SINGING THE BODY OF GOD

The Hymns of Vedāṇtadeśika
in Their South Indian Tradition

STEVEN PAUL HOPKINS

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master of six languages" (sadāhāsa paramesvara), Topāgamanvē Śrī Rāhula. Like Deśika, Śrī Rāhula adapted secular literary forms of his mother-tongue, Svēhala, to deal with religious subjects, which included verses in the erotic mode. And in ways analogous to the Śrī Lankan master, Deśika’s “complex religious profile” can be said to be a “microcosm” of the “total field of religion” in his time. This is precisely what was meant by Deśika’s epithet Svātantravasvatāstra (“master of all the arts and sciences”), a title recognized and celebrated by those within and those outside the Śrīvaiṣṇava community. An interesting difference between the Buddhist court poet and the Śrīvaiṣṇava Ācārya has to do with their alliances with kings. Whereas Śrī Rāhula, like the Tepkalai Ācārya of the fifteenth century and after, developed strong ties with both the secular and religious authorities of his age (he was a member of a royal family), Deśika—if we have read his stories aright—remains an ambivalent, transitional figure. This difference, however, has more to do with the era than with individual sensibility.

While Deśika is but one of a small but significant elite of South Asian philosopher-poets, his work remains a distinctive example of this elite cosmopolitan stream within Śrīvaiṣṇavism. Deśika’s use of language—his combination of Sanskrit and Pāṇḍīrī with their competing “cosmopolitan vernacular,” Tamil, and skill in a variety of literary and religious genres—sets him apart from his Śrīvaiṣṇava contemporaries, as well as from the earlier Ālvārs.

In the last verse of the “Garland”—quoted at the very beginning of this chapter and referred to throughout this book—we read about Deśika’s fateful meeting near the banks of the Peṇṭai. We hear there of the poet’s charge to write praises of Devanāyaka “in his own words,” and of how he combined praises in “lovely,” “fertile” Tamil with those in “heart-captivating” Pāṇḍīrī and in “old tongue” Sanskrit. We hear of the genesis of some of the stanzas we have studied in this chapter.

Next, in chapter 5, I will consider an example of Deśika’s Sanskrit style by way of his dīvāna-stotra modeled after the Tamil poem of the Untouchable saint-poet Tiruppāṇḍīvē. I will focus on a particular type of poetic writing in Tamil and in Sanskrit, the pāḍālikēśaśānavāka or “limb-by-limb” enjoyment of the “body” of God. This will reveal another face of Deśika’s devotional poetries, from the Sanskrit side, and show more concretely how his poetic voice compares with that of an Ālvār. Along with an analysis of these poems I will also take a close look at some commentarial texts, both on Deśika and by Deśika himself. I will give a sense of Deśika’s mantraśāstra style by citing passages from his prose commentary on Tiruppāṇḍī’s poem, his only extant full-length commentary on an Ālvār poem. And so we will build more layers—of genre and of language—into our study of Deśika’s poetry and poetries in its South Indian tradition.

Then in Part III of this study (chapters 6 and 7), we will return to the “Elephant Hill” at Kaṇḍi and to the banks of the river Peṇṭai—to Deśika’s Sanskrit stotras in praise of Varadārāja and his Sanskrit and Pāṇḍīrī praises of Lord Devanākāyā.

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### A God from Toe to Crown

**In Love with the Body of Vishnu**

**nīḷavaiṭṭhaṁ niṁpuṭtam**

The forms of the world appear—
lightning
from your dark body

—Vedāntadesāka
Mammasikkāvai, 10

**aśītasteṣu kēṣāsaṁ agaiva mēḻi
dhērāvarīku mēḻagēce eitintai saḷaṁ
duṇi evaṁ anupajjum saḷaalē niṅ
dēśavaḷakku māṇadētē pīpadētē**

O Lord of Truth to your servants
your lovely body is dark
like kohl
like the deep blue kēḍa blossom.

O munificent king
who showers grace like torrents
from a monsoon cloud
over Serpent Town,

if we do not forget the beauty of your body
we will not be born again!

—Vedāntadesāka
Navamaśimalai, 6

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**Introduction: From Praise to Parody to the Language of Visionary Joy**

In this chapter I will focus on a distinctive genre of devotional poetry in the Śrīvaiṣṇava tradition, with an eye on many of the themes that have so far shaped my discussion of Deśika’s Tamil prabandhas. I will continue to explore the uses of the erotic to speak about the relationship between the human and divine; the vivid “personality” of God’s
miraculous cultic "icon body" (arcaśītā) in the poetic imagination and visions of Deśika and the Ālvāras; divine beauty, salvation, and surrender; and the many ways a fourteenth-century philosopher, theologian, and poet responded to a body of venerated poems not only by writing commentaries but by writing poems of his own. This chapter will offer another glimpse of Deśika's craft and polylog poetics by comparing a poem he composed in Sanskrit in praise of Lord Raṅganātha of Śrīraṅgam to an Ālvār prahāndham composed in honor of the same form of Vishnu.

I will also explore, as I analyze our primary texts, some striking examples of the interanimation of poetry and commentary (or more broadly put, of philosophy and literary art) in the Śrīvaśnavism tradition.

Human and Divine Bodies, One Step at a Time

One of the most widespread, though little studied, descriptive devices in Indian literatures is the sequential description of a god or goddess, a hero or heroine, from foot to head or head to foot (padādeśem, ṣpadācārādmahānāvam or nakhā-sūkha, literally "toenail to topknot" for Krishna māntana). The actual origin of such limb-by-limb descriptions is far from clear. One obvious textual and perhaps cultic source—alleged to by some poets—may well be the Vedic Purusa sūkha (Rg Veda 10.90), though some of the earliest literary examples come from the Pali descriptions of the body of the Buddha in the Lakkhaṇasuttaṇa of the Diṭṭa Nikāya (c. 3 B.C.E.), inspired in part by ancienticonic accounts of the thirty-two auspicious marks of the "great" person (mahāpurṇa).

By the third century C.E., in the Buddhist stotras or "hymns" of Mārtacetas, we have fully developed examples of this adaptation of this form of sequential description to the body of the Buddha.1 By the seventh century, the Chinese pilgrim I-sing attests to the fact that two of Mārtacetas's stotras, the Camahastaka stotra and the Satapadiṣṭatika stotra, were widely chanted throughout "India."2

In the Pali Theriṅgāthā (lyrics with commentaries and attached biographical narratives collected in fifth-century Kāṇḍīpuram), such descriptions are used ironically to satirize a love poet's erotic descriptions of a human female beloved. The verses of Bhikkhuni Annapālī, a self-portrait of the nun-heroine from head to foot, are a parody of the erotic love tradition. They juxtapose conventional images of the young girl’s hair, “glossy and black as the down of a bee,” “a casket of perfumes,” her teeth “like the opening buds of the plantain,” her throat of "mother-of-pearl" and her arms “shining like twin pillars,” with the old woman’s body, “wrinkled and wasted” with years. The language of love is turned on its head and used in the service of a meditation on impermanence.3 The irony is even more savage in the verses attributed to Bhikkhuni Subhā of the Mango Grove, where the young male lover’s hyperbolic praise of the beautiful nun’s eyes—compared to “gazelles,” "enshrined" in her face as in the “calyx of the lotus”—is answered by the nun tearing out her eye in contempt and handing it to the young man.4 “Here then,” she says in disgust, “take your eye!” (handa te cakkham harasses).5

Other early examples of this form directed not to human lovers, nuns, or holy men, but at actual temple icons, include Bāṇa’s Cauḍī Sātaka (c. seventh century), which contains a detailed foot-to-head description of the loveliness of the goddess Cauḍī’s body, with a distinctive focus on the toenails; and a work Winternitz claims as contemporary with Bāṇa, Mūka’s Paśca Sūst, a praise in five hundred verses of the charming form of

the goddess Kamalakṣi of Kāṇḍīpuram. Also by the seventh century there are analogous Buddhist and Jain Sanskrit stotras that describe in elaborate detail the bodies of Buddha or of the Jinas.6

In later centuries limb-by-limb descriptions become widespread in pan-Indian cosmopolitan Sanskrit literature (kavya), as well as in various Prākṛta and "cosmopolitan" vernaculars, such as the Sri Lankan Buddhist kavya literature in Sinhala—developed from Sanskrit models—beginning in the thirteenth century. The important thirteenth-century Sinhala mahākavya, the Kastulumaṇa, contains, for instance, an elaborate foot-to-head description of the beauty of queen Prabhāvarī, the wife of the Buddha in his birth as King Kusa.7 The PāṢravaṇa, another thirteenth-century Sinhala kavya, contains long passages describing, limb by limb, the beautiful bodies of women, along with an emotionally charged description of the beautiful body of the Buddha as seen by his lover wife Yasodharā upon his return to his father’s palace.8 Such Buddhist Sinhala texts, the exquisite products of a second wave of vernacularization in Sri Lanka after the twelfth century, are imbued with a rich atmosphere of religious emotion that is deeply indebted to the aesthetic models of Sanskrit erotics.

Such descriptions also play an important role in Agamic and tantric ritual texts such as the Pāṭicārītra, where they form the basis of visualizations of a deity from foot to head. They also form part of iconometric texts for śilpas (icon makers) shared by Hindus, Buddhists, and Jains from a very early period. According to south Asian art historian Gustav Roth, the iconometric lists drafted by craftsmen in texts such as the sixteenth-century Cīrakārakas, begin from the crown of the head and proceed down to the foot, while early Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain religious texts, miming the attitude of the worshipper, move from foot to head.

Buddha worship started with the veneration of Bodhi trees, which, placed inside a railing, came to be regarded as caitanya. They existed long before Buddha images were formed for the purpose of veneration. The worshipper of Bodhi trees naturally started from the base of the sacred tree raising the face with folded hands in devotion. When Buddha images came into being they were treated in the same way. The worship of divine beings generally starts with paying homage to the feet. The list which starts from the top-point of the head is the list drafted by craftsmen who usually start drawing human figures with the head and the upper portions of the body. This is the reason why all the texts dealing with the iconometry of figures begin with the head, as far as they have come to our knowledge.9

While this directional distinction will not always hold true in later religious traditions—we have already seen how Desika at times choses to describe a god from head to foot—it brings up an important issue in any study of such descriptive devices: that is, a history of such descriptions must take into account not only their literary genealogy, but their religious and cultic objectives as well: a theme to which we will return.

Anubhava: Enjoying the Body of a God in South India

From the eighth through the fourteenth centuries in South India this trope is used in distinctive ways first by Tamil saint-poets (Ālvāras), and later by Śrīvaśnavas Ācāryas composing in Sanskrit and Tamil, to describe the male bodies of temple images (ugraha;
māri; mēnu): the various standing, seated, and reclining images of the god Vishnu in a growing network of shrines that dot the landscape of Tamil Nadu. Śrīvaiṣṇava commentators call such foot-to-head or head-to-foot descriptions anubhavas: “experiences” or “enjoyments” of the body of the god. Sanskrit and Tamil anubhavas in Śrīvaiṣṇava literature are visionary pictures of the deity meant not only as a tool for systematic tantric visualization (dhyānānā), but, as devotional visions, they are meant also to inspire emotion, an atmosphere of “divine passion,” a direct experience of amorous feeling through a refined erotic language inherited from Sanskrit kāya.

Like the usṣās of the Hebrew Song of Songs and dissembling metaphor-rich descriptions of the Beloved in ancient Arabic qāṣīda, the Śrīvaiṣṇava anubhavas is a language of overflowing joy, and one of the most potent vehicles of love-language in the literature. In the rush of images, the concrete object of contemplation, the temple icon, expands before one’s eyes. The poets’ similes, metaphors, and double entendres serve at times to dissemble the original object of gazing—a jeweled belt, a toe, a thigh, earrings, crown, or navel—this, along with mythic and cultic associations from Purāṇic or Pāṇḍavāra liturgical texts, create a complex composite image of a vigorously Procreative god.

Yet in spite of their lyrical energies and dissembling metaphors, such descriptive texts are decidedly rooted in a “cultural” context. The saint-poet’s experience—to use Richard Davis’ phrase—his “devotional eye”—is shaped by sanctum icons, by their liturgical service and ritual honor (pujā). Even when Vishnu is seen to change form, to move about like a living being, or to be played with like a doll (as in the charming narrative of the Muslim princess who fell in love with the plundered temple image of Rāṇīgānāthī), the poets often simply oscillate in imaginative vision between the immobile standing or reclining stone mūlaśabha and the bronze festival images (utṣāva māri) that stand before them in the “literary” space of the temple sanctum or as booby in the palace storerooms of a Delhi Sultan. After all, as we have seen in the poetry of Ďēsīka, Vishnu in this southern Tamil and Sanskrit poetry is the god who “stands” (the verb nil is most commonly used in the Tamil verses)—he “abides” (niṅga) in the temple and its environs, but most vividly “stands” there (niṅga) right in front of the adoring poet.

