

Note regarding CTSI Lecture on January 18, 2024

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Essay for Discussion: “On the Power of Imperfect Words: an Inquiry into the Revelatory Power of a Single Hindu Verse”

This essay was originally published in *Sophia* in 2022, in a thematic issue edited by Dr. Andrea Vestrucci, “Religions and Languages: A Polyphony of Faiths.” It has just appeared in the book arising from that journal issue, *Beyond Babel: Religious and Linguistic Pluralism* (Springer 2023), edited by Vestrucci. Catherine Cornille has an essay in the same volume.

Much of this short essay (13 pages) offers a highly focused example, my reading of just one verse of Tamil poetry by the famed medieval mystical poet Śatakōpaṇ (c 9th-10th century), known popularly as “Nammalvar” (“our saint”). I give the verse on page 11;

In that lotus where the senses circle keṇṭai fish war,
Held apart by a single creeper, still they dart about, piercing like spears.
Like ocean waves that gush ambrosia when churned by Kṛṣṇa’s hand
I’ve been churned. Those who have seen can no longer scold me. (*Tiruviruttam* 57)

The verse is ambiguous, deliberately, but translators have too often brought clarity to it, hastily adding details from commentaries medieval and modern. I restore the ambiguity and lack of clarity, in order then to show how the verse’s meaning and the power of its understated poetic form converge, language used to frustrate, challenge, but then invite readers into participation, seeing through the poetry. With the puzzlement in place, I too look to the commentarial tradition, learning from its learned readers.

The final pages of the essay (pp. 18-20) turn toward comparative theological perspectives, though only in a modest fashion, given its destination in Vestrucci’s thematic issue of *Sophia*. I read it, briefly, with the *Song of Songs* 4.9, attracted there by the mention of heart, eyes, and a hair, on page 19:

You have wounded my heart, sister, my bride,
You have wounded my heart
With one of your eyes
And one hair of your neck. (*Song of Songs* 4.9)

My larger point, I suppose, is that attending to the small details of particular instances of poetry in another tradition is a very worthwhile endeavor, drawing us into that other religious world by the power of its poetry. As I say on page 20,

Revelation is expressed, caught, hidden in the tangles of different sacred languages. Stressed by the vagaries of human language, it then grants access to those who stay with the words, puzzle them through, making sense and slowly weaving a wider array of connections in canons old and new. This is what happens, I suggest. I am not inviting us to justify this situation by reducing revelation to poetry, or by characterizing all such poetry as human approximations of an ineffable divine, or even by positing that it is the same God who is loved in both *Tiruviruttam* 57 and *Song of Songs* 4.9, even if that theologically must be the case (since neither Jews nor Śrīvaiṣṇavas nor Christians believe there can be more than one supreme deity).

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On the Power of Imperfect Words: an Inquiry into the Revelatory Power of a Single Hindu Verse

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Abstract

The Ālvārs are the seventh–ninth century Tamil poet saints whose works achieved the status of sacred canon in what became, after the time of the theologian Rāmānuja (1017–1137), the Śrīvaiṣṇava community and tradition of south India. Their poems are honored as excellent poetry, as expressive of the experience of the poets themselves and of their encounters with Nārāyaṇa, their chosen deity, and finally as revelation, the divine Word uttered in human words. This thematic issue of *Sophia* is interested in investigating the transformations or adaptations that a human language — speaking, writing — undergoes when transmitting a divine message, a revelation expressed in human words. This essay suggests that exploring how traditions have thought and performed the divine in human language can be undertaken usefully; that spiritual charged poetry is a powerful medium of divine communication in human words that both fall short in speaking of God and yet, in that failure, speak eloquently; and that reading intertextually, even interreligiously, is a way to disclose powerfully that divine communication. This essay reflects on all this by studying closely verse 57 of the *Tiruviruttam* of Śaṭakōpan (c. 700), the greatest of these poet saints. It aims to show how even the outside reader — ‘the pilgrim reader’ who is neither a native nor a tourist — can enter into the interpretive process and find, in the elusive poetic words, a point of access to the revelation of the tradition. Some brief comparison is made with the interpretation of the *Song of Songs* in Jewish and Christian commentarial tradition.

