

Prabandha: Mode, Tone, Theme

1.

After sampling *prabandha* texts in several languages, in an inductive and open-ended way of reading together over the last nine months, it is time to propose the lineaments of a more robust theory. Whatever formulation emerges will inevitably be amplified and deepened by further reading and inflected in relation to the particular languages and regions that generated these texts. However, there are already several distinct discoveries.

To begin with, we have the large empirical corpus of works that appear to belong to this class. I am calling them *prabandhas*, despite the much longer genealogy of this term and its common applicability to various kinds of texts, not only those of interest to us here—that is, texts composed during the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries (or a little earlier and a little later) throughout the south and sharing a set of common features. Among the latter we see: a relatively compact and thematically unified composition, usually capable of being recited or read over a few days or weeks; the existence of a named author (or authors) with a distinctive voice; an aesthetic impact that emerges from reading or hearing the text as a whole, from beginning to end (in that order); the presence of extended lyrical narrative; typical linguistic features, including the mixing of speech registers and the appearance of colloquial or as-if-colloquial speech; compounded figuration that challenges the definitions and logic of the classical *alaṅkāra-śāstra*; and a new protocol of reading or recitation, clearly marked off from earlier forms of textual performance. This protocol of reading reflects, among other things, a marked attentiveness to sound in the conjoined tributaries of sound and meaning and an exuberant economy of expression with minimal redundancy. *Prabandha* texts characterized by these features also often share a certain tonal and textural range, as I will try to show.¹

It is, in fact, entirely possible that tonality and texture are the prime indicators of what we might call the *prabandha* mode, as distinct from purely formal elements. The *prabandha* mode might then surface in texts that are longer than the prototypical *prabandhas* or that lack, or seem to lack, certain features listed above and spelled out in our earlier programmatic statements.

¹ For a more discursive discussion of the diagnostic features, see the essay by Velcheru Narayana Rao and myself on Telugu *prabandhas*.

This paper addresses the modal nature of sixteenth- to eighteenth-century narrativized texts meant for recitation in the early-modern way.

Recitation, whether public (in court or temple or salon) or private (in the space of the home), by a single individual literate in a special sense, foregrounds the sonic effects of tightly composed passages, as the authors clearly meant to be the case. There are several possible patterns of sonic foregrounding, some of them familiar from much earlier *kāvya* works. For example, we find, in all the literatures, aural devices that can easily overpower semantics. *Yamaka* texts such as Ciṅṅatampippulavar's *Kalvaḷaiyantāti* (early 18th-century, Jaffna), are good examples. No one could recite such a text in a manner that follows the natural syntax of Tamil speech, including poetic speech. But even in texts that are not intent on extending *śabdāṅkāras* to new limits we find, consistently, highly crafted sonic, that is musical and rhythmic, textures, to the point that one often feels (rightly or wrongly) that a verse or *gadya* passage simply could not be formulated in any other way, on the level of the individual syllable or metre. Attentiveness of this order is very different from the poets' somewhat mechanical category of *śabda-pradhāna* texts (such as the Veda). Early-modern prabandha works in no way impair the *śabdārtha-pradhānatva* that is classically associated with *kāvya*, in Sanskrit as in the vernaculars. That fusion endures as a datum. But within such sonic-semantic amalgams there remains a considerable range for experimentation, and the relative weight of each component shifts in accordance with the exigencies of context. *Artha* is now even more inseparable from the sound cadences and rhythms in which we meet it, and it is the reciter's task to make this basic attribute of literary speech evident to the ear and present to the mind. Putting things in this rather abstract way, however, masks the experience of a receptive reader/listener taking in any specific passage in its expressive depth.

Before going further, let me revert to the historical setting in relation to the cultural production of our period. Here we find significant variation throughout the regions. The canonical Telugu prabandhas (fixed in the canon only in the seventeenth century) were all composed in the course of the sixteenth century or the first two decades of the seventeenth, effectively in two waves—one situated mostly in the Western Deccan, particularly at Vijayanagara, and the second mostly in Rāyalasīma. They comprise an internally resonant, strongly intertextual corpus (intertextual not only among themselves but also with contemporaneous works in the other languages, including Sanskrit) that in a certain sense provides a paradigm for the entire prabandha phenomenon. Roughly in the same period there emerge the great *campū-*

*kāvya*s in Maṇipravāḷam (that is, in early Malayalam)—taken together, in terms of all the major parameters, a closely parallel corpus to the Telugu one. There is, however, a certain optical illusion about beginning with the Telugu case, since it is clearly coeval with, indeed an intimate part of, the Kannada prabandha works of this time, some of them developing features already very marked in the early Kannada corpus (Rāghavāṅka, Janna, Cāmarasa). By the sixteenth-seventeenth centuries, we have prabandha authors in Kannada such as the trans-sectarian Ratnākaravarṇi (whose multi-denominational, in some sense secular culture, however contested, is in its own way a diagnostic feature of this literature). But perhaps the most unusual and extensive prabandha literature of the type we are exploring crystallizes in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Tamil, especially in the discursive and narrative stream (*Pirapu-liṅka-līlai*, *Vasucaritram*, and the great lyrical *sthala-purāṇams* of Nirampavaḷakiya Tecikar, Tuṛaimaṅkalam Civappirakācar, and others), in contrast to the intricate Short Works (*cirrilakkiyam*) such as *ulā* and *kalampakam*, which have a different history altogether. Some of the former, primarily narrative texts may not appear, at first glance, to fit the prabandha mode-- for example, in terms of thematic integration and overall aesthetic effect; closer inspection reveals them to be characteristic exemplars of the class. Sanskrit prabandhas are everywhere in evidence in the south in this period; the *Varadāmbikā-pariṇaya*, which we have read, was composed at Vijayanagara in the same decades as the major early Telugu prabandhas and shares their tonality and themes; slightly later we have the tightly composed texts of Nīlakaṇṭha Dīksita (*Gaṅgāvataṛaṇa*, *Nīlakaṇṭha-vijaya*, *Śiva-līlārṇava*) and Rāmabhadra Dīkṣita (*Śṛṅgara-tilaka-bhāṇa*, *Patañjali-caritra*, etc.), to name but two prominent poets among many.