Ďēsīka’s Eye on the Body

Some of Vedāntadesika’s finest lyrics include anubhavas of the most audacious and luxurious sort. As we have already seen with his description of Varadārāja, some of these go from head to foot, presupposing familiarity. We will read more head-to-foot enjoyment of Devarāyaka later in this study. But there is one very special Sanskrit stanza that, for good reason, describes a form of Vishnu, Rāṇīgānāthī at Śrīrāmam, from the foot to the head. This is Ďēsīka’s Bhagavatādhyanayopāna, “The Ladder of Meditation on Bhagavān [The Lord].” Ďēsīka’s poem and its anubhava of Rāṇīgānāthī’s body is modeled after one of the most famous of Ďāvār Tamil compositions, the Amalanāṭtipirāṇa, “Pure Primordial Lord,” by eighth-century Untouchable saint-poet Tiruppūṟūrāvāṭ. This poem seems to have been as important to Ďēsīka as it was to the early Ācārya who compiled the Divyānābhaṇḍham, for the Kāñcēr Ācārya not only composed his own Sanskrit homage to Tiruppūṟū, but composed a maṇḍiraśāstra commentary on the Tamil poem, called Manuṅdaṇanāpōkām—which might be translated as “The Enjoyment of the Poet Who Carried the Sage on His Back”—the only extant commentary of Ďēsīka on an Ďāvār poem.14

Comparing these two poems—one in Tamil by an Ďāvār, one in Sanskrit by Ďēsīka—we also keep an eye on Ďēsīka’s prose commentary—will add more layers to the argument of this book on the hymns of Ďēsīka “in their South Indian tradition.” It will reveal another facet of Ďēsīka’s connection with the Ďāvār and creative appropriation of the bhakti poetics of a previous generation. Specifically, it will introduce us to our first Sanskrit poem by Ďēsīka by way of an Ďāvār poem that served as its model.

I will first discuss the remarkable descriptive praise of God’s body by the Untouchable Tamil saint, then move on to a treatment of Ďēsīka’s Sanskrit “enjoyment” of God. I will also allude as I go along to the insightful and original maṇḍiraśāstra exegeses of these poems by Śrīvaiṣṇava sectarian commentators, including Ďēsīka himself. For in this tradition, as we will see, to comment on a text is not so much to dissect it into minute doctrinal particulars, but rather to experience it. There are certainly many examples in the tradition where the commentators theologically or allegorically reduce the native richness of a poetic text.15 But Śrīvaiṣṇava commentary can be, at certain moments, a kind of imaginative participation, a “spiritual enjoyment” (anubhava) equal in intensity of relish to the enjoyment of God in the root-text. We will certainly discover many such moments in Ďēsīka’s own commentarial relish.

This is a rich field of study. Numerous forms of verbal “iconicity” are found in every genre of Indian literature—Hindu, Buddhist, Jain, Christian, and Muslim—from tantric ritual visualization texts, women’s wedding songs, songs and lyrics for children (including piḷḷaiḻai), and even songs to “headless heroes”; the versified template-texts of silpins, to the generalized iconic “epiphanies” of the sixteenth-century northern saint-poet Sūrī Dās, beautifully studied by Kenneth Bryant and John Stratton Hawley. But in the following south Indian Vaiṣṇava poems verbal icons and “iconicity” reach a veritable apotheosis of expression. Dennis Hudson has produced some remarkable readings of Ďāvār poems that foreground their cultic context, showing how, in almost allegorical detail, they mirror personages and actions in Pāṇḍavāra rites of initiation or the consecration of kings. While not ignoring the technical vocabulary of such ritual action behind the poems I study in this chapter, my work rather foregrounds, as does this book as a whole, the literary textures of such ritual poetry: the poetry of pāṇḍāra.

I will not only argue that these poems offer us some of the most vivid examples of the dynamic relationship between text and icon in Indian devotional literatures but will address issues of verbal iconicity and “visual poetics” in general, along with saying something about sacred poems in a “cultic context” of pāṇḍāra. Ultimately, I argue that these poems, in literally embodying forth the god, become themselves, in a peculiarly vivid way, “verbal icons” of icons.18

“His Lovely Dark Body Fills My Heart”
A Poet’s Ecstasy Before the Icon

kolamam̐ ci yamani muˈci tamam̐
imaiwatălai eḻil
nila mēn iriy niˈcai koˈtata e niciˈnaiy̯
My God! his lovely dark body of unfading beauty
strung with pearls
and big dazzling gems
fills my heart!

—Tiruppānālvar

Amalanātipirān, 9

There are many versions of Tiruppānālvar's story, told at different times and places by those with particular doctrinal and social nuances to add. According to South Indian Vaiṣṇava tradition, the oldest account of the life of the Āḻvār is the Sanskrit Divyaśivacaritam (eleventh–twelfth century C.E.). Two important later vitae are included in two different lives of the saints, both titled Guruparamparaśabdham, written respectively by Ācāryas of the Southern (Tepkālai) and Northern (Vaṭakalai) subsects of the Śrīvaīsaṇa community around the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries. There also exist two other important sources, one from the fifteenth century (the Āḻvāraḻ, vaibhava) and the other from the sixteenth century (the Periyatirumātipatana). But the popular version I will recount here—important to any discussion of the Lord's icon body—is rather late: it does not appear in these early biographies. Vasudha Narayanan conjectures that this version may not be more than 300 years old—but admits that its centrality in all modern accounts of the saint is highly significant.

The story's basic outline runs as follows: Tiruppānālvar was born into a caste of Untouchable singers (Pāṇḍara) in the village of Uttarār (in the modern district of Trichy) on the southern bank of the Kāverī river, near the great temple of Śrīraṅkām. He was an extraordinary boy, as soon as he began to speak, took in his hands a vīṇa and composed songs. Being an ecstatic lover of Raṅganātha, the Lord of Śrīraṅkām, he went every morning to the banks of the Kāverī river across from the temple to sing the praises of the god on the other shore. Though his Untouchable status denied him access to the temple, even to the holy temple grounds, he was unstinting in his devotions on the river bank; and for eighty years poured out praises for the god in song. One day the senior temple priest, Lokasaraṅgamāthu, happened to come to the Kāverī's banks to fetch water for worship. Absorbed in his ecstasies, the Untouchable bard did not see the brahmin approach, nor did he hear the command to move out of the way. Annoyed, the priest threw a stone at the singer, wounding him on the forehead. On his return to the shrine, the priest saw to his great amazement the image of Lord Raṅganātha bleeding from the head, in exactly the same place he had wounded the bard. The prayers of the king and the rituals of his fellow brahmins did not stop the bleeding. Finally, the Lord of Raṅga himself came in a dream to the temple priest, telling him of the wound he shared with his devotee. He instructed the priest to fetch the bard from the far shore of the Kāverī, and carry him on his own shoulders over to the temple and into the sanctum sanctorum. Finally the bard saw (kaṇṭha) and enjoyed (anupavita) with his bare eyes the body of the god he had been praising his whole life from a distance. And more than saw—one text uses a vivid image, popular in later commentaries, that joins the metaphors of tasting, touching, and seeing: the saint enjoyed God as a child who seeks its mother's breast, and finding it, puts it into its mouth. Then, facing the image, he sang the beauty of the god

one part at a time, humbly beginning with the feet, in what Vedāntadeśika would later call a spontaneous “outpouring of ecstatic enjoyment” (anubhava parīnakamākā). And thus we have in the ten stanzas of Tiruppānālvar's Amalanātipirān ("Pure Primordial Lord") one of the most important descriptions of the beloved god in the Vaiṣṇava Tamil tradition, one that would have a considerable influence on later Śrīvaīsaṇa devotional poetry in both Sanskrit and Tamil. I translate in full the Pāṇḍara's poem:

Amalanātipirān

I
Pure primordial lord,
   radiant god who has made me a slave
of slaves; flawless
   overlord of angels
   who lives in Veṅkaṭam of fragrant groves;
   sinless dweller
   in righteous heaven—
   our dear father,
   here in Araṅkaṃ of long high rampart walls:
   It seems as if his lovely lotus feet
   have come and entered
   my eyes!

II
   His heart filled with joy
   when he spanned the three realms;
   his tall thin crown grew taller
   and grazed the worlds' rim.
   Descendant of Kakūra
   whose cruel arrows are night demons
   crouched in ambush
   that day—
   our dear father of Araṅkaṃ of fragrant groves.
   Ah! my mind runs
   to the red cloth
   he wears on his waist!

III
   He who reclines on the serpent couch
   in Araṅkaṃ
   stood in the north on Veṅkaṭam hill
   loud with monkeys
   so the gods might see him:
The sweet core of my slave’s heart
rests on his waist-cloth
the color of twilight—
on the shining navel,
creator of our creator, Brahma,
above it.

IV
That Lord the color of the sea
who, driving
the demon back,
let fly an arrow that shattered
the ten heads of the king
of Lakshmi—
that city girt
with high square ramparts:

He is the Lord of Aranyakam
where the big peacocks dance
and sweet fat bees
sing.
The waist-band around
his lovely belly
strolls in my mind!

V
Cutting me loose from my burden
of old sins,
he made me his own—
it was after that
he entered me.

I don’t know what long terrible penance
I’ve done
to deserve this:
the chest of the Lord of Aranyakam
with its long garland
of flowers
and lovely goddess
has captured this slave
of God!

VI
He who quelled the grief of Lord Siva
who wears on his forehead
a new moon’s
white sliver

is our Lord who lives in the city of Aranyakam
surrounded by groves,
loud with dark-winged bees:
You see, his throat
that swallowed all things—
this precious earth
and its pedestal of seven peaks,
all of space
and the celestial worlds—
it has saved me,
his slave!

VII
He holds in his hands
the spiral conch
and fiery discus—
his body like a low broad hill—
our father
whose long crown
exudes the fragrance of holy basil—
our elusive lover
seated on the serpent couch
in the jeweled city of Aranyakam:
Ah! my mind is ravished
by his red lips!

VIII
When it came at him
he tore into pieces the demon’s massive
body, primal Lord
awesome even to immortals!
I see his face,
the pure Lord of Aranyakam:
his wide open shining eyes—
dark pupils darting
glances, whites
“streaked with red,
swelling the edges of the lids—
make a fool of me!

IX
He who swallowed the seven worlds,
the little baby
lying on a leaf of the great Banyan tree
sleeps here
on the serpent couch of Arānkam—
My God! his lovely dark body
of unfading beauty,
strung with pearls
and big dazzling gems
fills my heart!

X
As the cowherd boy
his mouth ate the sweet butter:
that Lord the color of a rain cloud
entered me,
ravished my heart.
Ruler of all worlds,
jewel of Arānkam—
these eyes, seeing him,
my nectar,
will never see anything else.22

And according to the tradition, he never did look again on anything other than the Lord of Śrīnāgaram, for while “all intelligent beings looked on,” the saint entered bodily into the holy body of the great Perumāl, “mercifully purifying those whose minds were muddied by confusion.” Thus the poem maps, in an intriguing double movement, both the way the temple image enters and “ravishes the heart” of the bard (ēppūḷiyam kāvanāyai, in verse 10), and the way the bard himself enters (both in mind and body) the temple image.

“The Thick Nectar of Enjoyment”: The Poem and Its Commentators

The poet Venkatesa, out of devotion, for the delight of those who have abandoned the pleasures of this world desires to comment on this hymn
of the good poet
who was carried piggy-back on the old priest,
filled with joy
at his sight of Mukunda!

—Vedāntadeśika
Invocatory Verse for his Maniṣṭharaṇapākam
Another common interpretive strategy of the commentators is the allegorization of natural imagery. This may have the effect, particularly for modern Western readers, of removing the poem from a certain existential immediacy. It is, however, yet another example of the union of feeling and doctrine, the natural and moral worlds, in Śrīvaiyavsa discourse. Both in Ṛṣṇakārācārya and in Deśika we find the big dancing peacocks and “sweet fat bees” in verse 4 turned respectively into celestial dancers and gods such as Brahmā, while the dark-winged bees in verse 6 are religious teachers (śrīvaiyavsaśāstra). Even the loud monkeys do not escape an exuberant, but nonetheless rather moralistic allegorization: they are described in verse 3 as a “moteley crew of transmigrants” (capalaka samārīka) who, trapped in the wheel of birth and death, leap from life to life after the worst fruits of their desires (kṣaṇakāla kāmika) as restless monkeys leap from branch to branch. In the same verse we find the two commentators training their learned passion on the Lord’s waistcloth, “like the color of twilight” (antipūpillim). The Tamil word anti, like the Sanskrit saṃbhut, indicates a “meeting of lights,” which can be interpreted to be either dawn or evening, the ruddy glow of sunrise or sunset (cevelām). It usually denotes evening twilight, but both Deśika and Ṛṣṇakārācārya exploit the ambiguity of the word to drive home a theological point. Deśika claims, and the modern Ācārya commentator follows him closely, that the word means both morning and evening “twilight.” As the pawn hue of the cool evening twilight (pasāmāsaṃbhut), it “extinguishes the burning afflictions of the Lord’s devotees,” and as the red glow of dawn (śānya-saṃbhut), it heralds the sunrise of “ultimate knowledge that utterly destroys the darkness of [their] ignorance.” This lively hair-splitting on the meaning of the Lord’s waist-cloth finally leads us to the poem’s center of gravity, something that brings out a lyrical energy in poet and commentator alike: God’s beautiful body.