Keywords Religious love poetry · Tamil poetry · Srivaisnavism · Revelation · Poetry · Ālvārs · Comparative poetics · Pilgrim reader

This thematic issue of *Sophia* is interested in investigating, along with related themes, the transformations or adaptations that a human language — speaking, writing — undergoes when transmitting a divine message, a revelation expressed in

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human words. This essay suggests that exploring how traditions have thought and performed the divine in human language can be usefully undertaken; that spiritual charged poetry is a powerful medium of divine communication in human words that both fall short in speaking of God and yet, in that failure, speak eloquently; and that reading intertextually, even interreligiously, is a way to disclose powerfully that divine communication.

My context for this inquiry is the poetic and theological tradition of the south Indian Hindu community known as Śrīvaiṣṇava Hinduism. By theology and piety, this community is devoted to the supreme deity Nārāyaṇa (known also as Viṣṇu, and embodied also as the famed Rāma and Kṛṣṇa), and Śrī Lakṣmī, his divine consort. It is a living tradition that benefits from a thousand years of continuous flourishing, and is grounded in both the vernacular Tamil and the sacred Sanskrit languages.

The twelve mystic poets known as the Āḷvārs (usually rendered ‘those immersed [in God]’, henceforth ‘saints’ or ‘Tamil saints’) flourished in Tamil south India in the seventh-tenth centuries. The nearly four thousand Tamil verses of their works, the *Divya Prabandham* (*Divine Canon*), were revered already by the thirteenth century as a body of sacred literature, equal in revelatory power to the great religious classics of Sanskrit literature, the Upaniṣads and the *Bhagavad Gītā*, and similarly worthy of commentary. While most Hindu traditions agree that the majesty and greatness of God cannot be expressed in a straightforward way in human words, the Śrīvaiṣṇavas strive to show how the Āḷvārs’ verses succeed in communicating in words what is beyond words. That is, the tradition is neither simply apophatic nor simply cataphatic.

Śātakōpaṇ, the ninth century Tamil poet saint is esteemed as the greatest of Śrīvaiṣṇava Tamil saints. All four of his works¹ are revered as revealing the mysteries of the love and grace of Nārāyaṇa, taken to be the supreme deity, and always accompanied by his consort, Śrī. The last of the four, the *Tiruvāymoli* (*Holy Word of Mouth*), receives the most commentary as the apex of entire canon of Tamil works in the tradition, and is taken to be the culmination of the saint’s spiritual and poetic journey. But this paper takes us back to what is traditionally positioned as the first of his works, the *Tiruviruttam* (*Holy Verses in the Vṛtta Meter*), 100 devotional verses in the *vṛtta* meter and in the genre of ancient Tamil love poetry which accentuates the episodic union and separation of lovers. Given the traditional view of the saint’s oeuvre of four works, the *Tiruviruttam* is taken to be his meditation on his plight in life and his separation from the Lord he loves. Every verse in some way dramatizes the plight of separated lovers, and the ups and downs of their fragile relationship.²

The verses in the *Tiruviruttam* are in the voice of a young man and a young woman occasionally together, too often apart and intensely missing one another. The pair are unnamed, just ‘he’ and ‘she.’ Sometimes her friend or her mother or his friend speaks, affording us other perspectives on their intense but fragile love. In the following pages I examine just a single verse from the *Tiruviruttam* that, as its

¹ *Tiruviruttam* (100 verses), *Tiruvācīriyam* (7 verses), *Periyatiruvantāti* (87 verses), and *Tiruvāymoli* (1102 verses).

² See Venkatesan’s Introduction for an overview of the *Tiruviruttam*.

obscurity is deciphered, turns out to have a performative dimension, both creating and resolving a crisis about what can be communicated in words:

In that lotus where the senses circle *keṇṭai* fish war,
 Held apart by a single creeper, still they dart about, piercing like spears.
 Like ocean waves that gush ambrosia when churned by Kṛṣṇa's hand
 I've been churned. Those who have seen can no longer scold me. (*Tiruvirut-
 tam* 57)³

I will briefly read it on its own, for what it can tell us without commentary; even in translation, I am wagering, it can speak on its own across time and space, language, and culture. I will then read it in accord with the long Śrīvaiṣṇava system of interpretation.

In the final part of this essay, I reflect on how the work of deciphering this interpretation draws in even the reader who is neither a native to the tradition nor a tourist, but rather what I will now start calling the 'pilgrim reader,' the visitor who comes patiently and to learn, ready to engage in reading practices which have grown up in the tradition, even while monitoring consonant and divergent practices in her own home tradition.

