Kālidāsa's *Meghadūta* that first sets out a two-part structure and in Sanskrit, even a meter—the elegant, lilting *mandākrāntā*—that becomes normative for the genre and the model for subsequent variant *sandēśas* in medieval South Asian literatures.¹⁶

The first part (*pūrva*) of the classic *sandēśakāvya* is a detailed description of the landscape over which the messenger will pass on its way to the absent beloved; the second (*uttara*) contains the message itself. Such descriptions are vivid examples of the ways in which the flora and fauna of the natural world both echo and respond to human emotions—to passionate love, longing, and loss—in Indian literary conventions. The literary landscapes creatively reimagined in messenger poems are imbued with feeling and resonate with the poet’s or main character’s inner state of love and longing in absence, but also often provide, in the second, “message” portion of the poem, a unique imaginative experience of connectedness through distance—as if the beloved or object of the *sandēśa* was right before the eyes—charged with auspiciousness and well-being. As David Shulman has remarked, the *sandēśas* after Kālidāsa “inevitably strive to come to grips with the imagination in its world-creating aspect.”¹⁷ At times the message can be couched in the form of lament in separation, thus embracing other varied registers of emotional immediacy, but the self-consciously reimagined experience of real presence remains. As royal or religious texts, they also show the individual poet’s chosen sacred or politically/ideologically important landscape, making these texts compelling sources not only for literary historians or scholars of religion but also for those interested in premodern sociopolitical formations. Like the related motif of the King’s aerial car ride in classical Sanskrit epic, and in Veṅkaṭeṣa’s drama *San̄kalpasūryodaya*, cited above, each messenger poem carves a distinctive map of the subcontinent that has political and social implications, a kind of religio-geocultural *imaginaire* reflecting the poet’s royal or sectarian patrons.

To mention only a few salient examples in a rich and varied literature, the cloud-messenger’s route in Kālidāsa’s *sandēśa* valorizes and places particular descriptive energy on the towns and sacred places surrounding his home country: Ujjayinī,

the Malava region and the city of Avanti, that glorious, necessary detour, with its perfumed streams and Śiva shrine at Mahākāla.¹⁸ The thirty-some Sanskrit *sandēśas* of Kerala all focus on specific places—temples, mountains, towns, cities—royal and religious legends, kings, deities, and poets important to the poems' patrons. C. M. Neelakandhan's study and translation of the Vaiṣṇava *Śārikāsandēśa* ("Message for the Parrot") enumerates many *sandēśas* of Kerala from the fourteenth century, each with its own particular provenance, god, and patron, its distinctive geocultural and religious imaginary.¹⁹

In the fifteenth-century *Kokilasandēśa* by Uddaṇḍa Śāstri, a desperate husband, stranded in the holy city of Kāñcīpuram, who has been abducted by a mysterious blue-haired woman in a winged chariot, sends the koel, the Indian cuckoo, through a landscape marked by local detail, to his lovely wife languishing down south in Chennamaṅgalam, Ernakulam District, in Kerala.²⁰ As for the eighteenth-century *Śārikāsandēśa* of the great Kerala scholar-poet Rāmapāṇivāda, composed in the traditional *mandākrāntā* meter, it describes a *gopī* who longs for her absent lover Krishna, though very quickly we move from generalized northern and pan-Indian themes and landscapes to the specific hallowed locales of the Keraladeśa. The *gopī*, languishing, was abandoned by Krishna after their love-making (*rāsakriḍā*) on the banks of the Yamunā in Vṛndāvaṇa; desperate, she sends a message to Krishna in his icon form at the far-off sacred shore temple of Ampalappuḷa in Kerala through the medium of a female parrot. The poem includes not only detailed descriptions of specific Kerala landscapes, flora and fauna—most specifically of the Campakaśṣeri (Skt: *campakaśreṇi*) or *purakkāṭ* regions around Ampalappuḷa—and the name of the patron Brahman king Devanārāyaṇa (one of a line of "Devanārāyaṇas"), but also includes detailed limb-by-limb bodily descriptions of Krishna as the temple icon (the standing form of Pārthasārathi, the charioteer) and also details of tantric rites (*śrībhūtabali*) that are

unique to this temple site.²¹ The gopī's message—to be eventually delivered by the female parrot—combines rhetorical strategies of the formal *stotra* (hymn of praise) the conventions of *viraha-bhakti* (love-in-separation), and female lament (*vilāpa*), with its mixing of praise, blame, subtle irony, aggression, and taunting protest. Moving through many registers of lament (*rodanākāraḥ*), our heroine here ponders, through protest and praise, how can you O Lord, who gives delight to the whole world, who I see everywhere around me, in all the particulars of creation, and who, on the ultimate level, is in my heart, *who is my very self*—how can you have abandoned me, who has done you no wrong?²² The syntax of one vivid verse is, in the original Sanskrit, just on the edge of linguistic comprehension, describing violent distress, lament at the far borders of articulation, over this Lord who seems to give to everyone else in this world supreme delight (*akhilajagadānanda*):

And when I left that dark bower of circling creepers in the
woods of Vṛndāvaṇa,
burning in the terrible fires of separation and desire,
I did not see you
you o Lord
who gives delight to all beings of this world:

again and again groaning *aho aho* I wept aloud crying, fell
into a swoon
what o what to call this unspeakable ineffable misfortune,
how I suffered it and endured.²³

We will return later in this study to such registers of passion and female lament in Veṅkaṭeśa's *sandēśa*.²⁴

Jain *sandēśas* such as the *Pārśvābhyudaya* of Jinasena (ninth century C.E.) and the *Nemidūta* of Vikramakavi focus on landscapes and beloved places, Jain doctrine and temples, love and separation, though with an emphasis on the devotion

to asceticism.²⁵ Sumathi Ramaswamy has studied in some detail the ideological and political importance of Tamil messenger poems after the fourteenth century (most particularly where Tamil itself is the messenger—*Tamiltūtu*).²⁶ Here the *sandēśakāvya* form can be used to chart the rise and eventual apotheosis of Tamil language nationalism in premodern South India. *Sandēśas* are a powerful vehicle of sectarian devotion in the Bengali Vaiṣṇava tradition as well, with Rūpa Goswāmi's *Pavanadūta* and *Uddhavadūta* as standout examples.²⁷

As for Buddhist South Asia, there are important Sri Lankan *sandēśas* in Pāli and in Sinhala.²⁸ Among the earliest examples of Sinhala lyric poetry of Sri Lanka, the so-called Sīgiriya Graffiti, poems scratched on to the so-called mirror wall (a gallery wall of polished plaster) at the Sīgiriya rock-palace from the eighth to the tenth centuries C.E., there is a verse that seems to allude to Kālidāsa's *Meghadūta*. Charles Hallisey's version preserves the elliptical beauty of old Sinhala:

[Diga]la-vaṇa-vāsi Sirina-himiyana gī
 Vandimi himi valā to gosin āya nevesnaṭa
 Piribun-pagā malayuna-divoṭa to hadahava kiya kiyayi]

The Poem of Lord Sirina, resident of Digalavana.