In all cases, we can probably posit a readership that is educated, sophisticated, multi-lingual, proto-urban, and moneyed—often *nouveaux riches*—and that thus had the leisure and the inclination to devour the new prabandhas composed, in considerable numbers, by their poets.

2. Texture

What goes into this amorphous caption? Suppose we look at a verse or two from one of the Maṇipravāḷam examples: Maḷamaṅgala kavi's *Bhāṣā-naiṣadha-campu* (1.39-40). Nala, very lovesick (though it's early days), addresses the wind and then his own mind.

peśalāṅga pavamāna-pota kuśalaṃ bhavānū bata varttate

*nāśa-kālam adhunā namukk' iniy ōr āśay uṇḍū paṛayām atum
āśu cenn' iniya kuṇḍinākhya-nagare sukkena damayanti tan
kaiśike bata virunnum uṇḍū varik'allayo sarasa sampratam*

*ētra kaṣṭam it' arūpiy āya pavamānanaṇṇu paṛayunnat' ē-
nn' attal ārum itu keṭṭat'illatu puṛatt' atinnū karutum vidhau
ittaraṃ bhramam akappēṭum vacasi citta-yoni-bhuja-vikramam
citta-kāmpil vaḷarunna kāla, iti kelppit' uṇḍ' akhila-kāminām*

“My dear delicate gust of wind: I hope you’re well.
As for me, it’s time to die. But I still have one wish
that I can’t help but tell you. Go at once to the city
called Kuṇḍinapuram. Come to rest in Damayanti’s
hair. There’s a feast waiting for you
there. Enjoy it, and come back soon.”

But it’s stupid that I should be talking to this
disembodied being, the wind. There’s nobody listening
to my sad story—no one but me and the wind
outside. I’ve heard that when the power of desire
reaches down into the depths
of the mind, all lovers speak
their delusion.

I would suggest that you first listen, more than once or twice, to the pure music
of these poems. Recite them out loud. I don’t think we need the usual exercise
of spelling out the alliteration, the metrical caesuras and the emphases they
provide, the gentle repetitions, the mix of Sanskrit and Malayalam. We are all
too practiced in these devices. Still, the melodic inevitability of sound conjuring
up meaning is clear enough. I would like to call it the isoglossia of expression and
topic. Notice, too, the lightness of touch, the easy flow of engaging sound. One
can easily get a little high on it. But we also need to listen to the gentle self-
mocking, thus somewhat comic and endearing, tone that is part of that
lightness.

Texture includes very specific verbal touches. As the modern
commentator, T. P. Balakrishnan Nayar, notes with insight, the first verse is filled
with urgent adverbs and interjections: *adhunā, bata* (twice), *sampratam, āśu*.
“Go there now, right now, fast, you there....” It’s as if Nala, who thinks he’s dying,
is stuttering, so that the sentence that emerges—a lucid one for the listener or

reader—keeps halting as emotion drowns the speaker; a jerky syntax colors the mellifluous progression of somewhat elevated words. At the same time, the opening sentence is natural, even colloquial: “There is something I just have to tell you (it’s my last wish).” It’s interesting, also, that he wants the wind to go soak itself in Damayantī’s hair and then come right back, quickly—as if Nala thinks he may still be alive when this journey, a kind of *sandēśa* moment, is completed.

And since I’ve mention the *sandēśa*, it’s also important to point out that the second verse is a complex quotation from and reworking of the *Meghadūta* (5): *kāmārthā hi praṇaya-kṛpāṇāś cetanācetaṇeṣu*. Nala chides himself for talking to a disembodied (probably also an *acetana*) being. At this point, he himself is entirely immersed in his body. People in love are crazy and they may even know it. I’ll have more to say a little later about quotations of this sort. You can see the particular beauty they offer the listener. Second- or third-order reference easily emerges, often with astonishing resonance, from such intertextual segments.

At the same time, the speaker is very aware of what is happening in the depths—the pith or inner essence, *kāmpu*—of the mind, just as we see in a vast array of prabandhas from our period. Ardent desire is, he says, growing inside the mind, that is, actually generated there, in the mind (*citta-yoni*). It is just at this point of sonic-semantic emphasis that complex figuration turns up together with the inflected Sanskrit compound that brings closure to the poem. And it’s not just any closure: Sanskrit strategically placed simultaneously closes and opens up the poem with its long-standing echoes. This, too, is intrinsic to what I am calling texture.