An Understated Vision

The first two lines are mysteriously populated with a lotus that is the center of attention for the senses, *keṇṭai* fish and a creeper:

In that lotus where the senses circle *keṇṭai* fish war,
 Held apart by a single creeper, still they dart about, piercing like spears,

These lines are hard to understand, since they say one thing, fairly simply, while seemingly alluding to something else. There is nothing religious about these lines as such, inviting though they may be. Readers well versed in Tamil literature may recognize resonances with the old Tamil literature of the *caṅkam* period, centuries before: references to animals and flowers, for instance, sketches of natural scenes that seem yet to be suggestive of something more, particularly human states of mind and heart. But the fact of precedents in old Tamil poetry does not of itself add religious meaning to these lines which remain oddly understated, yet 'begging' for some greater symbolic import.

But the next line *is* religious, evocative of the famed myth of the churning of the ocean (usually) by gods and demons by means of a mythic serpent wrapped around a mythic mountain,⁴ with a resultant gushing forth of a precious ambrosia of

³ pulakkuṅṭalap puṅṭarīkatta pōrka keṇṭai valli onrāl / vilakkuṅṭu ulākinru vēl vilikkinraṇa kaṅṅai kaiyāl / malakkuṅṭu amutaṅṭ curanta maṇi kaṭal pōṅṅavarāḷ / kalakkuṅṭa nāṅṅu kaṅṅāṅ emmai yāruṅṅ kaḷaḷalare
 All translations are my own except where noted.

⁴ For several classic tellings of this myth in ancient Indian literature, see O'Flaherty 173–179.

immortality (*amṛta*). But here it is Kṛṣṇa, not warring gods and demons, who churns the ocean, simply by his hand:

Like ocean waves that gush ambrosia when churned by Kṛṣṇa's hand
I've been churned.⁵

A classic myth is now made personal: I myself, says the verse's speaker, have been churned like that, and by none other than Kṛṣṇa. The remainder of the fourth line finally targets the verse's central claim:

Those who have seen can no longer scold me.

The speaker is explaining something — not clear in the verse itself — to someone who has not seen what the speaker has seen. It is as if the speaker is toying with the listener, not quite saying what it is that the listener has not seen but would appreciate had it been seen. The implication too is that listeners who do see what the speaker has seen will be able to understand the speaker's complaint, and perhaps have been or will be churned themselves by the touch of Lord Kṛṣṇa. New readers are like the disadvantaged friend, since they too will not at first understand that the allusion to the churning of the ocean is simply part of the larger dynamic of having to learn words, references, ways of speaking, memories inscribed in a tradition they did not grow up with.

By my reading, the verse is deliberately understating what it is talking about.⁶ If indeed it is a young man speaking to an uncomprehending friend, then it may be that that the latter not only has not seen what the young man has seen, but he may very well not quite know what the young man is talking about, even if he guesses that the man is talking about a woman he has seen. This failure in communication is key to the verse: what is imperfectly described provokes the listener, and by extension a current reader as well, to explore further, since the words as given only intensify the expectation for something more.

One way to begin to decipher all of this is by a sensible appeal to the immediate context in *Tiruviruttam*. I summarize the immediately preceding verses in this way:

54: bees are addressed, begged to fly away in order to facilitate uniting the speaker with the one who stole the butter⁷; 55: O bees, are there flowers anywhere as fragrant as her hair, which is as fragrant as the heaven of the one who

⁵ We notice a small twist here, that the beloved god Kṛṣṇa is the one churning the ocean, and with his own hand, a point rarely made, if anywhere else.

⁶ Ordinarily, one finds translations that make the verse perhaps too clear, as does Venkatesan's recent translation: 'Her earrings entrance the senses. In her lotus-like face her dark eyes dart like *kenṭai*/whose war is blocked by a gently curving creeper / such eyes: wide and sharp as spears. No one can mock me. Those eyes /bewilder me/I am like the ocean with its crashing waves/giving up its nectar/when Kaṇṇan [Kṛṣṇa] churned it with his mountain.' The great commentators of course make explicit what is not said directly, given their overall understanding of *Tiruviruttam* in the context of the great Āḷvār's works. There is no basis on my part to disrespect or ignore what they say, but neither am I inclined to read their interpretations back into the verse as we have it.