O Cloud, My Lord!
 I honor you!

go to her house and speak

cause her

whose courage is in pieces
 whose tongue and lips are parched

To have faith.²⁹

After the twelfth century, the full-fledged *sandēśakāvya* in Sinhala becomes one of the most important literary genres of Buddhist Sri Lanka, though, as Stephen Berkwitz has astutely observed, many of the later medieval and early modern Sinhala *sandēśas*—unlike the Sīgīrya fragment—tend to eschew entirely the erotic love context, eliding lovers desiring absent beloveds in favor of the supplication to local gods and blessings to strengthen rules of local kings.³⁰ In the sixteenth century *Sāvul Sandēśaya* (“Message for the Cock”), as Berkwitz notes, “the author beseeches the god Saman to protect the Buddha’s Dispensation, the beings of the world, and particularly King Rājasimha I, his ministers and his kingdom’s fourfold army.”³¹ The late fifteenth-century *Kōkilasandēśaya* (“Message for the Cuckoo”) “conveys a message of reassurance to Prince Sapumal in Yāpāpaṭuna (Jaffna) to confirm that the monastic author has been praying to the god Upulvan for the prince’s prosperity and protection in the land that he has conquered.”³² But however elided on the surface level of the text, the underlying context, of passionate love, sexuality, and fertility (all of a piece in South Asian literatures), is often preserved in the vividly eroticized descriptions of beloved locales—landscapes and cities with their impossibly beautiful local women, their ideal moon faces, water-lily eyes, and breasts like wild geese—and in the aspirations of royal fertility and the future birth of children. A passage from the fifteenth-century *Sālalihiṇisandēśaya* describing the Nāga girls who lay on the “clean sands” of the Kālaṇi River on languorous afternoons near the Kitsirime Temple, singing “of the Buddha sweet songs of praise,” “their fingertips caressing the strings of jeweled *viṇās*,” “their eyes blue *nymphaeae*, white lilies their smiles, their lips of red water lily and faces that mime the lotus” is emblematic of such erotic textures in Sinhala *sandēśaya* description.³³ And more:

With *kadupul* blossoms adorning black hair
 and bright jeweled belts circling wide hips,
 their hot breasts cooled by sandal paste and fresh seapearls,
 they cast dark light from wide open eyes
 in every direction.³⁴

The Sinhala *sandēśas*, even when they lack direct emotional expressions of love and longing of particular lovers and beloveds, possess all the charms of the lyric “romance” that inheres in the general literary form, first defined in Kālidāsa’s Sanskrit, and also preserve the familiar two-step pattern of the genre as a whole, however transformed: messengers are told where to go—they are given an itinerary that is privileged by religious or political, secular authority—and told what to say when they get there.

In his monumental study of the cult of the goddess Pattini in the southern and western provinces of Sri Lanka, Gananath Obeyesekere uses the *sandēśa* poems, particularly those written in the Kōṭṭe period (1410–1544) and in the late Mātara period (1750–1850) to chart changes in royal power, patronage, the administration of monastic schools and temples, pilgrimage maps, land routes, and in the religious destinies of various island deities—Nātha, Vibhīṣaṇa, Upulvan, Viṣṇu, Kataragama—before and after the impact of Portuguese rule of areas like Toṭagamuva.³⁵ In the exquisite aforementioned *Sālalihiṇisandēśaya* (“Message for the Starling”) of fifteenth-century Buddhist court poet Śrī Rāhula, the messenger travels a journey of six miles, from the poet’s capital Kōṭṭe to the temple of the god Vibhīṣaṇa at Kālaṇiya. On the way we have vivid elegant descriptions of botanically real and site-specific flora and fauna—blossoming champak, *hora*, screwpine, *sāl*, *sapu*, and *kino* flowers, sugarcane—the paddy fields and coco-palm countryside shrines of the Buddha where pretty Nāga girls sing him praises, along with monks and ministers (often specific

historical personages), gods, goddesses, and named historical kings.³⁶ But this shortest and most refined of messenger poems also has its political charge for a king and for a princess. C. E. Godambura summarizes:

His [the starling's] errand is to convey a prayer to this divinity from the noble chief Nallūrutunayan, the husband of Ulakuḍayadēvi or Lōkanāthā, daughter of Śrī Parākramabāhu, entreating him for a son, endowed with glory, wisdom, wealth and length of years. The colophon to the poem says that no sooner was this poem composed in the thirty-fifth year of the king than the God was pleased to give the desired child to the princess.³⁷

In the *sandēśakāvya* the political and the aesthetic embrace like Śiva and Pārvatī, fluidly and without fissure, as if, to use an image from Kālidāsa's *Raghuvamśa* (1.1), their bodies were sewn together as one skin.

The following variation on our genre in this short trip through messenger's territory comes from perhaps a surprising direction. One of the most curious transformations of the *sandēśa* motif in South Asian literatures is found in Judeo-Malayālam, in Jewish women's songs of Kerala.³⁸ As usual in the histories of ritual, oral, and literary performance traditions in South Asia, women tend to ask the better questions of any given tradition, and the "messenger songs" of Indian Jewish women in Kerala and Jerusalem—sung in public, in the company of men—are no exception. In such songs the central question that comes up is what might happen if the bird never arrives, if the messenger is shot, perhaps killed by a vicious hunter, and the precious message is never given or heard. A marvelous variation, and one immediately thinks of another context, the core event in the making of the *Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa*, when the sage Vālmīki witnesses an evil Niṣāda

hunter kill one of a pair of mating *krauñca* birds and lets out a curse that forms the metered structure of the “first poem,” the *śloka* meter that has its origins in *śoka*, “sorrow” and lament.³⁹ Kerala women’s “messenger songs” focus on the figure of the parrot, and the song below, translated by Scaria Zacharia in October 2008, in an oral presentation at Harvard, is one variation on several “Palur Parrot Songs”:

Milk and fruit, aiyaya
I shall give to you, parrot, aiyaya

Kovil fruit, aiyaya
I shall pluck and give to you, parrot, aiyaya

Tell me the news, aiyaya
I shall pluck the fruit and give it to you, parrot, aiyaya

Thus, once upon a time, aiyaya
the bird just started flying, aiyaya

Seeing the bird coming, aiyaya
the hunter interrupted it, aiyaya

The bird turned pale, aiyaya
Hunter’s arrow pierced the bird, aiyaya
and it fell down fluttering, aiyaya
Listen to the affliction of the bird, aiyaya
for Kovil fruit, aiyaya

Hunter’s arrow pierced the bird, aiyaya
and it turned pale, aiyaya
Near the seashore of Palur, aiyaya
the bird saw the short palm trees, aiyaya

Near the seashore of Palur, aiyaya
the bird went and bathed, aiyaya

Listen to the wicked thing that happened to the bird, aiyaya

The bird looked for a place to rest, aiyaya
but it could not locate a place, aiyaya

A beautiful green mansion, aiyaya
A beautiful decorated procession umbrella, aiyaya

A high place! Aiyaya
The bird flew and settled there, aiyaya

There are many themes that lie beneath this song, in all its variations, from the bird or birds (in other variants) as the Jewish community (in one version, “ten parrots sitting on high,” symbolizing the *minyān*), to the personal one of a woman feeding her *kovil* or *koyal* fruit—symbolic of her sexuality (in Christian Malayalam folksongs the bride is compared to a *koyal* fruit)—to the messenger bird who has come with news (of her lover). The song then imagines the messenger bird not arriving but killed by a hunter, though he seems to have been rewarded with some kind of paradise (“a high place,” in one variant, “a place of green diamonds, aiyaya, God! An umbrella of precious stones over us, aiyaya”).⁴⁰ Ruby Daniel has said of this variant: “It is said that at the time of salvation, when the Jews are gathered, an Angel will go and sit on the planet Noga (Venus) and rain down green diamonds on those Jews and make an umbrella over them. I heard this from my mother.”⁴¹