This is just a first, somewhat superficial glance at these two verses, which will repay many repeated readings. We would do well to extend the discussion to Maḷamaṅgala’s magnificent *gadya* passages. They present us with a range of musical, ictus-based cadences—a kind of free verse with well-defined rhythmic constraints, immediately evident when a passage is recited, and endowed with names taken from the standard *chandas* lists. There are moments here, as in many prabandha texts, where *gadya*-based syntax spreads into the metrical verses, spilling over into long, multi-verse sentences with strong complex enjambment between lines and also between verses. (In this respect, Malayalam prabandhas complement the Telugu norm of contrapuntal dissonance between metrical and syntactic sequences.) Figuration, too, tends toward experimentation through complex compounding and superimposing,

thus a new type of *alaṅkāra-dhvani*—self-reflexive to the point where figuration may transcend itself or empty itself out in the interest of a higher expressive burden.² As I have said, compounded figuration is a hallmark of the regional prabandha style. Moreover, compounding as a general rule can take many possible, or necessary, forms.

As already mentioned, along with intensity and elevation of style, we may find surprising “intrusions” of a direct, even colloquial register.³ Indeed, mixed linguistic registers are a staple feature of these texts in all the languages.⁴ Sometimes such mixing of registers extends to the graphic expressive modes of *citrakāvya*, as the characters of writing itself—their visual shapes and movement—take on suggestive meaning.⁵ Prabandha literature was graphically recorded, and writing is frequently thematized by poets attuned, above all, to aural effects, or to “auralization” in a more general sense, the counterpart of visualization.⁶

Auralization means that the author lingers over his or her image, visual or sonic, probing its potential, fleshing it out, continuously re-creating and re-calibrating the mental image through sounds and words. The choice of words will be determined by their syllabic, sonic shape (and, at times, by the graphemes that embody them). There are no lax moments, almost no drop in tension or failure of attention. Such attentiveness always derives from a personal tone. It may result in verses that look and sound simple, but it can also produce extreme modes of diction and symphonic rhythms at the outer limit of complexity. Talia Ariav has spoken about “vividness” as a unifying feature of these prabandha works—possibly in the sense of sonically and verbally recreating or actualizing the presence of what is being “described” (a somewhat impoverished term for these works) through cognitive processes that are invariably shaped by strong reflexive perspectives. I will return to this statement shortly when discussing tonality.

Sustained texture of this kind, although usually marked by shifting intensities of expression and perception, speaks to an audience capable of finding pleasure and beauty in multi-media textual performance: verbal, musical, gestural, sometimes dramatic strands weave perception, intuition, and cognition around the latent topics, subjects, and themes of such works. These

² See Jennifer Clare and David Shulman, on Maran.

³ See Manu Devadevan.

⁴ As we saw in Varadāmbikā-pariṇaya; also dialectical passages in Manu-caritramu....

⁵ As in kakawin: Hunter; Harshita and Narayana Rao’s introduction to Pārijātāpaharaṇamu.

⁶ Shulman, Abhayamba.

topics, too, have coherence and a marked intertextual patterning. Prabandha texts thus may well share features with outright, large-scale performance genres such as Kūḍiyāṭṭam, Kathakali, Padam-based dance, and Yakṣagāna in its several distinct forms. We are speaking of a single textual continuum, differently configured in each cultural setting.

A mere two verses from one Malayali poet have taken us some ways and allowed me to extrapolate a few general features. Now let us keep in mind that the prabandha works we are studying number in the hundreds, and that each text has its own specificity. In Malayalam/Maṇipravāḷam alone we will easily discover singularities and, in many cases, exceptions to the generalizations I keep wanting to make. Do the shared features outweigh—or, for that matter, contextualize and illumine—such singularities? I think they may.

3. Tonality

There is, again, the challenge of defining what we mean by such a term. Tonality and texture are siblings but not identical twins. Tone emerges through thick description, along the lines mentioned above; in recorded (spoken) speech in relation to formal and conventionalized literary language of various kinds; in the far-reaching experiments in figuration that are everywhere apparent in these works; and in the reflexive, ironic, parodic, ludic, and oneiric modes that turn up with remarkable regularity. I want to attempt an analysis of what I have just called reflexive and parodic in the hope that we can jettison these terms and find more sensitive ways to name and understand them.

Take, for example, the following example from *Varadāmbikā-pariṇaya*. The hero, Prince Acyuta, is in the standard state of *viraha-vedanā* for Varadāmbikā, whom he has seen only once, and rather briefly. Very much alone in his room in the palace, he is hallucinating. To be precise:

*tatra vṛddha-purandhrīṇām āsīrbhir abhyarhito nṛpatir garbha-gr̥ha-śayane
nipatyā samuttāmyatā cittena rahasi cintayati sma vismayanīyam
atispr̥haṇīyam anupameyam ameyam acintanīyam anākhyeyam atiramaṇīyaṃ
tadīyaṃ rūpadheyam/*

*saundarya-sāra-samavāya-camat-kṛtāṅgyāś
candrānanāḥ kati na santi vasundharāyām/
namra-smitāṃśam api tā na bhajanty amuṣyāḥ
kācid vidher iyaṃ aho kara-kauśala-śrī//*

Having been blessed by the elderly ladies (in the women’s quarters), the king fell onto his bed in his chamber and, his mind tormented, was silently thinking about her beautiful body—something amazing, utterly desirable, incomparable, immeasurable, unthinkable, unspeakable, and also quite pretty.