⁷ This is a reference to another famous myth recounted in the Bhāgavata Purāṇa of the butter thief — the boy Kṛṣṇa stealing butter from the churn.

came down to earth as a boar? 56: a friend is addressed: we can survive just by the scent of basil in the hair of the one who swallowed the whole world; 58: that lord who spanned the earth in three steps — might he stride right here too?

And here then in 57,

57: Kṛṣṇa churns the ocean with his hand.

So Kṛṣṇa is alluded to in each of these verses — butter thief, the boar, the wearer of sacred basil⁸ — but he is present only in an oblique off-hand manner as if noticed out of the corner of the eye, hinted at but not really the focus of what is being said. But later, as we shall see, by way of this understatement he turns out to be present in a deeper way, central to the meaning of the entire verse.

Reading with the Tradition

How far a reader can enter upon the verse, so as to move from textual to intellectual to spiritual understandings, depends in part on who this reader is. Some Śrīvaiṣṇavas in Tamil Nadu will know this verse and similar verses as if by second nature. They may even today be able to call up, or at least resonate with, the classic motifs behind the verse, and the many intertextual echoes resonating in and around it; and they will know the mythic allusions well. Still other native Tamil speakers may at least be proud of the beautiful language heard here, and recognize classical *caṅkam* precedents where ‘he and she’ and their friends are always overheard amid obscure conversations that speak of love and longing in times of brief union and long separation.

Commentators ancient and modern have striven to help readers to enter more deeply into the meaning of verses like *Tiruviruttam* 57. They offer simple expositions of it, construct an intertextual web, and thereby indicate how such a verse uses words to draw readers into an understanding of the verse, and then into the experience provoked by the words. To show this unpacking of a sacred verse within the limits of this brief essay, I will rely now on the modern commentary of P. B. Annagarachariar and Uttamur Viraraghavachariar, two esteemed twentieth century teachers deeply versed in the old commentaries but writing in a more accessible Tamil style.

Annagarachariar gives a straightforward rendering of the verse:

The context for this verse is this: the young man pushes back at the criticisms of his friend. That is, after achieving a consummation of a divine union, because of the sadness of separation the young man lies there exhausted. When he sees him, his friend asks, “For what reason are you worn out in this

⁸ *Tulāy* in Tamil, *tulasī* in Sanskrit.

way even now?” Unable to conceal the truth from his friend, the young man admits, “I have fallen into the snare of a woman.” (Annangarachariar 200)⁹

But the friend balks at this, thinking collapse too strong a reaction to a mere encounter with a young woman, particularly for a man so virile and experienced as this young man. But he pushes back, complaining that someone who has never seen her cannot understand what he is suffering. He obliquely describes her, perhaps by pointing to things in nature nearby, so that her effect on him is at least fragmentarily communicated to his friend.

But Annangarachariar makes explicit the various allusions: the lotus is her face, the circles are her earrings, the fish her eyes, and the creeper her nose that so finely keeps her eyes apart:

Friend! Do you know what this girl’s face is like? With her lovely earrings she is like a lotus. Do you know what the eyes in her face are like? They are like two *keṇṭai* fish battling one another. They are enemies about to jump on one another, attacking out of jealousy, but her nose is like a creeper, it stands between the eyes and keeps them apart. But then with anger each by itself darts around, as if to stick the other with spears. (Annangarachariar 201)

Seeing all this has deeply agitated the young man, in a way that he can best explain by making explicit the religious parallel:

When my girl looks at me with such eyes, I am churned, as when Lord Tirumāl [Kṛṣṇa] churned the ocean waves. (Annangarachariar 201)

Long ago, the myth goes, the deity had churned the ocean so that the ambrosia of immortality might gush forth from the hidden depths. So too, from deep inside the young man in turmoil, something undying has come forth. If, with tradition, we blur the line between the speaker in the verse and its composer, even the words of this verse itself can be taken as arising from the saint’s own intimate struggle with God. The point of the last line then is both a rebuke and an appeal:

I am churned this way, but whoever has directly seen her eyes will never berate me, but rather will say, “You are immersed in her beauty – how remarkable it is that you haven’t given up your spirit but remain alive!” (Annangarachariar 201)

The friend is by implication rebuked, since he too should come to see the beauty of that face, those eyes, that nose. So too, it seems, the reader then is implicated: if you understand what I am talking about, you too will be enthralled, no longer merely a puzzled onlooker. The revelation will come alive for you too, as the verse’s obscure words unveil the Lord who has so powerfully reverberated in the experience of the young man and, we might dare to presume, of the poet himself. It is key to understand then that the work of understanding *Tiruviruttam* 57 is meant to provoke

⁹ References are to *Tiruviruttam* 1930, with the commentary of P. B. Annangarachariar. Translations mine.

a similar experience, as the experience of the young man, churned like the ocean, becomes the vehicle of experience for the reader in the real time of hearing and reading even now.