This last example—however compelling—perhaps brings us rather far afield from *sandēśas* of South India and Sri Lanka influenced by the two-part form of Kālidāsa’s *Meghadūta*. What also comes to mind at this point are manifestations of this motif

in regions north of the South, most notably *sandēśa* passages and motifs in the *viraha-bārahmāsās* (twelve-month seasonal poems of separation) from northwest and eastern India in Apabhraṃśa (including the twelfth-century *Sandēśarasaka* of Muslim poet Abdul Rahman);⁴² texts in Old Gujarātī, old-Rajasthani-Hindī, Old Bengali, the Avadhī of Śūfī poet Muhammad Jāyāsī; or in Persian-influenced messenger motifs throughout Indo-Muslim literatures of North India.⁴³ As Charlotte Vaudeville noted long ago, early *sandēśas* are good sources for scholars who are looking for evidence of the literary vernacular “seasonal poems of separation” motif in Sanskrit literature.⁴⁴ Finally, variations in Bengali would include Rabindranath Tagore’s compelling *sandēśa*- (and Kālidāsa-) inspired poems “Meghdūt” (from *Mānasī*, 1890) and “Yakṣa” (from *Sānāī*, 1940), along with his important essay on Kālidāsa’s *Meghadūta* (1890, published in *Prācīn Sāhitya*, 1907).⁴⁵ In Tagore we find in the foreground the theme of endless longing and a lover’s continued absence, and a particularly modern subjectivity, but nonetheless, some of the *sandēśa*’s conventional formulae—rooted in the particulars of objective, ideologically charged landscapes and lament—retain their power. Tagore begins in “the easternmost part of India/ in verdurous Bengal.” From his *Meghdūt*, in William Radice’s translation:

In a gloomy closed room I sit alone
 And read the *Meghadūta*. My mind leaves the room,
 Travels on a free-moving cloud, flies far and wide.
 There is the Āmrakūṭa mountain,
 There is the clear and slender Revā river,
 Tumbling over stones in the Vindhya foothills;
 There along the banks of the Vetravatī,
 Hiding in the shade of green, ripe-fruited *jambu*-trees,
 Are the villages of Daśārṇa, their fences streaming
 With ketakī-flowers, their paths lined with great forest-trees

Whose overhanging branches are alive with the twitter
of village-birds
Building their nests in the rain . . .⁴⁶

In Tagore's poem, as in other more traditional *sandeśas*, we meet conventional personages mixed and mingled with real and idealized flora and fauna, some taken from luxurious images in Kālidāsa, some resonating with the beloved landscapes of "verdurous Bengal," and beneath the surface of the entire poem, in a kind of swelling expansion from a point, the universalized suffering of individual lovers alone and the hal-
lowed land of "India" itself. Many such images and conven-
tions will become familiar to us in our reading of Veṅkaṭeśa's *sandeśa*: not only *ketakī*-flowers, *tamāla* trees, and stones of the Vindhya foothills, but "forest girls" who "idly wander;" village wives who "stare up at the sky" as the dark cloud passes; the Gaṅgā in Śiva's hair, and, of course, a single lady longing in love, "weeping her lament."⁴⁷ But we will see in the medieval Veṅkaṭeśa, far more rigorously outlined, a decid-
edly vernacular focus on the beloved South and its "Tamil" imaginary.

The secondary literature on particular *sandeśa kāvyas* is small but significant, though there is need for a good comparative study of the genre as a whole, particularly in its efflo-
rescence throughout South Asia after the 1100s in an age that Pollock has called "the vernacular millennium," and with an eye on its significance as a transregional and transreligious genre.⁴⁸ I have only scratched the surface of the broader topic in the small scope of this introduction, and it is time to close this section and to draw our analysis more tightly around one particularly compelling *sandeśa* from medieval South India.

With this background on the *sandeśakāvya* genre in mind, it is time to shift sole focus to the South Indian Śrīvaiṣṇava Brahman saint-poet, Veṅkaṭeśa. After a short biographical

sketch of the saint-poet and philosopher, we will see how he chooses to compose a messenger poem.

III. THE FLIGHT OF THE GOOSE: A SANSKRIT SANDEŚA IN A SOUTH INDIAN TAMIL IMAGINARY

From Veṅkaṭanātha to Vedāntadeśika: A Lion among Poets and Philosophers

*iti śrīkavitārkikasimḥasya sarvatantrasvatantrasya
śrīmadveṅkaṭanāthasya vedāntācāryasya kṛtiṣu . . .*

*. . . this was made by the lion among poets and philosophers, master
of all the scriptures*

Śrī Veṅkaṭanātha, master preceptor of the Vedānta . . .

The medieval South Indian saint-poet, theologian, and philosopher Veṅkaṭanātha, or Veṅkaṭeśa (c. 1268–1369), as we have already noted, is most commonly known by his epithet Vedāntadeśika (Preceptor of the Vedānta). Veṅkaṭeśa is one of the most important Brahmin Ācāryas (sectarian preceptors) of the Śrīvaiṣṇava community of South India, a community that worships a personal god in the form of Viṣṇu, one of the high gods of Hindu tradition, along with his consort-goddess Śrī or Lakṣmī.⁴⁹ This 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. Veñkaṭeṣa'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 Veñkaṭeṣa, had long been associated with multiple religious communities—Buddhist, Jain, Hindu—and a decidedly cosmopolitan atmosphere. The city had deep roots in transregional brahmanical Sanskrit learning, though it also fostered the development of regional cosmopolitan literatures, most notably in Pāli, various Prākṛts, and Tamil.

Veñkaṭeṣa composed in three major languages of his southern tradition, Sanskrit, Tamil, and Māhārāṣṭrī Prākṛt, and 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 (*nāṭyam*); long religious lyric hymns (*stotras* and *prabandhams*) in Sanskrit, Māhārāṣṭrī Prākṛt, and in 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 *mañipravāḷa* ("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 signify a certain spirit of creative cultural and linguistic synthesis. Veñkaṭeṣa was master of all "tantras" (this term embraces multiple genres of texts); he was also both a *kavi* (a master poet) and a *tārkika* (a logician/debater/philosopher). Tensions and complementarities between poet and philosopher, the devotional lyric and theological prose, are present within the same person.

Veñkaṭeṣa's entire corpus of 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). Veñkaṭeṣa'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. Even more, each of his working languages is touched by the other; the boundaries here are porous, they touch, even overlap at points, in mutually vitalizing dialogue.⁵⁰ Though his Tamil and Sanskrit poetry exploits with great skill the distinctive aesthetic, syntactic, and philosophical modes of each language, classically formulated, one sees cross influences as well: his Tamil poetry and prose are marked with the presence of Sanskrit, and, most importantly for this book, his Sanskrit as well is saturated with Tamil literary conventions and idealized local landscapes, transparent to socio- and geocultural-aesthetic domains that I call more generally a South Indian, mostly Tamil, imaginary.

IV. FLYING OVER THE BOOK: AN AERIAL TOUR OF THEMES

sthitvā tatra kṣanam. . . saumyasakhe. . . vegataḥ vyatīyāḥ. . .

after a moment's pause, o gentle one, go fly swiftly. . .

—HAMSASANDEŚA 1.54.

We have already surveyed selected patches of territory in our treatment of *sandēśas* and some of their antecedents. This has been a kind of reconnaissance mission, scouting the borderlands, circling around our topic, ranging in breadth, and staying at a distance from the particular landscapes that will form the home ground of our study. It is time now to descend into the rich depths of Veṅkaṭeśa's reimagined *sandēśa* territory.

Veṅkaṭeśa's Rāma-Kathā

Though Veṅkaṭeśa's *Haṃsasandeśa* lacks a clear royal context, and its sectarian spirit is rather irenic when it comes to Śaiva shrines such as Kālahasti and Ekāmreśvara, its rootedness in South Indian landscapes and Vaiṣṇava shrines, notably in Kāñcīpuram, along with its turbulent emotionalism, reveal localizing patterns familiar to our discussion of the genre as a whole.⁵¹

Veṅkaṭeśa's *Haṃsasandeśa* is a Rāma *kathā*, a version of the story of Rāma, one of the “many Rāmāyaṇas” in South Asian literatures.⁵² It closely follows the form of Kālidāsa's model *sandeśa*, divided into two parts (address/description and message), and is composed entirely in the elegant, lightly rhythmic *mandākrāntā* (slowly approaching) meter that gives the poem a sense of uniformity and consistent internal music.