Are there not lots and lots of moon-faced women on this earth
whose bodies amaze us by the utter pervasiveness
of beauty in its ultimate essence?
Yet not one of them can claim even an iota
of her slight and ravishing smile.
By God, the god who created her had very
nimble fingers.⁷

As always with prabandhas, one has to hear the sounds to feel the tone, a lightly self-mocking one that is present on nearly every page of this book. First, in the *gadya* passage—as Dmitry Shevchenko noted during our reading—we have in the cascading superlatives an appropriation, or apparent parody, of Advaitic discourse. She’s a very pretty, well, more than pretty, well, far far beyond pretty, well, far beyond words of any kind, girl. Just reading through these few lines produces a smile. The verse then uses the *vyatireka* logic of “surpassing” to surpass even the irony of the prose. There is a theoretical problem hidden here, the issue stated explicitly in the fourth chapter of the *Dhvanyāloka*: if all women have faces like the moon, why use this eroded metaphor at all—and what does it mean, anyway? Varadāmbikā is unique (this goes well with Ānandavardhana’s conclusion) among beautiful women; even the faint trace of her smile is something no other woman can boast of. And all this is Brahmā’s doing. Of course, it’s of interest that Brahmā has been creating very beautiful women for many aeons: finally all that practice has paid off. He got one right.

Let’s see if we can describe this tone without calling it parodic. We could say that Tirumalāmbā has out-*vyatireka*-ed the *vyatireka*, in effect emptying it of its usual force, or pushing it back into or through itself so that we, and probably the figure as well, can examine its internal mechanisms of meaningfulness and its expressive range. The *alaṅkāra-śāstra* offers its formulation of this problem by identifying the figure of the unicum, *ananvaya*, which, however, doesn’t encompass the playful and ironic tone of our passage. But the tone is the essence of this extended figure. Extended—by the *atīśaya* that colors this entire passage and that, again, exceeds the bare figure of

⁷ Varadāmbikāpariṇaya, p. 111.

atīśayokti to comic effect. She's only a teenage girl, after all. She is, however, singular: on that, at least, we can agree. Singularity is one of those *prabandha* themes.

But we might do well do leave the classifications behind as well. The gentle curvature of the utterance is what should interest us. Reflexivity—not generally or universally but in the particular south Indian sources we are studying—entails that mental movement. One looks from the corners of the eyes. It is definitely not enough to speak of this slight turn as a kind of “reframing,” or as the emergence of an external perspective on the subject or topic being configured. No externality is needed. If there is a shift in perspective, as seems to be the case, it is an internal and internally directed shift.

There are several features that regularly accompany the move toward self-irony. Most immediately noticeable is thickening or intensification of the poetic statement. The verbal formulation, spinning into itself, then emptying itself, thereby amplifies itself. Amplification implies a rhythm of greater and lesser intensities or differential densities—the staple rhythm of irony. The light touch of lesser density destabilizes the weight of greater density. Any pre-existing equilibrium is disturbed. Duration itself as an ostensibly even and orderly progression is disrupted. Irony is anyway disjunctive. One might say that the rhythm or pulsation of a configured passage becomes syncopated. A dissonance in tone, possibly connected to the overlapping of registers, is suddenly audible.

All of that relates to sound as it conjures up sense. What sort of sense? Clearly, a self-referential kind. Self-reference, as a general rule, tends toward paradox. One generates a set that is a member of itself, as Bertrand Russell long ago made clear. It is as if the figure itself, say *vyatireka*, were saying, “I am and am not what (who) I am.”

An intimate tonality pervades such a statement. Listen for it. There is also something creative, a newness and freshness, in it (unlike in classic parody). Hence there may also be a temporal aspect to this kind of self-disrupting irony. We might even think of the difference between shallow time and deep time, the latter dependably resulting from involution, a turning backward and inward, so that a double, or triple, concurrent rhythmic progression becomes audible. Prince Acyuta's time, delicately mocked by the poetess, is deeper and more interesting than the familiar time of *viraha-vedanā*. Tirumalāmbā's time is deeper still. Probably still deeper is the listener's or reader's time, given the

richness of intellection that a simple tonal twist can generate. These temporalities of varying fullness appear to co-exist, to operate simultaneously, thus enhancing asymmetry and dissonance.

Note that the kind of self-referential and reflective moments we are discussing are radically different from the mirror effects that are everywhere in classical *kāvya*. Mirroring deepens perception, drawing up profound fragments of awareness from the hidden spaces of the mirror. (In *kāvya* the mirror probably never reflects what is apparent on the surface.) The prabandha modes and means of self-reference are more akin to multi-voicing, a ventriloquism that entails innovation through actualizing a second or third or fourth vocal tone, overlapping and often at odds with the first (surface) voice and its semantic contents. Prabandha tonality thus tends to the symphonic, the contrapuntal, and the creative (dissonant) echo.