A second layer of commentarial interpretation lies in the weaving of this verse into the wider array of relevant sacred texts in Tamil and in Sanskrit. This single verse, like any other single verse, is understood to be just a part not only of *Tiruviruttam*, but of a whole canon of sacred literature. The commentators highlight key points in the verse by the citation of other texts that in some way echo or embellish those points. In this way, its authority is increased and its resonances intensified, as the dynamic operative in the verse and the roles of divine and human actors are recognized across the canon.

Some quotations simply indicate texts that come readily to mind as similarly evocative. For example, *Tiruvāymoli* VIII.8.1 is adduced as offering a similar portrayal of a face, albeit more explicitly:

Lustrous eyes, full and ripe lustrous lips,
White bright teeth shining within, crocodile earrings shaking
Cloud-colored, shining topknot, four arms, with a bent bow,
Shining conch, club, discus, sword: unique, he is within me, I am at his feet.¹⁰

So too, the churned ocean in *Tiruviruttam* 57 reminds Annangarachariar of a reference to the loving heart as deep as an ocean: 'in the great field of my heart [Kṛṣṇa] planted love great enough to fill an ocean.' (*Tiruvāymoli* V.3.4) He turns to the Sanskrit canon as well. In the *Rāmāyaṇa*, lord Rāma too is like an ocean: 'Possessed of all good qualities, increasing the joy of [his mother] Kauśalya, in depth like an ocean, by fortitude he like a snow-capped mountain.' (*Rāmāyaṇa*, Bāla Kāṇḍa 1.17). These parallels are inexact but any given reference to the ocean reminds the commentators of every other reference to the ocean.

A more direct narrative parallel occurs with reference to Hanuman, the monkey warrior who is the faithful servant of Rāma. Hanuman had gone to Śrīlankā to visit the captive Sītā. Only when he sees her for the first time, does he come to understand how beautiful she is, and the greatness and severity of Rāma's anguish and fortitude:

Rāma has done what is hard to do. Though this lord is bereft of her, Still he supports his own body, he is not disheartened by grief. (*Rāmāyaṇa*, Sundara Kāṇḍa 16.27)¹¹

¹⁰ In turn, for the first line of VIII.8.1, the classical commentator Nāṃpiḷlai detects parallels in *Tiruvāymoli* VIII.5, where the saint both vividly describes Kṛṣṇa's face and expresses great longing actually to see him again, in *Tiruvāymoli* VIII.7.1, where the divine dwarf fulfils the saint's wish by entering into the saint, vividly appearing in his mind, and holding his mind entirely fixed on the lord, and in *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* I.6.7, where the radiant person has eyes like deep red lotuses.

¹¹ There are other references to the *Rāmāyaṇa* as well. The paradigmatic love of Rāma and Sītā sheds light on how much the young man misses the young woman, since they are meant for one another (*Sundara Kāṇḍa* 16.5); the young man's longing is like that of Rāma, who cannot bear to be without Sītā. (*Rāmāyaṇa*, *Sundara Kāṇḍa* 66.10).

Once Hanuman has seen her, he fully understands Rāma's anguish in separation. What the famed *Rāmāyaṇa* dramatizes on a grand scale is encapsulated in this little verse.

We could go on in exploring such references, and trace from each of them still further resonances with other Tamil and Sanskrit texts prized by the community as it weaves a great web of intertexts. But the point is clear: as *Tiruviruttam* 57 resonates across the canon, its inscrutability is lessened and its authority heightened in the cross-reading. The speaker, taken to be Śaṭakōpaṇ, has a consistent voice, such as will be heard in all his works. That speaker, young man, saint, poet — all are just like Rāma yearning for his Sītā, churned as if the hand of Kṛṣṇa had reached deep inside him.