The core of this book is a translation in fluid American English verse, with detailed notes and an expanded thematic commentary, of this remarkable messenger poem by Veṅkaṭeśa. Through a close thematic reading of the poem, building on my previous work on Veṅkaṭeśa's poetry in *Singing the Body of God* (2002); in *An Ornament for Jewels* (2007); and in separate articles on the themes of love, particularity, ideal bodies, and women's laments in Sanskrit, Tamil, and other religious literatures,⁵³ I explore ways in which Veṅkaṭeśa re-envisioned the story of Rāma and Sītā in his *sandeśa*, using motifs of vulnerable love and violent emotion present in his own South Indian Tamil devotional tradition—the agonies of separation, lament, loss, keening desire, and anticipated bliss—written into the living particularized bodies of lover and beloved, in the “messenger” goose, and in the landscapes surrounding them. I also note in some detail the important elements of religious allegory applied by Śrīvaiṣṇava commentators to this poem and this literary genre. In the theological world of Śrīvaiṣṇava

commentary (*anubhavagrantha*) and the tradition's secret teachings (*rahasya*), Rāma is the Lord, the goose is the Ācārya, and Sītā is the *samsārī*, the individual *jīva* suffering in this world of redeath in desperate need of consolation.⁵⁴

My thematic commentaries will take as their traditional point of departure and *locus classicus* the magisterial late twentieth-century commentary on Veṅkaṭeśa's *sandeśa*, the *Sanjivana* of Uttamūr T. Vīrarāghavācārya (1973). I also utilize the 1903 commentary by Mahāmahopadhyāya Śrīraṅgācārya, and the short but useful glosses of Śvetāraṅyanārāyaṇa Śāstri (1955).⁵⁵ Vīrarāghavācārya's *Sanjivana* in particular is a most comprehensive work, and in many ways provides a kind of précis of the traditions of Śrīvaiṣṇava scholastic commentary and modes of religious *allegoresis*, so I utilize this text in some detail in my own close reading of Veṅkaṭeśa's poem.

My reading of the poem as a whole rests on the following core themes.

Veṅkaṭeśa's Geocultural Imaginary

I will trace throughout my commentaries on this work various registers of what I have called Veṅkaṭeśa's religio-geocultural imaginary, his clever and singularly creative refashioning of the Rāma and Sītā narratives that privilege his native South India. Veṅkaṭeśa uses his Sanskrit *sandeśa* not only to mark emotions most common to his southern "Tamil" regional and literary tradition, or to reimagine within the structures of a literary form an experience of pure time, but he also most energetically, and with exacting particularity of detail, redraws the traditional geocultural maps of the Rāma and Sītā narratives with his own contemporary fourteenth-century beloved landscapes: the Vaiṣṇava and Śaiva shrines with their icons; their conventionalized Tamil flora, fauna, air, atmosphere,

indigenous light through the seasons, local folks and environs; and pilgrim towns and trails favored by him and by his Śrīvaiṣṇava community of medieval northern Tamil Nadu. Veṅkaṭeśa's "southern" cosmopolitanism is inscribed not only through literary motifs, images in the poem, landscapes, and human habitations but also in the syntax of his language.

Veṅkaṭeśa's Regional Sanskrit: Depth over Breadth

Veṅkaṭeśa's *Haṃsasandēśa* is composed in a Sanskrit steeped in the sensibilities of the vernacular. In fact, Veṅkaṭeśa's Sanskrit remains, in the literary history of the language, one of the most vivid and significant examples of "southern Sanskrit" in medieval India during an age of increasing vernacularization.⁵⁶

As Yigal Bronner and David Shulman have noted—arguing against Sheldon Pollock's far too dire and premature reading of the "death of Sanskrit" after the second millennium C.E.—Sanskrit was hardly "dead" in the South after 1200.⁵⁷ The shift to vernaculars, and their vigorous literary development, all over South Asia in this period did not erase Sanskrit as a living literary language, but rather made it glow more profoundly in depth, in the particulars of its local regional imaginaries. We find in the poetry of Veṅkaṭeśa one of the most powerful and impressive examples of the "localization" of Sanskrit in the Tamil land, where what is lost, in Bronner and Shulman's words, in "geographical range is made up by increasing depth." The greater the geographical contraction and localization, say Bronner and Shulman, forcing the paradox, "the wider the scope."⁵⁸ And the scope, the depth, the densities of Veṅkaṭeśa's Sanskrit, drawing its pan-Indian, trans-regional, and local Tamil energies to itself like the most powerful of magnets, speaks most eloquently to the continued life of Sanskrit in the heart of the "vernacular" millennium.

Sanskrit in a South Indian *Terroir*

I am tempted here to also use an analogy of wine and *terroir* from the riverine and Mediterranean landscapes of France. In Venkateśa's *sandeśa*, language is compared to land and a region in that the bawdy songs of country girls working in the fields mix and mingle “Andhra” and “Karnāṭaka” (*Haṃsasandeśa* 1.20). Śrīvaiṣṇava tradition might call this mixture of languages a form of “*maṇipravāḷa*,” “jewels” and “coral,” using a lapidary metaphor. Using a liquid image, the “mongrel” song here can also be seen as a kind of blending, a *cuvée* reflecting two different “soil-scapes,” more or less clear expressions of the earth of those places. Sanskrit, being essentially transregional, is more like a single grape varietal plant (*cépage*)—Pinot Noir in Burgundy; Grenache in the Southern Rhône; Languedoc-Rousillon, Collioure, and Banyuls on the Mediterranean coast; or Syrah in northern Rhône—that takes on sometimes quite different or sometimes quite subtle characteristics depending on the region, or even on a single, small adjacent plot of land, in which it is grown. Pinot Noir or old vine Grenache will be recognizably themselves across regions, though they will also mirror particular characteristics of the land in which they are grown; they will express, sometimes with excessive precision, what the French call *terroir*. *Terroir*—“place” or “placedness,” the “quality of being in a place”—refers to microclimates, including air; surrounding flora and fauna (olive or cherry trees, boars, birds, and bees); seasonal light changes; wind and weather variations; and soil: clay, schist, glacial stones, and, in Jonathan Nossiter's words, “a dialogue with the land's past memories of past plantings—including, in the literal sense, trace elements in the subsoil of hundreds of years of dead roots, rootstocks, vine leaves, grapes, and vine composts, all of which contribute to a physiological land- and timescape.”⁵⁹ Sanskrit, like a single varietal grown in various particular *terroirs*, has,

in Shulman's words, a "most remarkable heterogeneity, local innovation, context-sensitivity, and by no means only in the 'vernacular millennium.'"⁶⁰ "In practice," Shulman goes on to say, "Sanskrit was quite the opposite of fixed; indeed its capacities to assimilate variation, to generate dialectical subsets, and to 'regionalize' its syntax and lexis are among the most salient features of the language."⁶¹ In this sympathetic resonance to context and local innovation, Sanskrit most resembles Greek among the classical European languages, and one can find similar context-sensitivities in Tamil and Arabic across times, places, and cultures.⁶²

To return to the comparison with wine and place, Sanskrit, to again use Nossiter, "without ever losing its identity" does indeed "shift—sometimes subtly, always decisively"—in response to its South Indian *terroir*. In Veṅkaṭeśa's poetry, Sanskrit is in dialogue with a particular region's "past memories," its "land- and timescape."⁶³

Embodiment, Love, Lament, and Particularity

My thematic reading will also track the charged emotional landscapes of various particular *bodies* in the poem: there is indeed the affective body of a beloved territory, what is a fundamentally happy body of divine presences dripping with shrine jewels, but there are also bodies of individualized lovers who desire and who lament in separation, and bodies of animals that inspire and enflame longings of lover and beloved.⁶⁴ Veṅkaṭeśa's *Haṃsasandēśa* not only valorizes the excellence of particular South Indian landscapes, marking holy rivers, mountains, fields, and shrines, but it also eloquently marks emotional landscapes, the powers of erotic love, and the turbulence of desire onto the bodies of lover and beloved, and also onto the body of the messenger, in this case a royal goose (*haṃsa*). We

do not assume here some generic category of *the body* in Indian literatures but rather focus on particularity, beloved and loving *individual* bodies. This will lead us to an extended focus on the themes of love, loss, and lament as witness, radical empathy—feeling one’s pain in another’s body—and particularity, in the grief and love-laments of Rāma and Sītā.