In slightly later works, like the *Candrarekhā-vilāpamu* of Kūcimañci Timmakavi (early 18th century), involution, disjunction, and intimate dissociation attain a hilarious fierceness that is strangely moving, also a marvel of poetic art. Here is a work that attacks not only convention but mentation itself. Karri Ramacandra Reddy and I will be discussing this work at length. It may signal that a limit is being reached—although other forms of deep and complex disjunction emerge in works such as the early nineteenth-century *Pañcalakṣaṇa-tirumukavilācam*, one of the last masterpieces of early-modern Tamil. It's not so easy to find a good word to suit this prevalent tonality: maybe *vivāda*, in both its technical senses, will do for now. *Vivāda* lends itself both to dissonance and to irony and, even etymologically, embodies disjunction.

4. Theme

In theory, it should be easier to talk about themes. Some, at least, are very much on the surface of our texts. Elsewhere, Narayana Rao, Sanjay Subrahmanyam, and I have highlighted the Nāyaka-period predilection for antinomian and subversive themes in Telugu and Tamil. The social vision of a Nāyaka poet could be enacted by, for example, Indra and Ahalyā, or Tārā and Candra—both male and female figures more than ready to flaunt convention and dharmic prescription in order to fulfil their desires. Anti-normative acts seem to fit well with the non-ascriptive authority of a maverick individual creating a kingdom because he or she has ready cash.

We can take this thought a step further. One central strand of the prabandha literature—in all the languages—is destabilizing, to varying degrees. Look at Dāmodara’s Malayalam *Uṅṅiyāṭicaritam* and (probably) the same poet’s Sanskrit *Śiva-vilāsa*, both studied by Sivan Goren in her Ph.D. dissertation; both tell the story of a dancer and her royal lover. In itself, this story might appear to have a normative flavor—and much of it is more or less within the bounds of social and religious convention—yet this apparent conformity is sometimes belied by its tone (especially in the *Uṅṅiyāṭicaritam*).⁸ Or take the Telugu *Prabhāvatī-pradyumnamu* of Piṅgaḷi Sūranna, in which romantic love, in a modern guise, is powerfully articulated, possibly for the first time in Telugu. Nothing is as destabilizing to the political, the social, or the prescriptive as romantic love. Merely to state the matter this way is to highlight the political dimension, latent or explicit, in so many prabandha works. These are political texts par excellence, even if they ostensibly take place without reference to the royal courts. They reinvent South Indian kingship in an early-modern axiology (thus the *Āmukta-mālyada* and, it seems, the Kannada prabandha works from Keḷadi and Mysore).

The mostly unstable and precarious political order is underpinned by peculiarly south Indian forms of Advaita—Tantric, individualistic, magically potent, at home in the social margins no less than in the courts—that begin to appear in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in the Kaveri and Vaikai deltas, among other settings. Elsewhere I have used the term “secular monism” to characterize these works, which include, for example, the commentaries and handbooks of Bhāskararāya and his school. Clearly, a specialized use of the term “secular” is present here, one in which a full-blooded individualism combines with a strong, generalized interest in singularity or singularities as the defining aesthetic and philosophical telos of both literary and śāstric texts.

Even better: to understand the prabandha literature in a deep way, from the point of view of its dominant themes and their tonalities, one has to take account of a field of force in which four seemingly autonomous domains are continuously interacting, fusing, and competing: artistic expressivity in all available media; discursive political speculation, inside or outside the royal courts; non-dualistic philosophies, in Sanskrit or the vernacular; and theoretical grammars, including poetics, semantics, and philosophy of language, that attempt to map the new expressive worlds. Prabandha literary works are one easily accessible arena in which these intellectual and aesthetic forces are put into play.

⁸ See Chapter 2 of Sivan Goren’s dissertation.

As one might expect from a moment of significant intellectual ferment, we find a fascination with, and in effect a far-reaching rethinking of, the relation between present experience and the older tradition that is still alive and demanding. The *Cīkāḷattippurāṇam*, like its Telugu predecessor, the *Śrikālahasti-māhātmyamu*, offers us a radically reconfigured version of Tamil literary origins. For Tuṛaimaṅkalam Civappirakācar, the poets of the Caṅkam were, before all else, experimenting with new combinations (7.45: *nuṇ pōruḷ aril aṛa putu mōḷi puṇarttu*, with explicit stress on novelty), thus inventing both an unprecedented kind of poetry and the grammar suited to it. In order to make sense of this new narrative, the far more ancient Tamil materials on origins had to be integrated into a new narrative and conceptual synthesis, and at the same time elements of the older grammar—the *akattiṇai* landscapes for example—are now re-imagined and localized in the temple sites that are the subjects of the work as a whole. Much the same could be said of Punam’s *Bhāṣā-rāmāyaṇa-campu*, except that here the foundational intertexts are drawn from Sanskrit *mahākāvya* and *nāṭaka*, as we’ll see in a moment. I suppose every age has to explore and transform the looming presence of the past, but some periods do so with an intensity and a passion that goes far beyond what is known from other times and places. In Renaissance Italy, the recovery of the Greek textual world was part of a conceptual breakthrough on all levels. Did something like this happen in our period?