An Anubhava of the Lord

In declaration after declaration, the poet expresses his wonder at the harrowing beauty of the deity’s body: “It seems as if his lovely lotus feet have come and entered my eyes!” (verse 1); “Ahi my mind runs to the red cloth he wears on his waist!” (verse 2); “The chest of the Lord of Arāṅkām, with its long garland of flowers and lovely goddess, has captured this slave of God!” (verse 5); “His wide open shining eyes, dark pupils darting glances, whites streaked with red, swelling the edges of the lids—make a fool of me!” (verse 8). The splendors of each and every part are enjoyed in ascending order—as the Sanskrit invocatory verse or saṅgya to the commentary tells us—“from foot to head” (āpādācādānubhavāya).

Let us meditate with firm resolve on the singer who rode piggy-back on the old priest, whose heart’s core was filled with deep delight at the sight of Hari reclining in the middle of the Kāvērī’s twin streams—and who, after enjoying the Lord from his feet to his head, vowed that his eyes would never again see anything else!65

As Deśika says in his gloss on verse 9, one is suffused with a glorious splendor (śaṃsu; Skt. śhūkkha) when one “unites with the splendors of each and every limb” (cāyāyavaiśāpalka) of the Lord. And these splendors do not only extend in all directions, permeating the space around the poet, but enter into the depths of his heart, itself flooded with the glorious splendors of the Lord’s every limb.66 The terms used here by both the poet and his scholastic commentators for such an ecstatic, limb-by-limb seeing of God’s body are all cognates of the Sanskrit word anubhava: “experience,” “perception,” and, in Śrīvaiyavsa theology, “enjoyment,” a kind of spiritual delectation. Ṛṣṇakārācārya puts it succinctly: this poem is a pādākāśa anubhava, an “enjoyment of God, one limb at a time, from the foot to the head.”67 As K. K. A. Venkatachari has observed in his study of Śrīvaiyavsa āryapravāsa prose style, this same term is used for the act of commentary itself. In this tradition, to comment on a text is not so much to strip away its aesthetic skin for the sake of a philosophical or esoteric core—though at times this seems to be the case. Ideally, to Śrīvaiyavsa, the goal of commentary is a kind of “spiritual enjoyment” that matches the root-text’s more direct “enjoyment” of God.68 And we find the most striking examples of this “imaginative participation” of the commentator in the object of his commentary, of his aesthetic and religious “relish” of the primary text, in the treatment of the beauty of God’s temple body.

The Icon’s Ritual Body and the Language of Love

The poets and commentators alike rarely use the usual technical terms to describe temple images (maṇḍa; pratiśīmha; vijñhā; arācaśātra; mānti), but rather those terms which evoke the real presence of a body—such as Sanskrit katuva or vātis; Tamil vānu (Skt. vānu) or saṅghu, “form/body.” Vishnu’s beautiful body seizes the heart of this Tamil devotional poet like a beloved seizes the heart of his lover, inspiring in him a rich “language of joy.” Yet this is not an encounter entirely lost in visionary devotional space: neither is it one that merely serves in the production of an aesthetic ideal, the perfect poem of praise, a “verbal icon” in the purely literary sense.69 We are also dealing with a cultic context of temple and ritual.

The body of God as temple icon dominates as much the imagery of the commentators as does that of the poet. Ṛṣṇakārācārya, for instance, glosses one of the four Sanskrit synonyms of the first verse, vimalaś (“faulless, pure”), by a phrase that alludes to the “lovely twany hue” (cītānātikaśivara) of the golden festival image (sāmanvā mānti) of Raṅganāthā that stands in front of the god’s dark stone image in the temple sanctum, along with those of his two wives.70 It is these icons that, after being lavishly ornamented, are paraded in the streets in royal palanquins for all to see on festival days. In his prose commentary, the modern Ācārya speaks of vimalaḥ as referring to the poet’s “enjoyment of a certain extraordinary splendor (tāyaḥ; Skt: tejas) produced by our Lord’s holy body” (tīmānipipītaṇa).71

But luminosity is not the only attribute of this image/body. Ṛṣṇakārācārya also uses the image of Raṅganāthā as dark as the “pupil of an eye.”72 One of the most common words used by all the Ākārs to describe the temple image is meṇī, meaning “beautiful or perfect body.” The term meṇī evokes images of concentrated energy, alluring beauty, awe, fecundity (it can also mean “full crop”), and mystery; it gives a sense of both darkness and effulgence. Often poets use an adjective denoting darkness or blue-
blackness, as in Tiruppanāḻvār’s nila mēṭi in verse 9, which inspires in the mind of the reader-listener an image of the deep blue of monsoon clouds or of the sea, the season of love-making, and the blue-black, kasturi-smarted immovable stone icon (the mālebēra) in the sanctum, shiny and wet from icustrations.54 Desika glosses verse 4, where the Lord is described as being the “color of the sea” (ōtāranaṇaṇ), with an inspired allusion to the māla icon in the temple sanctum: “He has an auspicious holy body (tīrṇamēṭi), glossy blue-black like the sea, that can utterly destroy the burning heart of sins in those who see it,”55 Tirumēṭi, “auspicious/divine beautiful body” has a technical meaning: it is a conventional Tamil phrase meaning “holy image,” commonly used from a very early period to refer to Hindu as well as Jain icons.56 The poet sees both the visionary and the ritual “material” images—these multiple forms of Vishnu—as he stands before the “stander” in the shrine.

Which brings us to another dimension of this experience. As in the Hebrew Song of Songs, God’s beloved icon-body is continuous with the landscape in which it is placed—in this case not Mount Oilead or Hebron, the rich fragrant paradise gardens or fertile fields, but the shrine and its environs.57 In the words of the commentator, the poet simply “exults, seeing before his very eyes Raṅganātha who sleeps in the holy city of Śrīraṅgam, [his feet] gently massaged by the waves of the golden Kāveri.”58 In a gloss on “the color of a rain cloud” (koṇṭal vaṇṇamal) in verse 10, Desika conjures one of his most vivid word-pictures of a temple landscape transfigured by the material presence of God: “He has an auspicious holy body that soothes the weariness of those who see it, like a black cloud come to rest in the very middle of the Kāveri, having drawn into itself all the waters of the sea.”

The icon-body, in the poet’s “devotional eye,” is a living image, an animated body—something material, standing “out there.”60 It is a divine body whose visual beauty has salvific power. But there is more. This god’s body is also in the heart.

**Manifestations of the Image**

Gérard Colas has observed, in a perceptive article on the deva and the priest in South Indian image worship, that the inner image in the heart > the exterior image in the temple define a common “imaginative space.”61 Colas cites as one example among many in the early Āḻvār of such “mental devotion” a passage from Peyāḻvār in which the saint-poet describes Krishna as “the young cowherd who has taken as his abode the minds of those who have withdrawn into the lotus with fine petals.”62 This mental language of yoga emphasizes the unity of devotee and deity, in that the latter is the “indweller” (antarāyāmī) of the former. We add another layer to the icon’s charged field of meanings.

The temple image, as Colas notes, is the point of intersection of several perspectives. There is the temple priest’s notion of an inert statue conventionally fashioned by artisans (śilpān) that awaits a consecration ritual that will bring it to life, and the tantric idea of an “external appearance of an interior image that is conjured and controlled by yoga.”63 On the other, more “realist” spectrum, the image can be seen either as the concrete, living object of “violent and divinatory possession” in an atmosphere of hierarchy and difference, or as a kind of “sacred puppet” (poupète sacrée) suffused with the real powers of the deity, a deity that allows himself to be manipulated by priests as if it were a little character on the sacred “ritual stage” of the temple shrine—bathed, dressed,

talked to, sung to, put to sleep—to the delight of the audience-devotees, in an intricate mirroring of everyday details. One has the general image here of the momentary divinization of the shadow puppets in Balinese ritual theater. This latter perspective, Colas observes, leads us finally to the “more general problematic of the relation between play and the sacred.”64

**Vishnu as Sacred Puppet**

The notion of the āṭeṣa as a “sacred puppet” is certainly one way of understanding the vivid presence of Vishnu to Tiruppān. Colas alludes to some examples of ritual “theater” and sacred “marionettes” in the southern regions of Andhra and in Karnataka, and notes an interesting example of the puppeteer-priest in a suburb of Madras, pulling the threads of his holy doll as the winds of God’s spirit move him. This is indeed, as Colas remarks, “a modern (though hardly scriptural)" example of the South Indian Vaishnava tendency to “represent the divine as alive as possible.”65

Perhaps most telling is Colas’s example of a story in the medieval “Chronicles” of Śrīraṅgam temple (Koil Ojukku) that I discussed in chapter. 2. This is the story of the daughter of the Muslim king of Delhi who fell in love with the bronze festival image (utsava mārī) of Raṅganātha taken by her father in the sack of Śrīraṅgam. The girl took the image into her bedroom to play with as if it were a doll and was devastated to the point of suicide when her playmate was taken away.66

Vasudha Narayanan tells a similar story from another Śrīvaiśnava source about the utsava mārī at Melkote, known affectionately as the “Precious Son” (cełāpīḷā). In this version, the philosopher Rāmānuja goes in search of the missing image and, in a dream, finds out from the Lord himself that his festival image is in Delhi, “delighting in his sport” in the house of the Turkish king. The morning after, Rāmānuja goes immediately to Delhi and pleads with the Muslim king to return the image to Melkote. The king, granting the philosopher’s request, tells Rāmānuja to search for it in the lockers that hold his plunder. But to the devotee’s great disappointment, the image is not among the others locked away in the king’s “war chest.” He falls into a fitful, exhausted sleep where, once again, the Lord comes to him in a vision and tells him that he is playing in the inner apartments of the king’s young daughter. And it is there, in the daughter’s room, that he finally finds the Lord, who, upon seeing his devotee, “with all his golden bells and ornaments tinkling,” jumps into his lap in front of everyone. Rāmānuja ecstatically embraces the image come to life, addressing it as “my precious son.” According to oral tradition, as Narayanan informs us, the Muslim princess (Tuluk or “Bibi” Nācīqar), “unable to bear separation from Rāmapriya, followed the Lord to Tirunāṭṭānappuran where she is still honored in the temple ritual.” And because this lover of God is from the north, “she is served wheat bread (ṭūṭi; chappāṭi) every day instead of rice, which is the customary diet in South India.”67

From the Doll to the Divine Lover

This doll imagery emphasizes, in a charming way, the radical accessibility, even the vulnerability, of God. Yet these stories allude to far more than the notion of the temple image as an animated “sacred doll.”68 What is also important is the overall devotional atmo-
sphere of the stories, their language of delight. One of the more significant devotional motifs in these stories—along with the obvious socioreligious ones of Muslim conversion and "humanization"—has to do with the erotic overtones of the relationship between the girl and her divine playmate; the vivid physical reality of God's atavtawa, and the girl's agonies of separation when the image is returned to its temple. Such stories speak the emotional language of human love—of playful union and the misery of separation, of blissful innocence and of passionate fidelity—brought to bear on divine and human partners. They speak—to use a phrase coined by anthropologist Owen Lynch—about divine passions.

This multiform, metaphorically disembowled object of the saint-poet's ecstasy—his experience of the palpable interior presence of a transcendent, purely spiritual deity who yet captured, entered into, devoured the mind, and ravished the eyes of his human "slave" (Tamil api, "slave," is synonymous here with "devotee")—is most vividly captured by the language of human love, the touching and sexual mingling of human bodies. The erotic lexicon of swallowing and devouring, of kissing, of entering, of tasting and being tasted is far more common, and more significant, in the Tamil and Sanskrit poetry of the southern Vaishnava tradition in which this poem holds an important place, than the imagery of playing with dolls.

In the other works of Tamil poets, such as Namakkavār, the mental and material forms of Vishnu are evoked by means of a striking use of alimentary vocabulary, where the poet (in the voice of a girl) himself devours the god, holding in his "belly for keeps" that great Lord who once swallowed the worlds. Ramanujan calls this "drastic" imagery of partaking or merging that of "mutual cannibalism." He gives as an example of such mutual devouring a stanza from Namakkavār's Tiruvidanādi (9.6.10):

My dark one
stands there as if nothing's changed

after taking entire
into his maw
all three worlds
the gods
and the good kings
who hold their lands
as a mother would
a child in her womb—

and I
by his leave
have taken him entire
and I have him in my belly
for keeps.

What this passage makes clear (and its immediate context, like that of Tiruppāṇāvalī's poem, is the saint-poet standing before the temple icon) is that Colas's "violent and divinatory possession" (la possession savage et divinatoire) can go both ways in this literature: God both possesses and is possessed by the devotee. In extraordinary moments of religious ecstasy, the normal hierarchical relation is reversed. As Ramanujan summarizes: "[T]he reciprocity is carried all the way, the eater is eaten, the container is contained, in a metonymy many times over."