Ultimately I will argue that Veṅkaṭeśa views Rāma and Sītā’s love through a distinctively “Tamil” lens, comparing and contrasting this south Indian Rāma with the “mad” Rāma in the Vālmīki Sanskrit *Rāmāyaṇa*, whose love madness is certainly about loss, the wounds of love, but is even more, as Pollock has compellingly argued, about the potential violence and impending revenge of a god enraged, the nascent destructive power of the king, Rāma’s identity as Rudra-Śiva. It is in Sītā that we have a most vivid example in South Indian literatures of a suffering body marked by desire, separation, and lament, and I focus in particular on her body of desire and lament in the second “message” section of Veṅkaṭeśa’s text.

Sītā’s Lament through Rāma’s Eyes

We will see how Veṅkaṭeśa’s poem vividly portrays, in its elegant literary spaces, through its depiction of Sītā’s love-in-separation (*viraha*)—and in spite of her textual *aphonia* (she herself does not speak)—the disruptive and dangerous power of female lament, a fiercely particular love that refuses to let go of grief, an ethical witness to social wrong and personal ruin, and a theme with strong cross-cultural significance. Through Rāma’s mad, grieving “eye” (she *is* his eye, as he claims at one pivotal point in the poem, in a thoroughgoing act of introjection), Veṅkaṭeśa evokes love’s not unambiguous power of radical empathy, how one can feel one’s own pain in another’s

body—how Rāma has pain in “his Sītā”—and how through their pain, and not only through some preexistent metaphysical union, each becomes most real to the other. I compare and contrast such ideas in Veṅkaṭeśa’s *sandeśa* with some analogous motifs in the Tamil and Sanskrit *Rāmāyaṇas*, along with examples from various vernacular Rāma narratives and the theological allegories of the Śrīvaiṣṇava commentaries, pointing to the unique emotional densities of Veṅkaṭeśa’s Sanskrit poem.

Seeing What the Heart Hears: The *Sandeśa*’s Creative Imagination

paśyantvantaḥ śravaṇamanagham cakṣurujjīvyā santaḥ

*Those lucky ones
may they see what their hearts hear
after cleansing their vision*

—HAMSA SANDEŚA 2.50

And finally there is the body of the text itself, a cultivated imaginal literary “body” that wills transformation in all it touches. We will see how Veṅkaṭeśa imagines the goose’s journey, step by step, through a landscape enlivened and transformed—in Shulman’s phrase—“by intense, detailed, projected scenarios,”⁶⁵ and at the end, how he manages to create a conjured magical space for the reader/listener as if she were “right before our very eyes.” We are there, in the text, by means of the text, even before the goose has left on his “flight of love.” The manifold tensions and conflicts of the journey ahead are deployed, ramified, but also controlled, through an act of visionary (presentational) literary (re)imagination—in Sanskrit *bhāvanā* (or *anubhava*) with all its prodigious power (*prakarṣa*)—a literary creative act that inscribes hope and time transfigured by love regained.⁶⁶

Ultimately I argue that the *sandēśa* as a whole is a Proustian “magic lantern” that draws together past, present, and imagined future into what philosopher and theologian Raimundo Panikkar has called the “tempiternal,” “time’s eternal present,” and what Freud might term an “activation” (not mere “recollection”) of experience, a creative act of fantasy (*Phantasieren*) as (serious) play (*Spiel*), of wish fulfillment made material in a refined literary form that embodies auspiciousness (*śreyas*) and luck.⁶⁷

V. MESSENGER WORDS: THOUGHTS ON LITERARY TRANSLATION

*viśeṣeṇa kṣubhitamanasām meghaśailadrumādau
yācñādainyaṃ bhavati kimuta kvāpi saṃvedanārhe.*

*those shaken by love in separation are reduced to pleading
with clouds, begging mountains and trees
insentient things—*

*how much more we expect
from an animal that knows feeling . . .*

—HAMṢASANDEŚA 1.5

Royal Message from a Dead Man

It is not only in the linguistic context of Arabic that a guide can be construed as a kind of “translator.” As Michael Sells has noted, the word *turjumān* is used to denote a guide as well as a translator/interpreter.⁶⁸ And guides or translators both, in their ways, deliver messages. They interpret the world around us, as well as they are able, relay critical information, the latest news, exchanging one set of codes for another, hoping for

the best, for a discourse that mediates the differences. Words themselves are messengers, and so translations are also—doubly—messengers, reliable or disloyal, inaccurate, garbled, clear, dutiful, unequivocal, or stubbornly obscure. And one thinks here of Kafka’s parable “An Imperial Message,” where the messenger, having been whispered a message from the emperor, just “for you,” will never arrive, in fact, he is, even after years—decades, centuries—of arduous running, “still forcing his way through the chambers of the innermost palace, he will never get to the end of them, and even if he did, he would be no better off.” There are infinite sets of stairs and courtyards ahead for him, and when he finally makes it into open country, “he would still have the capital city before him, the center of the world, overflowing with the dregs of humanity.” Kafka concludes, with lines that every would-be translator knows obscurely to apply to his or her often demoralizing and solitary art: “No one can force a way through that, least of all with a message from a dead man.—But you sit by your window and dream it all true, when evening falls.”⁶⁹

It is indeed very likely that we are still waiting, hopefully with a good bit of patience, for a most accurate and loyal message, in English, delivered from Veṅkaṭeśa’s brilliant Sanskrit. I have been trying for years; and I keep going back to the desk, to stacks of drafts and notes, and to the window, and to the dream.

With this in mind, I want to reflect here on my own process of translation over the years, the changes rung in my own “messenger English,” and what stage this book has brought me to with regard to literary verse translation from Sanskrit to American English.⁷⁰

Dislodging, Replacing

When I first came to translate my first stanzas of Tamil and Sanskrit, I had internalized a style in English verse that utilized

a certain form of free verse. *The Peacock's Egg*, a fine anthology of Sanskrit and Prākṛt lyrics translated by W. S. Merwin and Jeffrey Mousaieff Masson, that included Masson's detailed notes and roman transliteration of the original texts, made an impact on me long before I actually began the study of Sanskrit and Tamil. One of the verses that struck me then was a *śloka* from the *Rāmāyaṇa* (IV. 30. 45). It was an example of *samāsokti*, a punning verse where the actions of human beings are inferred from a description of nature. Here red twilight (*rāgavatī samdhyā*) is feminine and the moon (*candraḥ*) is masculine, evoking a woman and a man:

cañcaccandrakaraśparśahaṣṇmīlitaṭārakā /
aho rāgavatī samdhyā jahātu svayamambaram /

Even in the relatively straightforward *śloka* meter, the original is characteristically agglutinative, a semantically dense word-picture. Literally we would have:

Rising-trembling-dangling moon rays/hands joy coming
forth/appearing/opening star/eye
Ah red hue/love-passion (female) twilight takes off/leaves
her/its dress/sky.

Merwin translates:

Red also in love twilight
at the hands of the moon
her lover

stars her eyes wide at his touch
oh

happily she abandons
dress and sky⁷¹

Merwin has translated the tightly constructed compound phrases of the original Sanskrit into visual ideographic patterns on the page, using a convention of modern verse, as Ezra Pound did, to give the English reader a sense of the clipped, swift, or slow movements of verbal units in the Sanskrit meter, and to isolate and frame the distinctive semantic units, even down to a single word to a line, focusing on vivid images. We also have in the English translation the opening up, though the insertion of empty spaces—visual caesuras—of a certain breathing space, a slowing down of the line, turning horizontal movement of the original verse line into a vertical descent down the page, working long into thin, creating a feeling of restraint and an episodic quality not exactly present in the original.