A creative reworking of the classical past goes hand in hand with the elaboration of novel theories of temporality, factuality, and causality. Prabandha texts have powerful lateral links to the new historiographical literature of the sixteenth century; elsewhere Sanjay Subrahmanyam, Narayana Rao and I have argued, in the wake of work by Gabi Motzkin and others, that the mutual superimposition of strongly differentiated and incompatible notions of time is a necessary condition for the emergence of historiography in early-modern South India. Competing temporalities are evident in most of the innovative literatures of this time, the *Āmukta-mālyada* being a splendid example. Here purāṇic, proto-historical, hagiographic, and mythical times collide to dizzying effect. The entire literature of *Prabhu-liṅga-līlās* in the various languages is saturated with incommensurate biographical and mythical rhythms. We also saw in the *Cīkāḷattippurāṇam* several remarkable instances of reverse causality, that is, effects preceding their ostensible causes. Once we begin looking in these directions, there is no end to surprises.

Along with these non-trivial and interconnected thematic clusters—social subversion, the links to the distant past, and competing theories of time, cause, and fact-- we have themes that have already been discussed, perhaps too much by now: the idea of humanness and the creation and destiny of the human; the simultaneous arrival of realism as a particular kind of configured fiction and of fiction itself as a self-conscious cultural category; the exploration of the natural world as an autonomous, rule-bound sphere and meticulous observation of this world by poets and scientists alike. I don't think there is a need to discuss these notions further here.

5. Intertext and System

“Quotations in my work are like wayside robbers who leap out, armed, and relieve the idle stroller of his conviction.”

Walter Benjamin, *One-Way Street*, 84.

The prabandha textual mode exists by virtue of its rich, conspicuous intertexts together with the theoretical and discursive works that arose to make sense of this luxuriant literary corpus. There is a specific quality of intertextual quotation that belongs to this moment—a quality not limited to verbal reference. A horizontal dimension links the prabandha works with closely allied literary genres in the various languages, with direct intertexts in the sister languages, and with the contemporaneous ongoing experiments in painting, sculpture, architecture, theatre, and (above all) music. Wherever we touch this literature, we encounter these domains: there are the paintings the Vidūṣaka companion of Prince Acyuta pretends to study on the temple walls just after his friend has first caught sight of Varadāmbikā and fallen in love; Varadāmbikā herself, awash in the torments of *viraha*, sings a pair of *padam*-like verses; the Viṭa-jaṅgama Śiva performs an *ulā* procession as he enters Śrī Kāḷahasti, very much along the lines of the Tamil *ulā* genre (Acyuta, too, manages a compressed *ulā* on his way to his wedding, and Pēddana has given us a famous, extended *ulā* in the fifth chapter of the *Manu-caritramu*); the *Varadāmbikā-pariṇaya-campū* ends with a climactic *piḷḷaittamī* inset. The *Vasu-caritramu*, possibly the most elaborate of all Telugu prabandhas, is almost entirely about music and can be seen as a musical text-for-performance in its own right. We can go on enumerating such horizontal links, basic to the self-perception of each artistic field and to the systemic aspect of cultural production across the languages and regions. More on this at the end of this paper.

Less well understood is the vertical dimension of complex textual citation. Reading prabandhas from this period, I am sometimes reminded of Walter Benjamin’s dream of composing a book entirely from quotations. Benjamin was thinking in terms of depth, resonance, and, one supposes, the continuous weaving together of chunks of past language to produce novel singularities—through juxtaposition, raucous disharmonies and irregular harmonies, decontextualization and recontextualization, abstraction, discontinuous segmenting, separating, making strange, shifting perspectives, sudden illuminations, and so on. The experiments in tonality discussed above in section 3 share many of these mechanisms; and as I’ve said, notions of framing and reframing are far too flimsy to account for the tremendous effects that result.

Let’s take a simple example from the Kerala Maṇipravālam corpus, where vertical quotation hypertrophied, as is well known. *Mutatis mutandis*, the far-reaching Kerala paradigm sheds light on vertical citation in all the other regional literatures as well. One needs to keep in mind that the Maṇipravālam *campus* were slated for performance—the written texts we have are perhaps no more than a score or scaffold for the Cākyār performers—and it is entirely natural, even today, for a live *kūttu* artist to slip in verses, in Sanskrit or Malayalam, that seem to fit a particular point in the story. *Kūttu* (with its primary texts, such as the *Rāmāyaṇa-prabandham*) comes close to the Benjaminian ideal. Nonetheless, it is probably fair to say that quoted poems never function in *kūttu* in a mechanical way, nor are they limited to a flow of random associations in the performer’s mind.

Punam tells us in the opening verse of the *Udyāna-praveśam* section of the *Bhāṣā-rāmāyaṇa-campu* that Rāvaṇa has deposited Sītā in the beautiful Aśoka Garden. He is mad with desire (*smaronmādī*). His mind is torn between the wish to approach her and a repeated loss of nerve (*aṇaṅṅ’ aḷiṅṅū*). There is a certain joy in all this. But he is looking for some means or device to achieve his aim. Maybe if he brings Sītā beautiful gifts such as saris, flowers, camphor, delicious cool water, a jeweled belt....(verse 2). No, he needs to talk to her:

laṅkādhīśan tadānīṃ pala paricu nirūppiccu kaṇḍ’ arddha-rātrau
śṛṅgāra-koppu vāypicc⁹ iniya janaka-jā-sannidhau cēnn’ aśaṅkam
saṅgam cerkkunna nānā-vidha-madhura-vaco-vaibhavair āśvasippicc’
aṅgī-karttavyam inne punar iti sudṛḍhaṃ kalpayām āsa gūḍham

⁹ V.I. *vēypiccu*—in which case Rāvaṇa is perhaps already plying Sītā with gifts sent through his servants, as we see in performance (thanks to Sudha Gopalakrishnan).