Tiruppāṇāvalī's rhetoric is less extreme; there is some ambiguity as to who has "devoured" whom. Though the poet's senses, "or better his eyes," as Friedhelm Hardt has observed, "seem to devour each part of the body and bring them into his soul," and though his "slave's heart" reaches out to rest on the waist-cloth and the shining nail, the accent seems rather to be on passivity, the poet having been entered, filled, ravished, taken captive. Rather, it is Raigañātha who has laid his eyes on the saint-poet. Another important dialectic in any reading of these poems is that between passive and active seizure.

Anāṇkaraśārya focuses on this double movement in his commentary on the first two stanzas of the poem. First, he says, it is the Lord who, of his own accord, rushes in upon the Ākārī (mekkānta) to take the poet captive as his slave (the marial imagery here is striking); then, in the second verse, it is the poet's turn to do the seizing: seeing the Lord's shining beauty (rukā), he in turn rushes in ambush on the Lord. And then, immediately after this gloss, the commentator tackles this movement from and toward God using very different metaphors. In a passage reminiscent of the poet's cita quoted above, where the seeing of God is vividly spoken of as sucking at the mother's breast, Anāṇkaraśārya turns to the metaphor of the mother cow (rāka) and its calf. In the first verse, the mother herself puts the calf's mouth to her teats, as the newborn is not yet aware of the sweetness of her milk; in the second, it is the calf that takes the initiative. Because it now recognizes its mother's scent (coṇa, lit. "mark," "scar"), the calf will rush toward it and demand the milk, even if the mother herself should reject its advances.

So briefly we add to the predominantly erotic atmosphere of male and female encounter the images of parentage love. As we have already seen, the sense of the Tamil word appa is linked not only to the sweetness of sexual love and sexual contact but to the overpowering loving affection of mother cows for their calves, and to alimentary images of flowing mother's milk. In chapter 6 we will add the very taste of the afterbirth to our lexicon of terms for parental devotion. "Love" in these poems takes on as many dimensions as the bodies of God that inspire it, from love of parents, to that of friends, to the all-consuming and often painful love of lovers.

As for male and female god and saint-poet, the gender symbolism that permeates this poetry has resonance in the actual daily practice of image worship among Hindus. We never, even in the definition of divine passions, leave the shrine and sancum very far behind. As C. J. Fuller has pointed out in his recent study of forms of "popular" Hinduism, one might understand the system of exchanges in pāṭ between a worshipper and the temple deity—particularly in regard to food—as conforming to the patterns of a household. By accepting food from a partner of inferior status (the lay person or priest), who then in turn eats the "leftovers," the deity essentially acts as a husband in relation to his wife in a traditional household. It is thus literally true on the social level that—as the bhakti poets imply, if not outright proclaim—the worshipper stands in relation to the deity as a wife to her husband.

Here we enter into the real complexities and ambiguities of what Fuller calls "the hierarchical inequality" between man and woman, deity and worshipper. For in the bhakti
poetic tradition, as in puja—along with moments of awe and the overwhelming sense of the gulf that separates the divine and the human—there are vivid moments of union, of interrelationship, even of reversal: hierarchy dissolves for brief ecstatic instants. The moment of union, to use an example from Fuller, is like the moment one touches the campfire flame and, after moving the still-warm fingertips to the eyes, absorbs the energies of the divine fire through the eyes into the heart. One such instant is wonderfully caught in verse 9 where Tiruppāṇi calls out “My God! (aiya) his lovely dark body / of unfading beauty / strung with pearls / and big dazzling gems / fills my heart.” The object of worship has filled the worshiper until for a moment they are one composite being.

Yet the “real presence” of the temple image is never more puzzling and intriguing than when one contemplates the meaning of the final, most sublime “marriage,” when the lover enters and disappears into the beloved—where God finds one particularly delectable devotee in his belly “for keeps.” The body of the saint, like that of God, is precious in the Śrīvaiṣṇava tradition. In one hagiographical source, as Vasudeva Narayanan has pointed out in a recent paper, it is compared by the Lord himself to a vial of rare perfume. Must one break the bottle to enjoy the perfume? This sense of the delectable bodies of saints is perhaps one of the motifs at work in Tiruppāṇi’s nuptial disappearance. He is one of only two saints—the other is a woman, Anjali, also a poet of divine love—said to have one day merged into the sanctum icon at Śrīrajaam.

Ultimately, there is in Tiruppāṇi and in the other Āḷvār and Ācārya-poets a complex interweaving of mythic/literary imagery and ritual practice, of the material bodies of temple icons and the mental images of the deity evoked in the saint-poet’s heart. Vishnu the master, that “flawless overlord of celestials,” standing there (nīga) in front of the poet’s slave, visible to the “naked eye” (kaṇṭakakṣa) as the commentators say, is the same as Rāma, as Krishna Gopāla, the god-king of Mathurā, awesome avatāras who performed such magnificent deeds in “those days” long ago. Yet “He”—Father, Mother, and Lover—is equally the bronze or stone image smelling of worship and the image present in the “sweet core” of the heart. The Ālvār here strongly affirms the ontological reality of the material and mental “bodies” of God: the lovely lotus feet of the great old tales that seem to come and enter his eyes as a kind of interior animated image, and the temple icon with its red waist cloth that his eyes in turn capture and take into his mind. Deśika, as we cited earlier, speaks of the poet’s simultaneous experience, in his ecstasy, of an exterior and interior glory radiating from the limbs of the Lord’s body. An exhaustive interpretation of each poem would have to take into account the sometimes subtle interplay of these various symbolic structures.

To again use Richard Davis’s terminology, the “dispensation” of this vision—the framing set of cultural assumptions and ideas brought to bear upon the temple image—is indissolubly multiple.

I end here with a Tamil verse by Deśika that begins his commentary on Amadhaṭitipāṭa. It is a verse that elegantly gathers together many of the themes and certainly much of the spirit of my discussion of the bard’s enjoyment of God:

After we see him joined to our hearts
as our creator,
standing in his temple, mingling with his loving slave,
our protector and husband,
in the ten stanzas sung by the Lord of bards
that bestow the fruits of the Vedas
in Tamil song—
we take a hint from the cowgirls who did their kūrava dance
that day long ago
for the lord who became
their cowherd
and king:
we leave behind the loneliness of sinners,
uniting with him
like the hen with her cock.

Visualization and the Eros of Devotion in Sanskrit

Tiruppāṇi’s poem is one of many such poems in the Ālvār corpus that describe the god sequentially from foot to head and head to foot. Namāville, in Tiruviṭṭu 1.9, in an intriguing variation on the imagery of swallowing God, who swallowed the worlds, the Ālvār describes how the Lord inhabits his every “limb,” beginning with the hip, and moving up to the heart, arms, tongue, eyes, brow, and finally head. Here the body of the saint merges (mingles: kalanṭa) with the “Body of God.” There are also some vivid examples of this genre in Rāmānuja’s gadyās and prose treatises and the poetic work of the later Śrīvaiṣṇava Ācāryas, especially in the Sanskrit stotras of Kṛṣṇa (Kūntēlaṅgū) and Parāśara Bhaṭṭār. As Nancy Nayyar has shown, the visionary/cultic/literary structures of Kṛṣṇa’s and Bhaṭṭār’s stotras are particularly marked by limb-by-limb descriptions of specific icons. These verses are steeped in the Ālvār tradition; they bring the vivid emotional experience of seeing (darśana) God’s body, particularly in the icon form, into fluid Sanskrit.

Bhakti texts such as Tiruppāṇi’s and the Sanskrit anubhavas of the Ācāryas are also clearly related to yogic ritual visualizations (dīrghaṁ) in contemporary Pāṭhārāṭhī texts such as the Ahoḷadebhagavanta. In a way analogous to yogic or tāntic/ritual visualization, they attempt a systematic building up of an image of the deity inside the body of the adept. However, the anubhavas of the Ālvār and Ācāryas are visualizations with a difference.

The Indian tāntic texts—perhaps themselves related to other iconometric texts that served as visual/mental guides for makers of images (tīṣṇas)—downplay personal emotion (erotic or otherwise) and for the most part avoid use of exaggerated imagery (they are mostly prose), for the sake of esoterically and iconically accurate visualization. However, there are exceptions, such as this vigorous dīrgha of a tāntic goddess from a Kashmiri text whose tradition has links to the south:

She should be visualized (samajñāmaṇe) black as a crow, as a swarm of bees or the clouds at the world’s end, three-faced, awesome, eighteen-armed, roaring horribly as she destroys the universe, mounted emaciated and terrible on [the shoulders of] the Great Transcended with various weapons in her hands, her limbs clad with [a skirt made of] strings of bones, and her hair flowing upwards.
In such texts the physical pleasure and bodily touching associated with such religious experience is of course to be distinguished from the physicality of bhakti "enjoyments" of the body of God. Desire (maddana) for the other (partner) here is not an end in itself, but is a ritual tool of enlightenment; desire is used to transcend all desire. This is vividly made concrete in the very practice of the "mingling of essences," which in most tantric and yogic traditions is ultimately the male absorption (by sucking or drinking) of the female "seed" until enlightenment is reached.

Ultimately, in most forms of tantra such affective experience, however concretely physical and focused on pleasure, serves the goal of detachment that is foreign to bhakti as we see it in the South Indian tradition. In tantric forms of yoga one is urged to transcend the physical form of the object of one's meditational or visionary or physical devotion. The goal is to experience the impersonal and universal aspects of one's chosen god or goddess. In tantra proper, one does not fall in love with a deity; the goal has little to do with feeling (bhuta) per se, as an end in itself, and everything to do with union, identity, the ritual incorporation of the other. The deity contemplated is finally nothing more and nothing less than a vehicle of one's own enlightenment.

In the bhakti "enjoyments" of the body of God the otherness of the deity/Beloved is always preserved; desire and various registers of physicality and visionary experience are harnessed in the service of pure adoration or for the subtle agonistic nuances of an experience of union-in-separation.

Ramanuja's Anubhava of Vishnu

To return to the Śrīvaiṣṇava tradition itself, we find in the Vedāntasamgraha, a prose treatise by the eleventh-century Viśiṣṭa-dvaita philosopher Rāmānuja, a fine example of a post-Ājñātī anubhava of the "auspicious anū, holy form" (ādityam-galavigrāha) of Vishnu from head to foot. This remarkable passage—a string of long intricately textured compound phrases—mingles the styles of tantric and iconic visualization with the surplus of descriptive detail that evokes the charged emotional atmosphere of bhakti. One has the distinct impression that the writer is describing both a real icon—its various ornaments and attributes, including even the pāṭāhāram, or yellow waist-cloth—and some transcendental or interior vision. Rāmānuja is glossing a passage from the Brahma-sūtra 1.1.21 that speaks of "the one who dwells in the sun and in the eye," which the theistic philosopher interprets as proof that the "highest brahman possesses a form" (paramā brahmaṇa nāvāsati).
broad chest—all his limbs are held in perfect symmetry—his fine body gives shape to an inconceivable divine form. His complexion is lucent and tawny; his lovely feet like two petals of a full-blown lotus. He wears the shining yellow waist-cloth to adorn his beautiful form.\textsuperscript{91}

Rāmānuja goes on to list, in downward order, Vishnu’s various ornaments and weapons, as would a text on icons, and then resumes a precipitous concluding litany describing the Lord whose “infinite, unsurpassed beauty” (anavādikātikāsaundarya) “captivates the eyes and hearts” of all creatures, sentient and nonsentient, who fills them to overflowing with the “nectar of his loveliness” (lakṣāyāṁśa), and whose “eternal and inconceivable youthfulness is utterly astonishing” (aayādikātikaṁyaśyaśuvaśe). One gets the heady sense at the end of this passage of a kind of liquid loveliness of form, a sensuous radiance alternately consoling and melting before the eyes.

But this anubhava of the Lord’s supernal form “dwelling in the sun, in the eye, in the heart,” and in the temple on earth—as alluring as it is—has little of the sensual detail and intimacy of the Āḷvār’s poem.

Tamil and Sanskrit as Vehicles of Bhāva

This is true of some, but not all, of the later Sanskrit stotras of the Ācāryas. Some, like Ramanujan, have attributed this difference to language. Tiruppaṭi’s poem is emotionally charged because it is written in Tamil—the mother tongue, the language of feeling, of the household, of everyday passions. Such direct expression, it might be said, is out of the reach of Ācāryas who compose in the artificial, “perfected,” therefore impersonal “father tongue” of Sanskrit (tantric transgressions, of course, by definition, the exception to the rule).

In the context of bhakti literature, there is some truth to this. Not even brahman boys of the more Sanskritic northern Śrīvaiśñava tradition grow up speaking Sanskrit with their mothers in the kitchen. Rasa and bhāva—to return to an earlier discussion—will always be in tension. But such a theory can be taken too far. Right off the kitchen, to keep to the household metaphor, is the main room of the house, or an open courtyard with its well or tulsi plant, where Sanskrit is spoken and memorized with the fathers and grandfathers. Two languages, one roof. At least in the traditional south, among most Śrīvaiśñava brahmanas, this has long been the case.

As I said in chapter 1, Sanskrit, along with being a language of elite learning and rigorous logic, is also the vehicle for “feeling,” the bhāva of bhakti, in the stotra literature of South Indian devotion. It, too, like the Tamil of the Ālvār, is chanted in daily household rituals by both men and women.