The English renderings in *The Peacock's Egg* are powerful, and many are deeply effective as literary translations from Sanskrit and Prakṛt originals. Although they obviously belong to what one might term the “dislodging, replacing” mode of literary translation, they are far from the looser literary “workings” of Jerome Rothenberg’s and George Quasha’s “ethnopoetics,” that is, modernist free-verse renderings of world oral poetics, Native American and African ritual chants and song, Hebrew scriptures, and mystical *opuscula*. Quasha and Rothenberg freely utilize in their translation anthologies a myriad of texts, oral and written, stylistic resources of modernist imagism, the visual ideographic styles of Pound (through Fenollosa), Robert Duncan, Gertrude Stein, the variable foot of William Carlos Williams, Charles Olson’s projective verse, Zukofsky’s objectivism, chance composition, and the visual configurations of the “concrete poets.”⁷²

Merwin’s work, with Masson as close Indologist collaborator, follows more closely the original. Indeed, there are many times when Merwin’s use of single complex sentences without punctuation mime quite nicely the breathless

compacted and layered rush of the original. I will return to this point later.

A. K. Ramanujan's work, though it is directly informed by his knowledge of the original language and sometimes follows the word order quite closely, keeps to modernist clean lines, indented stanzas, scattered downward descent of verse lines, and more consistently carves compound phrases into short, clean syntactically elegant lines. Ramanujan creates marvelous poems in English, though the reader loses any sense of the fluid continuous transformations, the layered quality of the originals, particularly in his anthology of selected verses from the ninth–tenth-century Tamil saint-poet Nammālvār. Sometimes place names are suppressed for the sake of a clean English lyric. A good example is his version of *Tiruvāymoḷi* 10.7.1, the first of ten verses of a *tirumoḷi* on the Lord who swallows the world, swallowing also the poet (I have separated some words from the sandhi of the original text for clarity):

ceñcor̥kavikaḷ uyir kattu āḷ ceymmin̄ tirumāḷiruñcōlai
vañcam kaḷvaṅ māmayāṅ māyamkavi āy vantu eṅ
neñcum uyir um uḷ kalantu niṅṅrā ariyā vaṅṅam eṅ
neñcum uyir uṅ avai un̄tu tāṅē āki niṅayntāṅē.⁷³

Literal translation:

pure/lovely word poets guard/protect your life make service
 [from] tirumāḷiruñcōlai
 deceitful thief master of illusions/great trickster marvelous
 poet having come my
 heart and my life having mixed/mingled with, by those
 standing a manner not understood my
 heart and life breath he having swallowed he himself indeed
 becoming me he filled me completely.

Ramanujan here bypasses the place name Tirumāliṛuñcōlai, the place in the Tamil land where this form of Viṣṇu dwells in the temple icon, and the concrete cultic center of the poem (here simply “the lord of gardens”), and turning an epithet into a statement, shaping independent phrases out of the gerunds in one long left-branching Tamil sentence, he composes a charming timeless and placeless lyric, stripped of its cultic context of temple Hinduism:

Poets,

beware, your life is in danger:

the lord of gardens is a thief,
 a cheat
 master of illusions;

he came to me,
 a wizard with words,
 sneaked into my body,
 my breath,

with bystanders looking on
 but seeing nothing,
 he consumed me
 life and limb,

and filled me,
 made me over
 into himself.⁷⁴

The following selection in Ramanujan’s *Hymns for the Drowning*, in a section called “The Takeover,” happens to be the second verse of *Tiruvāymoḷi* 10. 7, and this version is closer to the feel of the original. First, the Tamil text itself:

*tāṇēyāki niṅṅrantu ellāvulakum uyirum tāṇēyāy
tāṇē yān enṅpānāki taṅṅnai tāṇē tutittu enṅakkut
tēṇē pāl kaṅṅalē amutē tirumālieruñcōlaik
kōṇēyāki niṅṅra olintān enṅnai murrum uyirunṅṅē.*

Literal translation:

becoming me himself he himself becomes the whole world
and life breath of things
as the one I call “I” he himself praises himself
(very) honey milk sugarcane ambrosia (of) tirumālieruñcōlai
king becoming having stood/come/having dwelt there he
ended/left/vanished
taking my life entirely away.

In Ramanujan’s translation:

Becoming himself
filling and becoming all worlds
all lives
becoming him
who becomes even me

singing himself
becoming for my sake
honey milk sugarcane
ambrosia

becoming the lord of gardens too
he stands there
consuming me.⁷⁵

A lovely lyric that in one, somewhat breathless, phrase, better mirrors the original feel of the Tamil, though a critical tension at

the end of the verse mysteriously disappears, that of the Lord of Tirumāliṛuñcōlai who first came/dwelt (gerund, past) then vanished, taking the life breath of the poet away (finite verb, past tense).

By the time I came to my own work as a translator from Tamil and Sanskrit devotional poetry, I had Ramanujan in mind as literary model, and had somewhat forgotten Merwin and Masson.

One of the first verses that struck me as I began to labor over the Tamil *prabandhams* and Sanskrit *stotras* of Veṅkaṭeṣa with the paṇḍit R. N. Sampath in the hot back room of the Kuppaswamy Shastri Research Institute in Mylapore, Chennai, was a fine lyric in the Caṅkam mode. It proved that a fourteenth-century Śrīvaiṣṇava Ācārya like Veṅkaṭeṣa was still deeply in touch with essential aspects of the old Tamil poetry, of saint-poets like Nammālvār and Āṅṅāḷ, and even elements of Caṅkam Tamil. The verse describes the love-possession of a heroine (the *talaivi*) as a black cloud descends over the hill-shrine of Viṣṇu at Tiruvahīndrapuram, the cloud being a trope for the dark god himself. The poem is spoken by her friend (the *tolī*), who is concerned about the girl, and who worries what others might think, seeing her in this ecstatic, disturbed bodily state. It is pure Caṅkam conventions as used by the Ālvārs, here deployed by an Ācārya.

The original has an agitated surface, with a repetition of hard consonants, a spiky cascade that mimics the horripilating body of the heroine:

*ārkkun karuṇai poḷivān ayintaiyil vant' amarnta
karkkoṅṭalai kaṅṭa kātal puṇamayil kaṅ paṇiya
vērkkum mukilkkum vitivitirkkum veḷki vevvuyirkkum
pārkiṅravarkk' itu nām enkol enru payiluvamē.*

Literal translation:

full/complete/all people mercy/compassion raining/gushing
to Ayintai coming remaining

black cloud saw love/passion mountain wild peacock
 shedding tears
 sweating/horripilating shaking/throbbing with intensity
 shamed/shy panting/sighing
 to those who see her saying what it this what shall we say?

My earliest version of this lyric went like this, titled after the commentator's description of the scene, in imitation of Ramanujan's practice:

The concerned friend speaks, seeing the condition of the heroine:

Sighing, she quivers with desire
 then shrinks with
 shame; damp with sweat,
 hair standing on end,
 her eyes fill with tears—

she is a wild peacock of the hills
 crying its desire
 in love

when she sees the dark cloud come to rest
 over the town of the serpent king
 raining sweet mercy
 on all its people.

What shall we say to them
 When they see this?

At the time I first read these verses, one of ten in mixed meters in Veṅkaṭeśa's *Mummaṇikkōvai*, I was of course struck by the Tamil verse itself, especially the string of extraordinary modifiers

for this girl, describing her strange unsettling ecstasy. The line beginning with *vērkkuṁ* veritably bristles with spiky sounds, the whole verse is unsettled, emotionally charged. But I was finally guided by an idiom in English, and rather forced this emotionally disruptive verse into a leaner more lyric form. The second version, later published in my book, *An Ornament for Jewels*, came closer to the word order of the original but was still far from its emotional pitch, its semantic and syntactic layers:

Sighing, she sees the black cloud come to rest
 over Medicine Hill
 in the town of the serpent king:
 streams of sweet mercy rain
 on its people.