A third level of interpretation aims at the inner meaning (*svāpadeśa*) of the verse, as it provides spiritual nourishment for listeners and readers drawn into the truth that it expresses in poetic form. Like every other verse in *Tiruviruttam*, verse 57 is read in terms of the community's enthrallment with the saint himself and thus with his verses. After citing the views of a series of older commentators, Annangarachariar first points to enduring relevance of the verse:

The lord's people who know the light of the Ālvār's eye of knowledge are immersed in it. But they see others around them who, although they see how these are thus immersed, remain determined to find fault. This verse is their rejoinder. (Annangarachariar 203)

More broadly, Annangarachariar sees the verse as instructive on how one advances on the spiritual path, for this elusive verse teaches those willing to learn. Indeed, he finds the verse suggestive of a process akin to that found in *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* II.4.5, with its mandate for hearing, thinking, and meditating (*śravaṇa*, *manana*, *nididhyāsana*) in order to attain realization (*darśana*):

There are three steps to knowing the primary thing that is the cause of liberation: hearing, thinking, vision. Among these, *hearing* is listening to the words of the teaching of an ācārya who has had the experience; *thinking* is clear mental reflection, by authorities and by reason, on the meaning of the words of that teaching; *vision* is clarity that arises upon the destruction of doubts about the primary thing. With respect to the inner meaning of this verse, knowledge — the eye of the saint — is combined in turn with each of the three means illumined by the first two lines of the verse. (Annangarachariar 203-4)

This makes sense if we recall that Annangarachariar makes clear what is only implicit in the verse: the topic is a young woman's face, with indications of the senses at work, the eyes and ears and (by way of the battling fish) the cogitating mind. The ears with their earrings indicate hearing; the warring fish (eyes) symbolize competing theological views; the creeper (nose) demarcates the wise teaching making peace among warring theological positions. On this basis the way is opened, Annangarachariar is suggesting, to the true and subtle knowledge of the Lord. He then summarizes the vision, the knowledge symbolized by those piercing eyes:

By this process of listening and thinking, uncertainty is entirely banished, a state of subtle and enduring knowledge is reached, and there is vision of our Lord. Like the ocean waves that emitted ambrosia when churned by the hand of Kṛṣṇa we, accomplished in all fruitfulness, are vanquished by this unique knowledge of the saint and we reach a state where devotion overflows. The saint is saying that we are now among those who understand the nature of his own knowledge. Such is the inner meaning of the latter two lines of the verse... Indeed, like the ocean waves that emitted ambrosia when churned by the hand of Kṛṣṇa, the Lord himself is vanquished by the peerless knowledge of the saint that overflows in devotion, and he too loses control. Such is the inner meaning of the verse. (Annangarachariar 204)

In this way the saint himself — the author who composes the verse but who is also the implied speaker in it — becomes the real object of devotion, churned and churning, as the verse (and all the others in *Tiruviruttam*) might come forth as a word both divine and human.¹²

Uttamur Viraraghavachariar elaborates the divine-human relationship perceived to be inherent in the verse. By an ingenious reading of the first line, he imagines how it is the lord and the saint — the young man and the young woman — who are meeting in the heart lotus, that enigmatic lotus mentioned in the first line. The contesting *keṇṭai* fish, the saint and the Lord, argue regarding true knowledge and true love, neither conceding dependence on the other, even if neither can really imagine being apart from the other. They churn and are churned by one another. As a result, the uncomprehending friend is the beneficiary of the divine-human quarrel of saint and Lord, benefitting from the struggle that led to the words of the verse, words that in turn provoke the same struggle in the reader who is trying to understand. This, after all, is what the revelation is about, the provocation of an experience of God, of Śrī Nārāyaṇa, by faltering human words that attempt to describe what one must in the end see for oneself. As the reader works through the words, the revelation dawns.

Perhaps because the saint's Tamil verse is for all — free of the restrictions that bind Sanskrit learning — and because his love is unrestricted, Viraraghavachariar is able to note the wider effect of this verse, beyond the narrow bounds of gender, caste, and beliefs. Even hitherto excluded readers can enjoy this verse and what it reveals: women and śūdras, traditionally not allowed to learn Sanskrit, as well as those holding heterodox views and excluded for doctrinal reasons:

In order that women, śūdras, and the deniers of the faith might reach clarity on the knowledge of the real, of what is beneficial, and of the whole of the excellent experience that occurred in past days, the Lord himself is lost in the Ālvār's glance, and graciously made these gracious deeds. (Viraraghavachariar 101)

¹² The Lord is overwhelmed by the saint's knowledge (vision), love, and beauty. See the brief account of this theme in Clooney 1996, c. 4. On the human and divine authorship of the verses of the saint, see also Clooney 1985.