In Vedāntadesīka, as in the early Ācāryas, bhakti bhāva is present in Sanskrit as well as in Tamil. We have already studied his rich Tamil prabandhams that favorably compare in their emotionalism (their bhāva) with the Tamil of the Ālvār. But along with writing accomplished poems in Tamil and Prākrit, Desīka is perhaps the finest Sanskrit devotional poet in the later Śrīvaiśñava tradition.\textsuperscript{92} He is, as we have also had occasion to observe, one of the best examples of the complex interanimation of the Tamil mother and Sanskrit father tongues in the southern tradition.

We turn next to his anubhava of Raṅganātha, his poetic homage to the Untouchable saint-poet.

\textbf{Deśika’s fourteenth-century Sanskrit poem for Raṅganātha is called Ḍhagavadināna-

\textit{sopānam} (“The Ladder of Meditation on the Lord”). Deśika’s poem is far more richly textured and ornamented than \textit{Analaṇātiprāya}. But artistic self-consciousness does not make Deśika’s poem any less emotional, any less ecstatic or playful than that of the singer-saint. In fact the sensual richness of its surfaces, its bold mingling of colors, smells, and textures at times brings it closer to the “flaunted figuration” of the \textit{Song of Songs}. We find in Deśika also a more subtle (i.e., self-conscious) intermingling of the material and mental bodies of God, of yogic trance and ecstatic love. As Venkatasāpādara, a modern Sanskrit commentator on the poem, remarks: “When it comes to Śrīraṅgaṇātha, the image in the temple and the image in the heart are one!”\textsuperscript{93} The following is a full translation of Deśika’s \textit{anubhava} of Raṅganātha:

\textit{A Ladder of Meditation on the Lord}

I

Ineffable inner light of ascetics, mystical kohl of a yogi’s eye; precious stone, vessel of perfect liberation, healer of the sorrows of the poor and afflicted—

God of gods, divine eye in the assembly of the Vedas;

we see him here,

in the middle of Śrīraṅgaṇa town!

II

The lotus feet of the Lord of Raṅga,
exuding the perfume of the infinite Veda,
touched by the pious crowns of all the gods
and fondled by the lotus hands
of Lakṣmī and Bhū:

they appeared on the sandy banks
of the Kāvērī,
 loud with geese—

and I see them now, mirrored
 in my mind’s deep lake.

III
O Lord of Raṅga!

I see the exquisite curves of your calves,
the lustre of anklets bathes them in colors;

swift runners between armies in time of war,
long ladies to catch the liquid light of your beauty—

their loveliness doubled by the shade
of your knees:
seeing them,
my soul stops running
the paths of rebirth.

IV
They seem like firm stems of plantain
 growing in a pleasure garden;

wrapped in the linen cloth, on fire
 in the dazzle of the jeweled belt,

they are pillows for his wives,
Kāmala, Bhūmi, Nappīṇī.³⁴

Ah! my mind plunges into the mysterious depths
of Raṅga’s young thighs

as into a double stream of beauty.

V
What can equal it?

It’s so deep that once all worlds
 were tucked away inside it;
creator of all creators,
 its lotus flower spews out
 shining pollen.

In its lustre,
a whirlpool of beauty—

done for the Lord of Raṅga
gives endless delight
to my mind.

VI
His broad chest burns with a vermillion
 of shining jewels; blessed
by the touch of goddess Śrī’s small feet,
is its luster deepened
by the mole, Śrīvatsa:

with its long king’s garland of victory,
is its shining pearls bright
 as the full moon—
strewn with the tender leaves of holy basil—
this cool shade
between the long arms of the Lord of Raṅga
soothes the fever
of my mind

VII
Seeing his one arm playfully stretched back
 as a pillow for his head
and the other reaching down the length
 of his body to his knees—
two branches of heaven’s wish-granting coral tree—
drawn in tight by the rays
of his ornaments,

this lady elephant of my mind,
crazy with love,
turns round and round on her rope,
tied close to the lovely peg
of the Lord who sleeps
in Śrīraṅgam.

VIII
His half-smile, that just-blooming
flower, as if he were about
to say something—his pouting
lower lip, red
as a ripe bimba fruit.

His up-turned glance, as if fixed on a distant
horizon, holds in one thrill
all those who long for an end to their grief—
his very own self, his image,
shines. Here,
in the middle of Śrīraṅgam town,
a king with his three queens—
here, in the middle
of my heart!

XII
Venkiṭesha, his mind made pure
by serving the sages,
composed these verses in Śrīraṅgam—
a holy place praised by poets and connoisseurs,
their hearts burning
with deep delight.

He made this poem for those who long to climb, with ease,
the hard path of yogis
whose minds are fixed
on one goal alone:

May this “Ladder of Meditation on the Lord”
grant them deep devotion.95

“Deep Devotion”: Turning Yoga on its Head
Thus ends the praise-poem that, in the words of the Sanskrit commentator, “describes,
with each successive limb, the yogic ascent.”96

But this is no ordinary yoga, and these no ordinary “limbs.” This yoga has nothing
to do with the usual aṅgas (“auxiliary limbs”)—the difficult postures, tortuous breathing
exercises, harrowing asceticism, or elaborate preparation of drugs.97 This is not about
systematic suppression of the senses, but their ecstatic release; it is not about withdrawal
(kauṭilyāyam), but about opening oneself to an experience (anubhava) of “an astonishing,
otherworldly beauty” (alaukiṇādevīta-saurundāryam)98 and of “sweet, deep inner delight.”

Here—again according to our commentator—meditation (dhyāna) is not merely a scene
“uninterrupted recollection” (nirantarasthānaviśānta) but “continuous burning desire”
(nirantaratākāmā). It is a “ladder of love (kāma) that has as its sole object the Lord.”99

In Desīka’s dhyāna, “devotion to the Lord” (tīvra-prasādāṅkāna), which plays a rather
minor role in early yoga, is made the concentrated focus of highly eroticized emotions.
It thus turns the yoga tradition on its head and also moves beyond the comparatively
reserved, formal bhaktayoga of Rāmānuja. Such Sanskrit devotional poetry must also be
distinguished from tantric sexual symbolism, meant to serve an experience that far tran-
scends desire and any sense of loving separation. Finally, as Venkapatagopalaśā's points
out, Desīka's ladder of love has its model not in Tiruppān’s praise or in Patanjali’s
Yoga Sūtras, but in the erotic poetry of Kālidāsa—most particularly in the poet’s limb-by-
limb description of young Uma, Lord Śiva’s future wife, in Kumāravatsīha 1.32-49.

This latter passage is perhaps one of the most well-known foot-to-head sequential descrip-
tions in Sanskrit literature. The commentator glosses Deśika’s “ladder of meditation on Bhagavān” with the following line from Kālidāsa’s anubhava of the young goddess:

At her waist like an altar, curving and slender,
there were three gentle folds of the skin,
as if a woman in her youth could freshly grow
steps for the God of Love to climb.\(^{100}\)

This citation is very suggestive on more than one level. The immediate fact that even a traditional commentator, writing, like Deśika, in Sanskrit, focuses not only on the poem’s immediate religious inspiration, the Tamil source-text, but also on its roots in the erotic tradition of Sanskrit kāya or “court” lyric, is a vivid witness to the poem’s rich intertextuality and to the breadth of Śrīvaiśnava exegesis. This is also a significant example of bhakti as kāma outside of the Āḻvār tradition; it belies Hardy’s sense that such passionate bhakti was either “not tolerated by Sanskrit ideology” or “altogether abandoned (both as religious experience and as intellectual construct) by Śrīvaiśnava.”\(^{101}\)

Venkataśāla describes this poem in terms identical to those used by Tiruppān’s commentators and tāṇṭāy verses. Deśika’s work, like that of the Untouchable bard, is also a formal “foot-to-head enjoyment” of the temple image (āṭpādacādamanubhavam),\(^{102}\) as well as a presentational yogic vision of the “ineffable light of ascetics.” The poem, like the icon after which it is patterned, is a point of convergence of many perspectives. I will explore below only those directly relevant to our discussion.

Enjoying the Enjoyer of God

Hardy has remarked on the “seemingly irreconcilable descriptions” in Deśika’s baroque litany of the Lord’s body. He notes, for instance, that the thighs in verse 4, ambiguous at first, gain solidity, then melt into an image of a “double” stream, two rivers in flood tide.\(^{103}\) We also see a rich internalization of inner and outer worlds: the inner contemplative vision of the yogī (evoked right away in the first stanza, and underscored by the repeated use of mātī or citum, “mind,” as the subject) and the physical erotic playfulness of the lover/devotee. In verse 7 Deśika evokes an image often used to describe yogic concentration, in both the Mahāyāna Buddhist and Hindu traditions. The mind of the poet is tied to the daze (rasmī, the “rays” or “ropes”) of jeweled ornaments on the image like an agitated female elephant tied close to a tent peg; she goes round and round the peg in her agitation, like the poet’s mind circles around the lovely icon.\(^{104}\) Madness, wildness (drēpa), is a trope here not only for deep yogic concentration (nītādyāsana),\(^{105}\) as Venkataśāla has it, but also for infatuation, sexual arousal. Here the commentator softens rather than underlines the erotic overtones of the text. Verse 8 describes the god’s face: the half smile, the golden tilaka, the lower lip full and red as bimba fruit. The god’s eyes are deeply riveted (gāḍālingana) on his devotee; to have darśana, sight of God, is both to see and be seen.\(^{106}\) Here Venkataśāla returns to medieval Sanskrit love poetry to illustrate a devotional attitude. He cites here, as an analogy to this “embrace of eyes” between devotee and deity, a description of Rāma and Sītā’s embrace written by the eighteenth-century playwright and poet Bhavabhūti—a secular love lyric regarded by traditional Sanskrit scholars as the finest in the language:

When we talked at random—
our cheeks pressed close
together, deep in love
softly, oh softly
of something unspeakable,
our arms busy in close embrace
only the darkness ended—
the night-watches passed
unnoticed.\(^{107}\)

In verse 9 Deśika comes up with an image that rivals Kālidāsa in its evocative sensuality and audacity: the thick, wavy hair of God is compared to the oblique, barbed words of “angry Cōja girls.” This image, too, leads the commentator to more literary citation, this time among Deśika’s own kāya verses. Both are exquisite examples of the Sanskrit erotic mood (śyāvārasa). One, from his play Śaririkavīryodaya (1.32), describes black saināla creepers that undulate on the surface of the Kāvērī as being like the loose black hair of bathing Cōja girls; and the other is from his short sāndēśākāra or “messenger” poem, Haṃsasandesā (1.36–37), where Deśika speaks of the white flowers in the dark hair of Cōja women as being a quartet between moonlight and darkness.\(^{108}\) Here Deśika, with great finesse, transforms the traditional Indian erotic motif of the sexual power of a woman’s disheveled hair into a trope for the alluring beauty of a male god. One is tempted here to see this reversal in gender terms as an attempt by a male poet to imagine a woman’s eros of devotion using the conventions of his own sex.

Verse 10 sums up the amorous journey: the mind touches the lotus feet, relishes the knees, and slowly moves up, touching the two thighs, the navel, the chest, shoulders, drinks in the nectar of the face and, finally, rests on the tiara. After alluding in verse 11 to his reduplication in the festival image (sasāva māṁi), which is placed in the sanctum directly in front of the dark stone mālāva (this is a rare mention of both sets of images in such poetry), he goes on in the last verse to describe this vision in terms of both yoga and deep devotion (bhakti gāḍām).\(^{109}\)

A Jeweled Belt in Ecology: Variations on a Theme

Deśika wrote several limb-by-limb anubhavas to Vishnu, most prominently to Lord Devarāyaka in the village temple of Tiruvaiyāndrapuram.\(^{110}\) While the quoted Sanskrit praise of Raṅganātha is his only anubhava of that form of Vishnu, he wrote two complete descriptions of Devarāyaka, the god of a village he reputedly lived in for thirty years. Devanāyakaparākṣati in Sanskrit and Aiyarukkam in Prakrit both depict, from head to foot, the icon of Vishnu at Tiruvaiyāndrapuram with intense erotic energy. The two Tamil poems to this god and this shrine, Mūrmapikkātai and Navanāṭiṇālai, do not include limb-by-limb anubhavas, but they both are suffused
with the erotic mood in the Tamil way: the icon retains its strong associations with the real body of a beloved.112

To return to the brief comparative note on the Song of Songs, these bhakti descriptions share with the Ancient Near Eastern way the desire of a poet to overwhelm and delight the reader/listener, to open an emotional space where that reader/listener might share the poet’s experience of love, of endless erotic joy and the pains of separation. Deśika says time and again in his anubhavas that he longs to look on the god endlessly, with “unwinking eyes.” Love here, as in the Song, is a process. Deśika’s thirsty eyes drink in the beauty (śānavyam; saunadāryam; abhirātyam) of God, never sated with seeing.113

But unlike in the Song, here even inanimate objects share in the erotic atmosphere generated by the lover. In these descriptive poems to temple icons objects such as Krishna’s flute or Lord Vishnu’s conch, even the various ornaments that decorate the image share the lover’s delectation. The latter, in Deśandhyakaparipācāritam (14), are even seen to have themselves sought out the body in order to increase their radiance: it is the body that serves as ornament for the jewels!!