Quivering with desire
 shrinking from shame

wet with sweat
 hair standing on end
 her eyes fill
 with tears.

A wild peacock of the hills
 screaming its desire
 in love:

What shall we say when they see her?⁷⁶

Although I still stand by this translation, accurate in its own way, it does reflect a certain aspect of the original Tamil verse and reads well in English, bringing a certain spirit of Veṅkaṭeśa's poetry alive; but I would not translate this verse in quite the same way now. One's translations, like one's poems,

if one writes poetry, are never finished. This is a truism. Translation, by its essence, is corrigible, partial, and its idioms and stylistic solutions do change with the changes in the translator's sensibilities.⁷⁷ My earlier work attempted to match the varying complex and densely figured semantic, syntactic, metric rhythms of the original Sanskrit, Tamil, or Prakṛt texts entirely through the *visual* placement of words on the page, with an emphasis on vertical descent of the line rather than the horizontal flow of the originals. Though my translations have no fixed meter, they are far from "free" or arbitrary. I have thought long and hard about my choices on the page, hoping to effectively translate my sense of the metric rhythms and sound shifts of the originals using the visual as a map for the American English reader.

I still think this approach works well; although, I have become impatient with this style and have in recent years shifted my approach closer to the grain of the original on *its* page—its own lines visually in its original meters, long or short—as well as what Hank Heifetz calls the "rhythms of feeling for the ear."⁷⁸ I began to take a closer look at Heifetz's work with George Hart on Kampan's *Irāmāvatāram* and the *Puṛaṇāṅgūru*, and to take up again some of the hints of Merwin's work with Masson in that anthology that first drew me to this poetry, along with Merwin's own original poetry.⁷⁹

I translate Venkaṭeśa's lyric this way currently, staying closer to the tight grain of the original metric and syntactic constructions in Tamil and Sanskrit, respectively (and ideally eschewing punctuation entirely):

A sweet rain of mercy is falling coming to rest over Ayintai town
 and seeing the black cloud
 a wild mountain peacock screeching in love
 sighing she shakes with desire shrinks with shame
 damp with sweat hairs standing on end

weeping her eyes fill with tears
what shall we say to those who see her.

And the *Ramāyaṇa* verse translated by Merwin:

The stars her eyes wide at the touch of the rising moon
O red with love twilight
with joy she abandons dress and sky

I trust the differences in approach are clear enough, though I will reflect on the process of this shift in style. I would call this approach to translation more in the mode of a “caress,” touching, tracing, stroking; translation as *anubhava*, a line-by-line relishment or “enjoyment” of the original.

Touching, Tracing, Caressing

This shift was caused by a combination of things, one being intimately connected with my work in this book on the *Haṃsasandeśa*. Daily close reading of the Sanskrit meter of Veṅkaṭeśa’s *sandeśa*, the *mandākrāntā* or “slowly approaching” meter, inspired me. As I noted, this meter is used to compose many core *sandeśas* in Sanskrit. Veṅkaṭeśa’s *sandeśa*, like his model, Kālidāsa’s *Meghadūta*, is composed entirely in the *mandākrāntā* meter, all 110 verses in two sections, or *āśvāsas*. I became rather enchanted by the rhythm of this meter on the ear, its long, sometimes clipped, sometimes loping rhythms. With four-line stanzas, and seventeen syllables in each line, divided into ten and seven in each *pāda*, the meter possesses an infectious rhythm on the ear, and its long lines have a cumulative power, orally and visually. I would have to find a form in English that took account of this clipped and loping rhythm, a form that could be repeated in a long poem and not

become monotonous. I could not just rely on visual spacing alone, a varying visual texture more suited to sequences in mixed meters, or when one is selecting, out of context, individual stanzas for the creation of independent English poems.

I went back to Hank Heifetz's brilliant translation of Kālidāsa's *Kumārasambhavam*, whose form in English follows so closely, in its spacing on the page, its line, the Sanskrit original, and its success—to use Heifetz's own words—in “*translating* rhythm, by producing suitable American rhythms at the level of the speaking voice.” “A translation for the ear,” Heifetz goes on to say, “meant to be read aloud in the natural emotional tone suiting each stanza or sequence and with the poetic line as the basic unit, receiving its slight stresses at beginning and end.”⁸⁰ Even punctuation is an issue here. Sometimes, Heifetz observes, one needs to move away from “formal norms” to “reinforce,” in a phrase I have already cited, “rhythms of feeling for the ear.”⁸¹ One does get the sense of Heifetz's English verse gently tracking the original Sanskrit verses, as if he were running his fingers—the fingers of his English—back and forth along the lines of Sanskrit.

And Merwin redux. At about the same time I had returned to *The Peacock's Egg* and also to Merwin's midperiod collection *The Vixen*, written entirely in a verse style of long lines, mostly single long sentences, with uniform alternating indents at the left margins and no punctuation. Merwin's “rhythms of feeling for the ear” in these poems haunted me, influenced my own poetry, and gave me some keys to a style I might use in translating the *mandākrāntā* verses of Venkaṭeśa's. To best get an aural and visual feel for this meter, I first chose to forgo, for the most part, the use of punctuation and to compose English verse lines with phrases that flow one into the other, in single lines and in separate stanzas that visually mime the long original Sanskrit lines, with their slow-step rhythm.

The following verse is from the second *āśvāsa* of Veṅkaṭeśa's *Haṃsasandēśa*, a verse describing Rāma's memory of love-making with Sitā, a verse that alludes to an earlier famous verse of the great eighth-century playwright and poet Bhavabhūti in his *Uttararāmacaritam* I. 27.

I trust it is fitting to end with two poems about embrace, the caressing of two bodies, like two different languages, two different poetic forms, and the hairs that stand on end from the touching.

First, the original Sanskrit (try to hear the beats - - - u u u u u - - u - -):

*velātīta praṇayavivaśaṃ bhāvam āseduṣor nau
bhogārambhe kśaṇamiva gatā pūrvamāliṅganādyaiḥ /
sampratyeṣā sutanu śataśaḥ kalpanāsaṅgamais te
cintādirghair api śakalitā śarvarī nāpayāti //*

Literal translation:

limit/measure/end beyond passion/affection subject to state/
emotion attaining to us
at or in the beginning of our love-making gone as if in an instant
once/in those days with our embraces close, and so on (*ādi*).
but at this moment o lady of lovely body hundreds/innumerable
imaginary unions by us
by thoughts made even deeper which is broken/fragmented/night
does not pass away.

In the old days o lady of sweet body
consumed by a madness of passion that seemed to have no limit
we had barely begun to make love our bodies pressed close
together
in tight embrace when the night would vanish
in an instant

but now broken into pieces by a thousand acts of love in my mind
 this same night made even deeper dark
 long with memories of you never ends⁸²

And the Bhavabhūti model:

*kimapi kimapi mandam mandam āsaktiyogāt
 aviralitakapolaṃ jalpator akrameṇa /
 aśīthilaparirambha vyāpātaikaikadoṣṇor
 aviditagatayāmā rātrir eva vyaraṃsīt //*

Literal translation:

of what kind of what kind softly softly on account of
 deep attachment
 contiguous close cheeks of us two talked/murmured/
 prattled randomly
 becoming tight or firm embrace occupied/busy one-to-one/
 each arm [of us two]
 the watches [of which] unknown the night only passed.