The Lañkā king was thinking hard, his mind flitting through many modes. Midnight. Fanning the flames of his desire, decisive, he headed toward Sītā. He'd secretly made up his mind. "First I will comfort her with fancy words conducive to connecting, and then, this very day, she must be made to agree. Or else...."

A slightly unsettling *punar (iti)* concludes this soliloquy. How decisive can a love-lorn Rāksasa be? Self-doubt plagues him in every verse of this opening passage. Now we get a first quotation: a verse from Rājaśekhara's *Bāla-rāmāyana* (5.2), to be sung verbatim:

*asmad-vikrama-ceṣṭitāni nikhila-trailokya-helā-jaya-
prahvī-bhūta-surāsurāṇi bahuśo¹⁰ bhūmes sutā śṛṇvatī/
patyau dveṣa-kaṣāyitena manasā snigdḥā mayi sthāsyati
strīṅāṃ prema yad uttarottara-guṇa-grāma-sprḥā-cañcalam//*

When the daughter of the Earth hears how I so easily came to dominate all three worlds with my deeds of valor, her mind will turn bitter with hatred for her husband, and she'll stand firm in loving me. Women's hearts are fickle. They're drawn to anything shiny and better-looking than what they had before.

Again, Rāvaṇa speaking: in the Sanskrit play, this reflection follows a message he has entrusted to Māyāmaya, in which Rāvaṇa declares to Rāma that he, Rāvaṇa, who first strung Śiva's bow, has a prior claim on Sītā. The messenger knows that Rāvaṇa is out of his mind (*mati-viparyāsa*)—a conclusion reinforced by the verse just quoted, which is clearly delusional. Punam has quoted it as a natural sequel to the Maṇi-pravāḷam verse above. And, indeed, this poetic linkage makes sense and enriches Punam's portrait of Rāvaṇa's internal monologue in the opening section of the *Udyāna-praveśam*.

But there is something more, something far more tantalizing than a simple insertion of prior text. Let us state the rule of Pierre Menard, well known to all NEEM scholars: a cited passage never means just what it meant in its original setting. The mere act of quotation adds a tinge of reflexive distance,

¹⁰ V.I. bhavato.

usually ironic or skeptical. What is more, the quotation carries with it considerable baggage—above all, the words, tones, and narrative extensions of its prior context. In our case, the very next verse in the *Bāla-rāmāyaṇa*—still part of Māyāmaya’s lines, though now the latter speaks in his own voice—carries a punch:

*sukhinaḥ para-saukhyena para-duḥkhena duḥkhitāḥ/
jāyante kavayaḥ kāvyē naya-tantre ca mantriṇaḥ//* (5.3.)

Rejoicing in another’s joy, grieving for another’s grief—
this is how poets are when they make poetry
and ministers when they think politics.

The context is Māyāmaya’s guess about how the minister Mālyavān must be feeling as he sees Rāvaṇa slide into madness. But Rājaśekhara interestingly links political advisors to poets because of their shared propensity for empathic understanding. In Rājaśekhara’s original, the *viṣkambhaka* interlude thus moves, almost at the outset, into a metapoetic mode. Poets—and their readers—can imagine another person’s feelings. That is what is going on in the course of this somewhat hallucinatory interlude. But this meta-poetic insight, though not quoted explicitly by Punam, lingers on in the latter’s text by virtue of the listener’s presumed knowledge of the prior context and the flow of verses there. (Note that there is no need to assume that *all* listeners or readers had *all* this prior knowledge at their fingertips; it is enough to posit the existence of an informed audience that had access to at least some of it, consciously or unconsciously.) It is as if Punam offers us, first, a reflexive intertextual reference very suited to his own passage and then, secondly, reinforces the reflexive impulse through the silent, implied presence of Rājaśekhara’s verse 3. This is reflexivity reflected upon and intensified to a higher order. Many citations in Punam’s work follow this same pattern. Look, the poet/performer says to us, at what I am doing, what I *can* do if I want to, and *how* I do it.

Moreover, the implicit reference to the *Bāla-rāmāyaṇa*’s progression in the wake of the explicit quotation carries yet another remarkable after-effect. All of Act V in the Rājaśekhara play is devoted to Rāvaṇa’s encounter with a “mechanical Sītā” (*yantra-jānakī*) that the wise minister, Mālyavān, has commissioned a carpenter to make out of wood; this lifelike woman speaks through a Sārika bird hidden in her mouth (v. 6). Here is ventriloquism thematized and elaborated to its extreme. Has not Punam produced just such a device for his audience?

The more one reads a passage like this in Punam, the denser the allusive web is seen to be, and the richer and more resonant the expressive power of the Malayalam poet. One last example will have to suffice here. A few verses further on in the *Udyāna-praveśam*, as brilliant moonlight illumines midnight in Lañkā, and as Rāvaṇa is still contemplating a nocturnal visit to the Aśoka Garden, we get the following well-known verse cited from Mammaṭa's *Kāvya-prakāśa* (552):

kapāle¹¹ mārjāraḥ paya iti karān leḍhi śaśinas
taruc-chidra-protān bisam iti karī sañkalayati¹²
ratānte talpasthan harati vanitāpy aṃśukam iti
prabhā-mattas candro jagad idam aho viplavayati¹³

A cat thinks they are milk and licks the bowl.
Broken up by the branches of trees:
an elephant thinks they're lotus fibers
and reaches for them.
A woman, fresh from love-making, sees them on the bed
and tries to wrap herself in them.
The moon, mad with light, maddens the world
with his rays.