The poetry teaches in ways otherwise not possible, as the drama — of the lover and his beloved, the Lord and the saint, the saint and the community — becomes the drama of every attentive listener down through the ages.

Seeing Indirectly

But this leads directly to the third and final section of my essay: the pilgrim reader, neither native nor tourist, can conscientiously and patiently find a way into the verse, by study such as I have recounted in the preceding pages. This person, though disadvantaged, ends up a real even if imperfect participant in the same drama, caught up in the words of the verse, the young man's faltering self-defense, now implicated in the fact that only those who have seen God can really understand what it means to long for God.

But even so, one might fairly ask, 'But where is the revelation — now? Can such a verse really have its revelatory effect for a pilgrim reader who works her or his way into the tradition from afar?' Once the verse, its context, and the long history of expert reading are appreciated, the available resources increase immeasurably, and it becomes possible for pilgrim readers to come near to the Śrīvaiṣṇava tradition by reading their way into it, close up to a given single verse, such as *Tiruviruttam* 57, with the other 1300 verses of our saint to follow later on.

I myself came to this verse as someone who is not a Tamil or a Śrīvaiṣṇava, but by dint of slow learning, I am someone who has been reading Śaṭakōpaṇ's works on and off for nearly forty years, with some help from teachers, but too often on my own. My knowledge of Tamil verses of course cannot be like that which arises from native experience and due to the benefits of communal formation in a recognized lineage. It came about only by way of this student's choice in graduate school to learn some Tamil, as best he could, and then, early on, having stumbled upon the poetry of the Ālvārs, making the effort to read that poetry, and to continue to do so over a very long time.

Yet I am not merely lacking in the benefits accruing to Śrīvaiṣṇava learning. I am not from nowhere. As a Roman Catholic with a theological education and decades of the study of the Bible for the sake of preaching and teaching, I am definitely from within a religious tradition that understanding the living and enlivening nature of sacred words. The Biblical revelation I began with arose in another part of the world, in other mother tongues. Due to all this, I suggest, I am more and not less sensitive to the power of acts of translation across religions and cultures works, such as allow *Tiruviruttam* 57 to do its poetic and intellectual and spiritual work on pilgrim readers such as myself.

I am suggesting that the saint's poetry and the Śrīvaiṣṇava tradition of reading will not be entirely foreign to readers who know something of another tradition's learning, such as that of my Roman Catholic tradition, or who is versed in Rabbinic or Quranic or Buddhist modes of reading. The pilgrim reader who comes equipped with the learning of her own tradition continues the holy reading we find so brilliantly exemplified in the Śrīvaiṣṇava tradition, now playing it out on a much wider stage of learning and spiritual insight. This reader retells a verse like *Tiruviruttam*

57 in her own language, in a way that makes sense in her mother tongue and home tradition; expanding the field of intertextual links in the languages of her own canon; deepening and enhancing this spiritual engagement by drawing on her own tradition of spiritual study and practice. After learning the verse itself as best as she or he can as a knower of other mystical poetries, the pilgrim reader too can proceed by way of the phases I have outlined as germane to Śrīvaiṣṇava tradition: learning from commentators ancient and modern as they retell the verse, as a text woven into a vast web of intertextual significations — and then, as we shall see, a still wider inter-religious web — and finally by a contemplative process going deeper and deeper, in order to come to see through the text what cannot be heard and then seen by way of words that would pretend to be able to state things simply and directly.