He says in a remarkable passage of the Deśandhyakaparipācāritam 27, which follows very closely in Sanskrit the sentiment of Āṇṭil’s Tamil poems in praise of Vishnu’s conch-shell:

O Lord of immortals!

mad with love,

my mind kisses your lower lip red as bimbi 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.115

Both words used here for “enjoyment,” anubhātām and niṣeṣitām, allude to sexual pleasure.116 In verse 37 of the same poem, Deśika, in his anubhava, describes the jeweled belt surrounded by the yellow waistcloth—whose beauty “enslaves” his mind—as itself thrilling to the touch of the god’s hand: like a lover or a possessed devotee in the conventions of the poets, the “hairs” of the belt stand on end. And even more: the verse is an example of skillful double entendre (śeśalāṅkāra), where the belt can also refer to a young girl “of lightheadedness” (sujuțā) dressed in a golden sari who thrills in ecstasy at the touch of her lover’s hand.117

Deśika takes the fine art of hyperbole here to a level above even that of the Song.

Icons of Icons: Concluding Reflections

A major difference, however, between the Vaiṣṇava anubhavas of Tiruppānṭūr and Vedāndasēkha and the awaf of the ancient Near East is the former’s undeniable extraerotic, esoteric context. Such limb-by-limb descriptions get part of their literary inspira-

tion from the poeties of early Indian Śāstra (both Hindu and Buddhist), but, as I have shown, they also allude to yogic visualization practices based on the southern tantra, the Pāñcarātra Āgamas.

In tāntic meditation, adepts are taught, by way of certain seed mantras, how to construct within their own bodies the body of the deity. The anubhavas spoken of in this study in a sense do this for us. Their very recitation bodies forth God. They articulate both the spontaneous enjoyment of the beauty of God and the ritualized ritual map of a spiritual elite, the connate and cognitive. It is within this meditational tradition that we are able perhaps to understand these poems themselves as “icons,” “bodies” of God. Understood in this way, they are “icons of icons.” With this in mind, it is significant that one of the early Śrīvaism commentaries on Nārāyana, Vaiṣṇavatiruvāippilāi, compares Nārāyana’s great cycle of poems, the Tiruvilāmi, to the temple image (āravatāram).118 Whatever one might say about the apparent “iconicity” of these poems, no one would deny that the tradition ascribes great spiritual power to their recitation. These are not only literary but liturgical/cultic texts. As Norman Cutler has observed in regard to the Tamil bhakti tradition as a whole, a bhakti lyric not only records a specific saint-poet’s experience but is also the “occasion for a ritualized re enactment of the events and emotions portrayed in the poem.”119 In bodying forth God, they too are able to grant grace.

One sees this dimension most clearly in the phalaśīristī, or end verses describing the fruits of singing the poem, as common in Deśika as they are in the early Āṭārī. I simply quote from the phalaśīristī of Deśika’s praise of Lord Varadārāja at Kaṭcī:

Those who accept this lofty hymn

to the ear

composed by Vaiṣṇavatiruvāippilāi out of devotion

will pluck with their bare hands

every last fruit

from the wish-granting tree

set on the summit

of Elephant Hill!!

It is time now for us to treat the poeties of Deśika’s Sanskrit stotras not merely as imitations or “translations” of a specific Tamil model but in their own right. Only by closely studying Deśika’s stotra styles, as we studied his Tamil prabandham, can we get a fully nuanced picture of Deśika “the philosopher as poet,” or get a sense of his dynamic relationship with the Tamil Āṭārī tradition. Only after setting ourselves the task of studying selections of his hymns in all three of his working languages will we be able to begin to see in what complex way Deśika’s texts are “indexical” symbols of Āṭārī emotionalism.120 We will also see how his texts further the regional and linguistic scope of southern bhakti emotionalism.

In pursuing my study of the stotras to Varadārāja at Kaṭcī and Devanāyaka at Tiruvilāmiṇḍrapuram, I will continue what I have begun in the final section of this chapter, though my context will be not only that of Tamil bhakti but also Sanskrit poeties and the “northern” traditions. We will explore the many ways in which Deśika’s Sanskrit hymns to Vishnu’s temple icons (the āravatārams) creatively echo not only the Tamil tradition but also create something new out of their own indigenous Sanskrit materials.
54. This last phrase, in the left-branching syntax of Tamil poetry, is the first one to meet the reader’s eye: orumati appar ulam kavananta. See Nasaramisimalai (NMM), verse 1 in STP, p. 406. Cf. Deisi’s description of the feet of Raṅgānātha at Śrentinām in a Tamil verse at the very end of the Raṅgānāthasmādhura, chap. 32. This verse uses some of the same mythic images, though it is far less intimate in tone.
56. See Hardy, Vinha-Bhakti, pp. 417–18. For Āṇṭāl’s poems, see Deheija, Āṇṭāl, especially the cycle Nācīcīrī Tīrūnāl, p. 75ff.
59. See the many examples in Freedberg, “Live Images,” in ibid., esp. pp. 301–12 for the experiences of Caesarius and Saint Bernard of Clairvaux. Freedberg recounts one old tale: “A monk was especially devoted to an image of the Virgin, before which he was accustomed to say his prayers. One day he fell ill and developed a terrible growth on his throat. He could not talk; he was palid and dolorous. At the height of his pain he had a vision in which the Virgin appeared especially beautiful; and then, having wiped his wounds with a cloth, she withdrew her breast from her bosom and placed it within his mouth, ‘et puis en arceus toutes ses playes.’” (p. 312).
60. This seems to imply that mokṣa, liberation, is granted to those who merely “see” and “remember” the aṟṟavuṟṟa of Vishnu—a radical theology implied by Deisi’s poetry, but tempered by his prose. For a detailed discussion of Deisi the philosopher and poet, see conclusion.
61. I have already noted, the reference to Gajendra in the last extant verse of the kōvai.
62. arappulam kāyavum aṉṟai mey. Aranṉa is kohl or collyrium, a deep blue-black cosmetic used as makeup for the eyes. Its rich dark color is often used as a comparison for the dark color of Vishnu/Krishna’s body. See Āṇṭāl’s Nācīcīrī Tīrūnāl I. 6: karṇamaiṉkai vaṇam kāyavum aṉṟaṇai vaṇam (My Lord, from the rain clouds, the purple lotus blossom, the shining karṇai). Tamil text in Śrī Kāṇṭa Pratāvāi Bhayathākaram Annthiṟavaiyaiṭṟai edition, with the Tiṟṟuṟṟuṟṟaiṟai (Kāṇṭa: Kāṇṭamalai Āḷṉ, 1990), p. 11. See Deheija, p. 77.
63. This verse plays on the two meanings of the word mey of body and body. Devanāyaka, as we have already seen, is the “Lord of Truth for his servants” (aṟṟuṟṟuṟṟaiṟai). The epithet can also mean “He who takes on (a) body for (the sake of) his servants.” The same word is used for “body” in the first phrase, and for the subject “Lord of Truth” in the epithet.
64. STP, p. 415. See also Deisi’s allusion to the crow in the Aṟṟuṟṟuṟṟaiṟai, quoted in chap. 3.
65. See Hardy, Vinha-Bhakti, p. 442ff.
66. As I have already noted in chap. 1, Hardy himself says as much in Vinha-Bhakti, p. 480, n. 216.
67. The six languages he is supposed to have mastered (a task, as I have noted, also popular among Jain intellectuals) are Aṉṟṟuṟṟaṟ, Māḷṭarṝṛi, Sauravai, Māṇḍāṭi, Pāli, and Āṇṭāl. Deisi, of course, while being analogous to Śrī Rāhula and the Jain in his breadth of learning and expression, was never a saddhāśi for Deisi, the major fields of literary activity remained Sanskrit and Tamil. For Śrī Rāhula as saddhāśaṟṟaṟaiyaiṟai, see N. de S. Wijesekera’s introduction to his translation of the Śaṅkaraṇī Sandēśai ("The Message of the Mynah-Bird"), one of Śrī Rāhula’s sandēśai ("messenger") poems, The Śaṅkaraṇī Sandēśai of Āṇṭāl Rāhula (Colombo: M. D. Gunasena, 1934), p. vi.
69. See chap. 2, especially sec. 5, “The Writing on the Wall.” Śrī Rāhula’s literary work and political alliances in the Kone era of king Paṟṟakramaśāḷi VI of course reflect a cultural context very different from eighteenth-century Tamil Nadu, but in both eras and in both regions religious leaders had a crucial role to play in shaping the political order. In Śrī Laṅkā and in South India, from ancient times, religion and polity have never been separate arenas of action and ideology.

Chapter 5
1. For a discussion of Māṟṟaṟṟa’s stories, see Warder’s Indian Kēṟṟyai Literature, vol. 2, Origins and Formation of the Classical Kēṟṟyai (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1974), pp. 228–30. Quotation on p. 230. And this Buddhist notion of the “great man” (māṟṟaṟṟaiṟai) obviously has its roots both in the royal notion of the kavaṟṟuṟṟai and in the ancient Vedic tradition of the “cosmic person” from whose sacrificed body the cosmos and the social order were created. See Rṛg Veda 10.90 (esp. verses 12–14) for a sequential description of the māṟṟaṟṟaiṟai. For further discussion of the Vedic hymn and its relationship to Vishnu’s temple icon-bodies, see chap. 7.
2. This reference is taken from Nancy Nayar’s study of the poetry of the early Āṇṭāl, Poetry as Theology, p. 39.
6. I am indebted to Nancy Nayar for these references. See Poetry as Theology, pp. 20 and 38. See also Winternitz, A History of Indian Literature, vol. 2, p. 377. Other important poems include Ḍaṟṟa Vardhana’s sarabhaṅga stotra, a “wake-up” poem for the Buddha (in the style of shrine poems for the deity), and Jain poet Māṇṭuṟṟa’s Bhāḍakṣāvara stotra and eulogy for the Jina Rājaśā (Winternitz vol. 2, p. 548; Nayar, Poetry as Theology, p. 38).
7. The māṟṟaṟṟaiṟai is based on a Jāṭaka tale (no. 531), as its original title of Koṟḷaṟṟaḏuṇa indicates. See Canto 5: 224–44 in McAlpine and Arjëpaḷa’s translation. For one of the few discussions in English of the Koṟṟuṟṟaṉa, see C. E. Godskalbough’s seminal study Sinhalese Literature, pp. 148–52.
of the Association of South Asian Archaeologists in Western Europe, Held in the Fondazione Giorgio Cini, Island of San Giorgio Maggiore, Venice, ed. Maurizio Taddei, with the assistance of Ferruccio Callieri, pt. 2 (Rome: Istituto Italiano Per Il Medio Ed Estremo Oriente, 1990), p. 1025 [48]. I am grateful to Heino Kottkamp for drawing my attention to Roh's work on Indian art and iconography, when we were colleagues at the Center for the Study of World Religions, Harvard University.

10. See Richard Soulen, "The Waifs of the Song of Songs and Hermeneutic," Journal of Biblical Literature 86, 2 (June 1967): 183-90. The purpose of the waif (plural waifs), Soulen suggests, is "presentational rather than representational." "Its purpose," Soulen observes, "is not to provide a parallel to visual appearance" or "primarily to describe feminine or masculine qualities metaphorically." Rather, the images want to evoke feeling; they "seek to create emotion, not critical or dispassionate comprehension; their goal is a total response, not simply a cognitive one." The lovers' metaphorical hyperbole is, in Soulen's words, "the language of joy" that seeks to "overwhelm and delight the hearer." We are invited, even gently coerced, to share a lover's awe, joy, and erotic delight in the physical beauty of the beloved. The visual exaggerations of the waif in the Song are related to other rhetorical excesses of the text, which include tactile images of entering, eating, tasting, and feasting on the beloved, and the olfactory excitement of flowers, fruits, spices, perfumes, and the many aromas of the Lebanon mountains (pp. 187-90).

11. Michael A. Sells has studied in some detail "disembling similarities" and "semantic overflow" in the classic pre-Islamic Arabic odes. Such "semantic overflow" is part and parcel of head-to-foot descriptions of the alluring female beloved, the ghâlî, in this pre-seventeenth-century literature. See, for a discussion of issues similar to those in this chapter, Sells's essay "Guises of the Ghâlî: Disembling Similar and Semantic Overflow in the Classical Arabic Nastîf," in Representations: Arabic and Persian Poetry, ed. Susanne Pinckey Steklovich (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), pp. 130-64. See also, for translations of such poetry, Michael Sells, Desert Traces: Six Classic Arabic Odes by 'Alqama, Shanfara, Labid, 'Antara, Al-'Asha, and Dhu al-Rimâna (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1989), especially the poem "To the Encampments of Mâyâr," pp. 67-76.

12. For the Song of Songs, see Soulen, "Waifs of the Song of Songs," p. 188. See also Sells, "The Guises of the Ghâlî," for a similar argument about the language of the Arabic odes.