When we talked at random our cheeks pressed close together
 deep in love
 softly o softly of something unspeakable

our arms busy in close embraces only the darkness ended
 the night-watches passed unnoticed.⁸³

The reader of this book will notice, however, that punctuation inevitably worked its way back into these translations as I began to publish them in contexts less than the purely literary. I was convinced by various editors to compromise here, which greatly changes my original process, though I hope makes the reading of these translated verses easier for a wider audience. I also

discovered that, as I progressed in my translation of the entire poem, over a period of many years, the shape of some of my verse translations began to naturally take the form of the wedge or half of an inverted triangle, with the long lines at the beginning, shorter lines at the end and a caesura in the middle. Some verses would take a rough chevron shape miming the body of a bird in flight or the shape that oil makes thrown down a smooth surface, flowing to a point like half an arrowhead or the single wing of a bird, rhyming with the eye what became more and more the rhythm in my ear of the original. So the visual took its inevitable turns in the process. The verse above (*Haṃsasandeśa* 2.33)—only approximating the shape of geese in chevron flight common in other verse translations from the poem—gradually became

In the old days o lady of sweet body,
 consumed by a madness of passion that seemed to have no limit,
 we had barely begun to make love, our bodies pressed close
 together
 in tight embrace, when the night would vanish
 in an instant:

but now broken into pieces by a thousand acts of love in my mind,
 this same night made even deeper dark,
 long with memories of you,
 never ends

And I did not always stick strictly to the long lines, though this rule governed the primary aspects of the process. The following verse (2.40), most elegant in the original in its simplicity and quiet unobstructed lyric directness, called at first with each draft for a vertical thinning out, a division of phrases outside the rhythms of a single English sentence, and the intrusion of the dreaded semicolon:

*dehasparśaṃ malayapavane dr̥ṣṭisambhedamindau
dhāmaikatvaṃ jagati bhuvī cābhinnaparyaṅkayogam /
tārācitre viyati vitataṃ śrīvitānasya paśya-
ndūrībhūtāṃ sutanu vidhīnā tvāmahaṃ nirviśāmi //*

I touch your body in the warm Malaya wind,
our eyes meet in the moon;

we live together in a single house
this world
and lie together on the same bed
this good earth,
with the sky full of stars our shimmering royal
canopy:

you see o lady of sweet body,
even though fate has driven us so far apart

I still enter
you

Though this is a certainly totally acceptable form for use here,
I came to my senses. Drafts began to look something more like
this, without any punctuation at all:

I touch your body in the warm Malaya wind our eyes meet in
the moon
we live together in a single house this world
and lie together on the same bed this good earth
with the sky full of stars our shimmering royal canopy

you see o lady of sweet body
even though fate has driven us so far apart I still enter you

“Slowly Approaching”: Being Touched, Being Haunted

In this attempt to be loyal to the original, invariably sometimes one stretches—though, with some skill, not overly distorts—the syntactical limits of American English. Preservation and negation go both ways in literary translations that demand, along with their own originality and literary independence, a loyalty to the original text. Translation can be a grasping, an attack, a taking hold and dislodging of an original from its singular place, but, to cite an image from Jacques Derrida, it can also aspire to be an attentive tracking, the fingers along with eyes slowly following original words on a page, a touching, a caress. An act of love and a loving beholding.

Images of translation as an ambivalent amorousness reach a kind of peak in one of Derrida’s lyric transports, in an essay on the words “mercy” and “merciful” in *The Merchant of Venice*, of translation not only as elevation, preservation, and negation (*relève*) but also an act that excites desire, an encounter of bodies (“tongues” as separate bodies). To love a word is to love it, in Derrida’s words,

only in the body of its idiomatic singularity; that is, where a passion for translation comes to lick it as a flame or an amorous tongue might: approaching as closely as possible while refusing at the last moment to threaten or to reduce, to consume or consummate, leaving the other body intact but not without causing the other to appear—on the very brink of this refusal or withdrawal—and after having aroused or excited a desire for the idiom, for the unique body of the other, in the flame’s flicker or through a tongue’s caress. I don’t know how, or in how many languages, you can translate this word *lécher* when you wish to say that one language licks another, like a flame or a caress.⁸⁴

There is a subtle dialectic operating here, a precarious balancing act. Difference and even a certain incongruity in

translation need hardly be betrayal (alone), but is—potentially—an act of beholding (*anubhava*) that preserves the ongoing particularity of the original while creating something new in the receiving language, most loyal and, strangely perhaps, most loving. Here resonances can touch, and translation can be a meeting and touching of two separate essential expressions, literary resonance to literary resonance—*dhvani* to *dhvani* in the language of Sanskrit aesthetic theory.⁸⁵

I end this reflection with one more register of exchange in this process of translation. In such an encounter, as Derrida fancifully contends, the languages lick, touch, caress each other, so one's own voice may also be vulnerable to change, one's own poetry, to capture. One touches, but is also touched, and perhaps also haunted, possessed. As Gayatri Spivak remarked in the "Translator's Note" to her work on Aimé Césaire's *Un saison au Congo*:

There are two theories of translation: you add yourself to the original or, you efface yourself and let the text shine. I subscribe to the second. But I have said again and again that translation is also the most intimate act of reading. *And to read is to pray to be haunted.*⁸⁶

If the translator is truly open to this touching, this being haunted, and if, like Spivak, one "cannot help but translate what [they] love," one might just find that one's own poetic voice, if one also writes poems, one's own inner rhythm and even breath-line, will be indelibly influenced by work in a particular Sanskrit or Tamil, French, Occitan, or Greek meter.⁸⁷

The Messenger: A Note on the Goose

Finally, not to shoot the messenger, we need to pause and consider what exactly is our messenger honker, the Sanskrit *hamṣa*. There is some lively controversy in Indological circles

as to exactly what is referred to by the term *haṃsa* in Indian poetry. Most translators of Indian literatures, from the seventeenth century to the present, have translated the word into some version of “swan” (*cygnus*), influenced by European literary notions of that bird and its many mythological associations. In his influential monograph *The Goose in Indian Literature and Art*, J. Ph. Vogel (yes, Vogel) using art-historical and contemporary ornithological evidence, sheds doubts on this easy identification of *haṃsa* with swan, arguing that the *haṃsa* or *rājahaṃsa* mainly refers to the Indian “bar-headed” white goose, *anser indicus*, with its honking call—and its long migration patterns and its high flight—while *kalahaṃsa* is the graylag goose, or *anser anser*.⁸⁸ When the swan was eventually imported to India, this word was used to refer to the swan as well. I follow recent post-Vogel Sanskrit scholarship in translating *haṃsa* as gander/goose, for reasons of accuracy and also to avoid inevitable poetic archaisms in English—however much Yeats’s fine image of the “wild swans of Coole” might ring in my ears. The late Julia Leslie compellingly raised this issue again, challenging Vogel, and arguing that the term denotes in Indian literatures a range of large aquatic birds, including swans, geese, even flamingos, and some ducks. As for me, I think I’ll keep—and will hope not cook—my goose. I have confidence that this high-flying crosser of the Himālaya will be good to think (with).

VI. FINAL INSTRUCTIONS

The chapter that follows this introduction consists of a full translation of the entire *Haṃsasandēśa*, with notes limited to immediate philological details and specific points of translation, often utilizing the readings and word glosses of the

Śrīvaiṣṇava commentators, and including quotations from the original Sanskrit. Please read the poem first as a poem before moving on to the third chapter.

Chapter 3 is a thematic commentary that combines a detailed account of major motifs of mainstream Śrīvaiṣṇava scholastic commentary—rooted in Vīrarāghavācārya’s compendious *Sanjivana*—with readings of the poem that open it out to contemporary themes in the comparative study of religious literatures, outlined already in this introduction, from regional cultural imaginaries—beloved spaces—in a cosmopolitan language, the themes of bodies and embodiment, love, lament, particularity, to the encompassing theme of transfigured time—the experience of past, present, and future made “tempiternal” in a “flawless gem” of imaginative literature. But first, and always primary, is the poem—or rather, the translation—in its own words.