Just one example must suffice here. When reading South India's poetry of the young woman and young man such as is exemplified in *Tiruviruttam*, I am always reminded of the *Song of Songs*, which has long been recognized as strikingly parallel to ancient Tamil poetry of the sort we have been reading.¹³ When I had been studying *Tiruviruttam* 57 for some months, this *Song* verse came to mind:

You have wounded my heart, sister, my bride,
 You have wounded my heart
 With one of your eyes
 And one hair of your neck. (*Song* 4.9)¹⁴

Of course, here too we must slow down and learn something of what *Song* 4.9 means on its own and has meant in the *Song*, and then in the Jewish and Christian traditions. Commentaries on the *Song* abound, in Rabbinic tradition, and among Christians from the time of Origen until now. Supplementary resources abound in Hebrew, Greek and Latin and also now in translation. If one does not know Hebrew (as I do not), a volume such as Michael Fishbane's *Song of Songs, Shir ha-Shirim: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation and Commentary* is most useful. A direct way into the Christian tradition might similarly begin with Richard A. Norris' *The Song of Songs Interpreted by Early Christian and Medieval Commentators* which, as the title indicates, draws masterfully on Christian sources arrayed over nearly two millennia. And so we can read our way into this verse of the *Song*, allowing it in its indirectness to reveal to us the beloved and the power of the beloved in our lives.¹⁵

¹³ The most concerted effort to draw parallels between ancient Tamil poetry and the *Song of Songs* can be found in Mariaselvam. See also Clooney 2013.

¹⁴ As translated in Hoyland 1979. I have used this translation, out of the many available, because it is from the Latin used by Hoyland (likewise rendered in the 1979 translation).

¹⁵ I have previously had some experience in reading medieval commentaries on the *Song* along with Śrīvaiṣṇava commentaries on *Tiruvāymoli*. In *His Hiding Place Is Darkness* (2013), I engaged in a reading of Śaṭakōpan's main work, the *Tiruvāymoli* with its commentaries, along with the *Song* with the three connected medieval Cistercian commentaries of Bernard of Clairvaux (on *Song* 1–2), Gilbert of Hoyland (on *Song* 3–4), and John of Ford (on *Song* 5–8), who read and preached and wrote in accord with the medieval tradition of study loosely termed *lectio divina*. The point was to intensify pondering and suffering the absence of the Beloved in two traditions of poetry and commentary, intensifying the whole process by diving into the holy confusion of reading both traditions together. Here, in a fuller

But when we start to contemplate *Tiruviruttam* 57 and *Song* 4.9 together, both are unsettled and as it were churned in order to generate a flood of new insights. The choices of each poet, as interpreted in their tradition, to write indirectly of the experience of God, have been canonized in each respective tradition. Now, in the spirit of that indirection but pushing it further, both traditions turn out to be at a bit at a loss in terms of speaking of God and the experience of God, particularly since neither tradition is willing to reduce God to a name or concept. For each tradition, language has a more provocative, constructive role that is intrinsic to its revelatory power. In their falling short and speaking indirectly, individually and together, a certain more primal power is released. The reading of the two texts together — even focusing on ‘her eyes’ and their piercing glance twice over — turns out to be still more incisive, more penetrating than might be accomplished by working only with either of the verses. Śrīvaiṣṇava readers will not have expected this new reading, but it is inspired by the manner of reading they, but not only they, have done for a thousand years. Christian readers — and Jewish readers, I surmise — will likewise be unprepared for the prospect of these two texts taken together, even if we too have been prepared for this textual engagement that enables us to find kindred spirits in the south India we visit as pilgrims.

Revelation is expressed, caught, hidden in the tangles of different sacred languages. Stressed by the vagaries of human language, it then grants access to those who stay with the words, puzzle them through, making sense and slowly weaving a wider array of connections in canons old and new. This is what happens, I suggest. I am not inviting us to justify this situation by reducing revelation to poetry, or by characterizing all such poetry as human approximations of an ineffable divine, or even by positing that it is the same God who is loved in both *Tiruviruttam* 57 and *Song of Songs* 4.9, even if that theologically must be the case (since neither Jews nor Śrīvaiṣṇavas nor Christians believe there can be more than one supreme deity). Rather, I am suggesting that we would be foolish to stop reading such holy poems, as if to read only in the tradition we grew up with. Read, and see what happens. What is not easily said in one tradition or the other may be said, still imperfectly but all the more intensely, by the new nearness of two traditions. Like *keṇṭai* fish, they flash and dart about, dazzling and piercing, catching our hearts. Those who only watch from afar will inevitably remain skeptical, or merely puzzled, and so here too the challenge applies: ‘Had you seen what I’ve seen (or read what I’ve read), you would no longer scold me.’

Declarations

Conflict of Interest The author declares no competing interests.

Footnote 15 (continued)

essay, I would return to Gilbert of Hoyland for inspiration as he interprets the dynamics of seeing and wounding and being wounded in *Song* 4.9. See his sermon on this verse.

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