14. We might also reflect on the importance of the poem and its maṣnawaî commentary to the later Vatakali community, given the fact that it has survived, when most of the commentaries on Āḷvâr attributed to Daśika have not.

15. This is Friedhelm Hardy's general opinion. See Vinah-Bhaktî, pp. 243-45; 479-80. John B. Carman, Vasudha Narayanan, and Francis X. Clooney have strenuously argued for continuity. See bibliography for Carman and Narayanan, The Tamil Veda, and Clooney's many articles on the subject, as well as citations and discussion in the later section "An Anubhava of the Lord."


18. See my earlier version of this comparative analysis, which puts more emphasis on the Song of Songs, "In Love with the Body of God: Eros and the Praise of Icons in South Indian Devotion," Journal of Vaishnava Studies, 2, 1 (winter 1993): 17-54.

19. All quotations from poems of the Tamil saint-poets are taken from the Tamil text, without commentary, of the "Sacred Collect," the Nālāyira Tiruvātippuram (Madras: Tiruvâkâsaṭṭu Tirumâram, 1987) (NTP). For the Amalanantârîmar of Tirupparâkânti (1661), we have also consulted a modern Tamil commentary, the Tiruvâruttam Tipâki of Appâkkântârânta (Madras, 1966), as well as the helpful English translations and commentaries of D. Ramasamy Aiyangar (Madras: Visisthadwâta Prachârini Sabha, 1970), and of V. K. S. N. Raghavan (Mylapore, Madras: Śrī Visistādâvâta Prâcârini Sabha, 1986), pp. 67-102.

20. For a concise treatment of some of the various versions of the Āḷvâr's life and his legacy to the later tradition, see Vasudha Narayanan, "Tirupparavan alvar: Life, Lyrics and Legacy," a paper presented for the panel "Untouchable Saints of Medieval India" at the national meeting of the Association for Asian Studies, Washington, D.C., April 3, 1992, in manuscript (forthcoming in a volume on Untouchable saints, to be edited by Eleanor Zelliot for State University of New York Press). See also Eleanor Zelliot, "Untouchable Saints: An Indian Phenomenon," MS. 1998 (also for prospective volume), which uses material from my "In Love with the Body of God" for its section on Tirupparâkânti.

21. Though it is found in some manuscripts of the southern (Teppalâl) tradition, and included in brackets in the printed editions.

22. Narayanan, "Tirupparavan alvar," pp. 6-7 of typescript. I am very grateful to Professor Narayanan for sending me a copy of her essay.

23. The Vatakali version—showing its anxiety over the lovely origins of the saint-emphasizes his miraculous birth "outside of a womb" (ayâninâya). In the Vatakali Gumânamparâppârâkântâ (GPPV), he is found in the middle of a rice field (vayyal) by a very pious couple, who because of a particular remnant of bad karma from a previous life, had been born in the class of candâlas. Because they had no children, they were delighted to have come upon the baby immediately upon seeing him, they took him up and raised him as their own. For the maṣnâwaî text, see the GPPV, p. 37: mahâsuktrakšiṣxom ayâ prâaprâvatissaitâlù cañṭatâjanâmakâlaṇâmakârlû tâmpatâkâl vayyal natwâr idâ sañœvâ kâlo apândvakâlâyâkâlû makhântûnta evarâqâkshnopay vâlântârâkshnopay . . .


25. In Tamil the town is called Tiruvâruvârânti (or simply "Aratânûm"), which, like the Sanskrit name, means "Holy Stage" (for the Lord's "play"). See Introduction for a note on Sanskrit and Tamil orthography.

26. In earlier versions it is the Lord himself who, delighted with the music of the Pînâr, appeared to the temple priest in a dream and requested him to bring the bard into the temple sanctuary on his shoulders (some accounts contain the added detail of Lakùmûn's intercession in their sending out for the bard).

27. I do not have to remind the reader here of the many cross-cultural resonances of "bleeding icons." See Freedberg, "Live Images," in The Power of Images. Narayanan notes the similarity of this stone-throwing motif to an episode in the life of Satikârânta, where the philosopher-saint hurts a stone at an outcaste to get him to move—anode, she says of many common motifs in the story literature of the Adiavasitas and the Śrîvaiçavas, "Tirupparavan," p. 8, and 34, n. 8.

28. stannâyapranâi malañ têñ têñ yê tâkkântêpâlî . . . GPPV, p. 38.

29. See Daśika's maṣnâwaî commentary on this poem, Mûnâdhanâpanâkânta (MVP), in a privately printed text, with Tamil commentaries and notes, of the Târî tahâyântâl (the "Independent Esoteric Treatises") (Madras 1974): . . . sanâtra yûtânñyam tâppârâkântâlû, pîparâ parânam pâsâteñ pûrâm pûrâm iññê pûrâm pûrâmîrumârâkântâlû (mûlûtû) pûrâ, îppêññayi atîtronékûnta, "Amaññâ Atî práñî mañálaññê pâtu pàsâteñ amûpâ laññâmâmâmî karîyêkûnta, . . ." Tirupparâkânta, filled with happiness, obtaining here, at the holy feet of the great Perumâl the same bliss he will obtain after death in highest heaven, composed, in an outpouring of ecstatic enjoyment amûpâ.
for another detailed account of the legends associated with Tiruppaṇaḷḷavā—indeed a

As a name of Rāma, the hero-god and one of Viṣṇu's avatars.

Nālāṭāra Tivāṇiṇayīntam, mūlāśārayā, 927-36.

This list is made up of Sanskrit terms transliterated into a Tamil alphabet salt- and peppered by occasional grantha letters—one of the strangest aspects of the man反腐ēdas style to a native reader. The terms are: avistaram, atri, karāsām, aśānātmatākāyavānam, tārakārthavā, tāvatāśātāvāram, sāmāyavā jānakavām, viṅkaḷāśā, tātāvāśā, pāpāśā, pārāśā, nīnāśām.

This use of the term rasa—a rich word meaning, among other things, aesthetic "taste" or "experience" in classical Sanskrit poetry—to describe a bhakti experience of course anticipates later uses of bhakti rasa in Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism and other schools of North Indian Vaiṣṇavism. See works by Haberman, Hawley and Juergensmeier, and Wulf in the bibliography. See also Shrīvatsa Goswami, "Radha: The Play and Perfection of Rasa," in Hawley and Wulf, eds., The Divine Consort: Radha and the Goddesses of India (Berkeley: Graduate Theological Union, 1982), pp. 72-88.

As in the Viṣṇūkāta account (discussed earlier) of the Untouchable as an aṇāya, "born of no womb."

In a devotional name in the Śrivaṁśavā tradition, to be Nande nāmāryāna ("Oh! Homage to Nāradeśiya!") the second—also part of a fully developed Śrivaṁśavā theology influenced by the mantras of an earlier tāṇic ritual tradition—is Śrīnām nārāyaṇa nārāyanam tātāram prapāyī Śrīnāte nārāyaṇa namō ("I take refuge at the feet of Nāradeśiya joined with Śrī; Homage to Nāradeśiya, Lord of Śrī"); and the third is from the Bhagavad Gītā 18.06: sva dhāmaṁ pāpyāyaṁ, mām ekam sarvamṛtyuḥ/ dhāmaṁ sarvapāypēye māksaṇāy resulting in śucālić ("Giving up all dharmas, take refuge in me alone; I will save you from all sins: do not grieve!"). For a detailed analysis of the Śrivaṁśavā exegesis of these mantras, see Patrick Y. Mumme, The Śrivaṁśavā Theological Dispute, pp. 273-75.
64. “La notion de “poupee sacree” a laquelle nous avons abouti peut s’inscrire dans une problematique plus generale de la relation entre le jeu et le sacre.” Ibid.
65. Ibid., p. 109. More work needs to be done on this intriguing form of the deity’s arca-vatara in South Indian bhakti. The interface here between street theater and temple pujai is most striking.
67. See Vasudha Narayanan, “Arcavatara: On Earth as He Is in Heaven,” in Gods of Flesh, Gods of Stone: The Embodiment of Divinity in India, pp. 53–66; here pp. 56–57. Narayanan’s source is the Tejakali Gruppananar prabhadham. The standing mulabena of Cella Pillai at Melkote is indeed a lovely image, not as monumental as other major stone images in the Vaishnava dvarasas, such as Varadaraja and Devanayaka. Its smallness, along with the sweetness of its features (and particularly its eyes), is seen as evidence of this image’s particular approachability.
68. On both the mulabena and the ugra ruci forms of Cella Pillai, there is a small goddess image between the feet, said to be “Bibi” Nacioyar.
69. See Colas, “Le devote,” p. 113: “Il s’agit bien alors d’une poupée sacrée.” Much more work needs to be done in this area of “divine dolls” in South Indian bhakti.
70. Narayanan, “Arcavatara,” p. 57, notes that the manjaprakala phrase used to describe the Lord’s “delighting in his sport” with the princess (bila koniti elantulayamukkan) “is actually a delicate way of saying ‘consorting with.’” See also Richard Davis’s insightful analysis of this story as humanizing Muslims during a time of interreligious conflicts in the late Vijayanagar (Lives of Indian Images, pp. 132–35). These stories create Muslims (both the sultan and the girl) who do not destroy images, but who, like Hindus, are sensitive to the allure and grace of an embodied god. At the very least, of course, the sultan is generous and understanding in allowing the devotees to take their precious image back home.
72. The idea of a doll or puppet does not always index the concreteness of divine presence. We need to add to the experiences of the devotee-poet and the priest that of the silpa (artisan: temple sculptor). One of the Tamil words for “doll”—ponmai—is included in the silpin’s lexicon of terms for temple images. The naturalistic plaster relief sculptures (catai), painted in gaudy colors and drawn in bold, exaggerated lines on the outer surfaces of the great temple gate towers and shrines are often called ponmai, with reference to their lack of divine power (sakti). I am indebted for this reference to Samuel K. Parker’s paper, “Aesthetic Categories and Contemporary Image Making in South India,” delivered at the American Council for Southern Asian Art IV, Washington D.C., April 1991). In Tamil, as in English, the term “doll” or “puppet” may carry a diminutive connotation unsuitable to describe the icon body of God. When referring to the “tradition” of sacred puppets, we need to specify our indigenous terms and the specific ritual context of which we are speaking. In Colas’s words, the Hindu image is a “point of convergence of several perspectives.”
74. Ramanuj, Hymns, 151.
75. See his Viraha-Bhakti, pp. 435–36.
76. See TAT, p. 90: mustail emperunai tanda divadi asaiyilai melayumarpayiram, pisaatu edatru nuligu rati melayumarpayiram savukal samaram.
77. Ibid.: “Very nakkaiyyu nakkaiyyukku mustail mukkaiyilai itiriyamayilai tan taynayilai ratai koilukum; pisaatu cinaarum rati kuytakaiysavum rati melayumarpayiram.”
77. See his The Camphor Flame: Popular Hinduism and Society in India (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), pp. 78–79. The entire passage is worth quoting here: “When we recall that the closest analogue to eating the deity’s left-over food is a wife’s consumption of her husband’s, it makes good sense to say that a worshipper stands in relation to a deity as a wife to her husband. Such a comparison is indeed drawn in many contexts, so that priests and devores are commonly described as wives serving the gods and goddesses. That in turn is consistent with the fact pujā is really all about honoring a respected guest, for the quality of hospitality in a Hindu home always depends on a wife’s work in her kitchen. Thus in a real sense, it is the institutionalized hierarchical inequality between husbands and wives, not between castes, that is most patently reflected in the ritual of pujā.”

78. Ibid., 73. I do not entirely go along with the monistic tendencies of Fuller’s notion of divine-human identity though the ritual of seeing, smelting, and touching the camphor flame at the end of worship. But I do agree on the importance of this synthethic experience for the understanding of the visceral nature of Hindu devotion and its unique mingling of difference and identity, hierarchical asymmetry and momentary fusion.

79. I do not follow the commentators in my translation of the last line of the stanza, nīlāmungāṃ aṅgūḷi mātārāṣṭra tiṣṭhī ("Ahi! [his] lovely dark body has filled my heart!"). Following other such passages in the Tīrthankāpanāstā, I take the verb koi to be a continuous auxiliary to the verb nīṭi “fill (the suggestion here then, literally, is that it fills and will continue to fill my heart)” and not as the verb principle “to take” with nīṭi as a noun meaning “measure,” “reductio.” Apanākārānāya glosses the phrase with māttikka ceśak ceśa—that the body “causes confusion or bewilderment” in the poet’s heart. Desika has a long involved explanation of why one should take the line to mean that the body of God “robbed the heart of its contentment.” His theological interpretation has significant import to do with the saṅkṣetopa getting too confident in his visionary powers and in the permanence of his experience—believing that he himself has finally secured for himself the dazzling vision of God. But, in a moment, when he is again confronted with the real majesty of God’s form, this confidence is suddenly lost. He is dumbfounded in this stanza before the glory of a transcendent God. This is perhaps an attempt to soft-pedal the powerful experience of union in the line’s other interpretation—something familiar in Desika’s careful polemics yet relatively absent in his own poems, as we shall see in the next section. For Desika’s commentary, see MVP, p. 141; see also TAT, p. 98. Hardy has some interesting things to say about this notion of “filling the heart” in other Āḷvar poems in Viraha-Bhakti, pp. 278–79.

80. I am indebted here to her paper “Tirumāl alvar: Life, Lyrics, and Legacy.” The Śrīvaiṣṇava source is the Aṉdavai kavipāram, 1043–1044, ed. R. Kaṭṭapāl Cūlim (Madras, 1987), pp. 262–63 cited in Narayanan’s paper. This also happened to the northern bhakti saint-poet Mira Bai. See Hawley and Jergensens, Songs of the Saints, pp. 119–33.

81. Colas expresses this quite well: “Du point de vue du dévot idéal, l’Etre et l’Appariteur du dieu ne sont pas séparés. De plus la présence simultanée de Vīṣṇu dans les consciences et dans ses multiples sanctuaires témoignant de son universelle ubiquité: les images, intérieures et extérieures, ne sont pas les émanations diverses d’un modèle abstrait qui les transcenderait, mais elles forment l’incarnation multiple d’une divinité unique.” (“Le dévot,” p. 103)

82. See Davis, Lives of Indian Images, p. 21.

83. See MVP, p. 114: päñjalai tamil maṭṭai paṭṭaij pesanai koṇṭai pōṭṭipāḷu paṭṭaij paṭṭaij paṭṭaij kōvalaṇai nāṭai paṭṭaij paṭṭaij paṭṭaij paṭṭaij kōvalaṇai. This poem is also analogous poetic genres like the Tiruppalli-štēgal, or holy “waking poems,” where the god is awakened from a long night’s sleep for the morning ritual bath, etc.

85. See Nancy Nayar’s full-length study of the stotras of Kṛṣṇātāṁśa and Paścārma Bhaṭṭa, Poetry as Theology.

86. This is a vastly comparative topic that I can only mention in passing here. The anubhava and the tāntic dhyānānāṁ have much in common (there are, most likely, concrete historical connections between them), but there is also much that sets them apart. For an excellent analysis of some important visualization texts in the northern Kashmiri tradition and in the “post-scripturnal literature of the Anuttara cult” in the Tamil-speaking south, see Alexis Sanderson, “The Visualization of the Deities of the Trika,” in L’image divine: culte et méditation dans l’hindouisme. Études rassemblées par André Padoux (Paris: CNRS, 1990), pp. 31–88.

87. This translation and the original text appears in Sanderson, “Visualization of the Deities,” p. 61. The parentheses are mine, where I draw attention to the verb used for “visualization,” here a rather awkward (and perhaps corrupt) form of samāj, “to recall,” “to remember.” This is a common term for visualization (in its form of ornam) in the Buddhist and later Hindu bhakti traditions. In private correspondence, Francis X. Clooney has drawn my attention to the fact that Rāmānuja distinguishes between samāj ("remembrance") and dānāja ("seeing").

88. Ibid., p. 44. Note Śrīvaiṣṇava’s own vigorous description of Sarasvati as a river in chap. 3.

89. From the Laktōpāoṣāg, cited and translated in Douglas Renfew Brooks, Auspicous Wisdom: The Texts and Traditions of Śrīvaiṣṇa Śākta Tantricism in South India (New York: State University of New York Press, 1992), p. 63. For a discussion of Lalitī’s power, auspiciousness, royalty, and sensuality, see especially pp. 63–74. On p. 73 Brooks remarks on the bhakti context of this South Indian tāntic goddess: Śrīvaiṣṇava’s conception of Lalitī’s mālaxāṇa ["anthropomorphic form"] and her identification with local goddesses places her squarely within Hindu devotional traditions (bhakti) of worship (pūjā) based on seeing the deity (dānāja).

90. Many of the descriptions of dānāja (some follow the foot-to-head pattern) resemble secular literature in the erotic mode. See Miranda Shaw, Passionate Enlightenment: Women and Tantric Buddhism (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), pp. 156–58. See also David White, “Transformations in the Art of Love: Kāmalākāla Practices in Hindu Tantric and Kaula Traditions,” History of Religions, 38, 2 (November 1998): 172–98, for a detailed discussion of ritual transformations of “erotic” practices, particularly the drinking of female sexual fluids in the dānāja traditions. White’s reading of the Kaula system and the dānāja texts emphasizes, contra Shaw, the ritual use of women (and their precious sexual fluid) rather than a world of mutual “erotic” pleasure. See also other sources such as C. Dowman, Sky Dancer (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), and K. Dhome, Songs of the Sixth Dalai Lama (Dharamsala: Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, 1981), for extraordinary examples of Buddhist love songs in the tradition of the tāntic sūdhās."
not different [from one another].” From Venkatagopaladasa’s valuable edition of the poem with his own Sanskrit commentary, Bhagavadlyanopanishad (Śrīraṣṭākam: Śrīvairavīḷa Press, 1927), p. 7 (BDS: Com.).

94. “Nāpiṇṭai” or “our Piṇṭai,” is Vishnu’s Tamil consort. In Tamil mythology she is one of Kṛṣṇa’s cowgirl (gep) lovers.

95. In DSM, pp. 48–63.
96. yogāndhatapanampravartataśvetam samāpanaḥ ... BDS: Com., pp. 2–3.
97. nāpiṇṭaśrutayeṣu mukhyónicaśvāpanāhan avā amṛtaśaktiḥ iva ... BDS: Com., p. 5.
98. alaṅkāraśrutaśvasaṁvāpaṇāhan eva ... BDS: Com., p. 3.
99. evaśvatu bhāvanāśaktiṣvāparānāmaḥ dhāmaṇaḥ ca nīrmanakarmacakrama eva. BDS: Com., p. 3. See also p. 11, where he refers to yoga as nīrmanakarmacakrama—unsurpassed bliss.” This obviously is related to the Upaniṣadic dictum of Brahman (ultimate reality) as “joy” (ānanda) in such texts as Tattvārthā Upādhyāya 3.6.1.

100. Kumudavālahva 1.39. Translation from The Origin of the Young God: Kālidāsa’s Kumudavālahva, trans. Hank Heffern (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), p. 27. Venkatagopaladasa quotes only the last two pādas of the verse: arohatanamākramanam kāmaṇām śravānīmānāṁ prakṣayitam iti (p. 3). The entire foot-to-head description is remarkable for its metaphoric energies.

101. See Viraha-Bhakti, p. 401: “To provide a definition [of bhakti] in terms of kāma was certainly characteristic of the pronouncedly anthropocentric, sensuous and emotional nature of Āyār religion, but in the long run—particularly when the girl frame ceased functioning—bhakti as kāma would not be tolerated by Sanskritic ideology, and was altogether abandoned (both as religious experience and as intellectual construct) by Śrīvaiṣṇavins.” See also the striking sensuality of Rāṣṭra Bhaṭṭa’s description of Lāṃkāṇi (reminiscent of Kālidāsa’s anubhūta of Uṃā in his Svēṣṭhūrdhva 42–46. For a translation, see Nancy Ann Nayar, Paise Poems to Viṣṇu and Śrī: The Stotras of Rāmānuja’s Immediate Disciples (Bombay: Amanthacharya Indological Research Institute, 1994), pp. 294–96.

102. See BDS: Com., p. 4.

103. For Hardy’s analysis, see “TirupPiṇṭā-Ayār,” in Devotion Divine, p. 132.

104. For a fascinating parallel verse in the work of a seventh-century Buddhist Madhyamaka philosopher, see Bhāvaviveka’s Madhyamakahāvyakarānī 3.16: “When the mind strays like an elephant from the right path, it should be bound to the pose of the object [of meditation] with the rope of mindfulness and brought slowly under control with the hook of wisdom.” Quoted in M. David Eckel, To See the Bhūkha: A Philosopher’s Quest for the Meaning of Emptiness (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1992), p. 32.


106. For a rich overview of the place of images in the Indian tradition, see Diana L. Eck, Darśan: Seeing the Divine Image in India (Chambersburg, Penn.: Anima Books, 1985).

107. kimai kāmapitāhānaḥ mānām mānąm āśātikārayaḥ/āśvīrakaloṣṭaḥ yājnātās ākramena/ātivādayaṇaḥ sṛṣṭi eva yājñātām. From Bhavabhūti’s play on the later events in the life of Kṛṣṇa, Uttarānāmarāca, 1.27, cited in the BDS: Com., p. 71–76.

108. BDS: Com., p. 71–76.

109. agre kīṃśācaḥ tānāśātmakānāṁ uttānāśātmakānāṁ saḥ. Literally, “[of he who has the serpent for a couch, becoming his very same self just in front of himself.”

110. Gāḍām here covers a rich register of meanings, many of which are associated with liquidity: it describes, according to Monier-Williams, something “dived into,” “bathed in,” “deeply entered,” “plunged into.” It also connotes thickness, density, firmness, vehemence. One thinks here of the traditional etymology of the word ālakṣā to describe the Tamil saints: they are those who are “drowning in” God. See Ramanujan, Hymns for the Drowning.

111. There is also a notable anubhūta of the Lord in Vaiṣṇava (highest heaven) as seen by liberated souls in Desika’s maṇivānaṇe puram naiṇayam Putyaprasūpāṇam. For a detailed discussion of anubhūtas from the Deserēyakṣaparācārā and the Prakṛtik Aṣṭavatāram, see chap. 7.

112. See chap. 4.

113. See, for instance, Deserēyakṣaparācārā, 14, and Varadānparācārā, 48.

114. See also Desika’s commentary on verse 9 of TirupPiṇṭā-Ayār’s poem in the Maṇivāṇaṇaṇam, p. 142, where he remarks that the jewels that garland the icon obtain effortless beauty (ālakṣaḥ) from God’s dark body. D. Ramaśwamy Ayyangar, Amanuṣaṅgasūri, p. 26, mentions this, too, and also cites a saying among the āryaṇs, or singers of the Tamil Veda in temple worship: āṭaṇāṭaṭaṇaḥ vārasaḥ uttānās ākramyaḥ prastāvītum ("The Lord gives beauty to the ornaments").

115. amavānāśātvātānāṁ sṛṣṭi eva yājñātām. From the Veda, compared to the pura or transcendental form of God, and śrīkṛṣṇa ("history," the epics and purāṇas) to the anūkṣa or incarnation forms of Vishnu.

116. See, for example, the sex as an external object of the āyār corpus, see Hardy, Viraha-Bhakti, pp. 299–300.

117. For discussion and translations of this verse, see chap. 7, “The Anubhūta.”

118. This is in terms of “accessibility.” See the Īṣa 5.7.11 (Bhagavadgītā, bk.3, p. 321): ātivādayaṇaḥ samāpanam. Quoted in K. K. A. Venkatachali, The Maṇivāṇaṇaṇam Literature of the Śrīvaiṣṇava Ācārya, p. 21. The Veda is compared to the pura or transcendental form of God, and śrīkṛṣṇa ("history," the epics and purāṇas) to the anūkṣa or incarnation forms of Vishnu.

119. See Cutler, Songs of Experience, p. 70.

120. Varadānparācārā, 51. See my discussion in chap. 5, sec. 2, “Beauty Untouched by Thought.”

121. I have already discussed, using Ramanujan and C. S. Peirce, the “indexical” nature of Desika’s texts, i.e., that they are not outright literal “imitations” (icons) of the Āyār, but that they respond to and mirror aspects of the Āyār tradition they “imitate” while pointing to (indexing) their own local context and set of signifiers. See Ramanujan, “Three Hundred Rāmāyanas,” pp. 44–45. This indexicality is of course different than what we have viewed as the iconic dimension of the texts themselves, particularly in their anubhūtas, as “bodies of God.”

Chapter 6

1. One example that comes immediately to mind is from Islam. The very rich šamsa’il and dala’il poetry in honor of the Prophet, as well as the short descriptive ḫūṣa ("ornaments") drawn from early Arabic sources, paints an inestimable richer picture of Muhammad, and the Prophet’s centrality in Muslim piety, than much of the theology would admit. This poetic literature is full of sensuous description of the Prophet’s beauty—his face, hair, eyebrows, beard, even sweet odor—a kind of “imaginal” piety that many orthodox ulama over the ages have resisted. Often ḫūṣa are used as talismans, carefully calligraphed and kept in elaborate silver or leather cases. Their words and the Prophet’s attributes they carry are thought to possess brāksa, a spiritual power analogous to Hindu mantras. For a study of such poetic literature, see Annemarie Schimmel, And Muhammad Is His Messenger: The Veneration of the Prophet in Islamic Piety, especially chaps. 2 and 4. There is also Michael Sells’s recent work on the poetry and poetics of Ibn ’Arabī’s mystical texts, and the difference that a focus on the poetry makes in the appreciation of this master poet-philosopher-saint. See his two essays, “Towards a Poetic Translation of the Fusus al-Hikam,” in Muḥyiddin Ibn ’Arabī: A Commemorative Volume, ed. Stephen Hinterstein and Michael Tietman (Shaftesbury: Element, 1993), pp. 124–39; and “Ibn ’Arabī’s ‘Gente Now, Doves of the