This is the figure *bhrāntimat*—"delusion." Someone, perhaps the poet, as in this case, sees someone else making a cognitive error and takes note, usually ironically. The figure is particularly prevalent in descriptions of moonlight, as we see in both Pēddana's and Mukku Timmana's great *gadya* passages,¹⁴ and could even be said to be the dominant thematic ornament throughout the *Manu-caritramu*. It's no surprise to find Mammaṭa's exemplary verse in Punam's *Udyāna-praveśam*. But consider the new context in which this verse is embedded. This is no ordinary moonlight scene. It is the setting for Rāvaṇa's *bhrānti*, the passion and mental aberration that will drive him to his death. Or is it really an aberration? He's in love. Death pales before his desire. Here is a dilemma that cannot be resolved, one the poet chooses to articulate with the

¹¹ V.l. *kapolye*.

¹² V.l. *saṃvalayati*.

¹³ V.l. *vibhramayati*.

¹⁴ See our paper on the Telugu prabandhas.

help of the quoted, lyrical text. Yet the original lyricism, so brilliantly and, we could say, affectionately presented in the three images of cat, elephant, and young woman, now acquires in its new context a proleptic, sinister aspect in keeping with the *Rāmāyaṇa* plot. For that matter, one can't help but wonder if we ourselves, listening to Punam's replay of Mammaṭa, are not affected by *bhrānti* of one kind or another. The poet, as we just heard in the silent overtones of Rājaśekhara's *viṣkambhaka*, knows something about us that we can't know without his help. Moreover, Punam's text in some critical sense, by definition, generates its own *bhrānti*, seducing us with its interweaving of necessary fiction and emergent emotional truth. We, the listeners and readers, have much in common with Rāvaṇa—more than we would have thought possible—and it is part of the poet's task to show us that this is the case. It is not only the poet who rejoices in another's happiness and grieves with another's grief. The Rājaśekhara verse now looks a little different—a little deeper-- than it did before.

You can see the richness as layer folds into layer. I have given only a very small sample from the opening verses of this one section. Were we to tease out the entire interplay of new Malayalam verses with assimilated quotations, the richness would be beyond our ability to think it, let alone formulate it. Look what is present in these few poems. Attend to the allusions calling up centuries of Sanskrit literary experiment, made present by verbatim citation that both intensifies the force of the host text and re-semanticizes the guest verses through touches of irony, shifting perspectives, hidden commentary, and meta-poetic self-reference. This is a new way to compose poetry and an astonishingly complex and sophisticated technique of generating meaning.

The Maṇipravālam *campus* take us to the outer edge of vertical intertextual allusion, but the main lines of this principle (always under the shadow of Pierre Menard) are evident throughout the prabandha literature. The *Cīkāḷatti* text cites verbatim the Caṅkam poem, *Kuṇṭōkai* 2, in the course of re-inventing the story of Nakkīraṇār. The quotation entirely transforms the meaning of that verse, as Charlie Hallisey has shown us in our discussion. (If God wrote it, as the story tells us, at a time of bitter famine, then an element of bitter absurdity enters into the citation.) Internal histories of the great poets, such as the *Tamiḷ-ṇāvalar-caritai* (early 18th century), depend entirely on vertical quotation and the juxtaposition of works that, in our more limited perspective, belong to different epochs. Figurative reworking of earlier, well-known examples of individual *alaṅkāras* (as in the Punam-Mammaṭa example above) is a staple of prabandha works. And I have so far said nothing about what we sometimes think of as translation, as when the Kannada *Prabhu-liṅga-līle*

becomes the (markedly transformed) *Pirapu-liṅka-līlai*, or when the *Raghu-vaṃśa* generates the remarkable eighteenth-century Jaffna work, *Irakuvammicam* of Aracakecari: in such works, horizontal and vertical vectors fuse to profound effect. In short: we cannot become good readers of prabandhas without an awareness of the interlocking intertexts that were available to their intended audiences.

We are seeing the girders and pillars of an entire eco-system. They are in full view in our texts, if we can only develop an eye for them. To help us hone the sensibility that we need, we have the large literature of contemporaneous grammars generated in tandem with, or a little later than, the great literary and musical works. One may posit a rule: a novel literature, once established and widely diffused among its readers, always gives birth to discursive theoretical texts that attempt to describe, illumine, and tame it. In South India, such grammars build upon earlier models, whose contents they subsume, subvert, or re-conceive. The grammars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries comprise an intellectual revolution, although they tend to assume a normative surface guise. This statement applies no less to the domain of poetics and aesthetics than to those of morphology and syntax.

To mention but a few instances: In Sanskrit we have Bhaṭṭoji Dīkṣita and his successors, Kauṇḍa Bhaṭṭa and Nāgoji; together they rearranged and reconceived Pāṇinian grammar and produced, for the first time in Sanskrit, penetrating and exhaustive treatises on semantics and syntax, much of it in what can only be called a modern perspective. Their contemporaries in Telugu and Tamil were engaged in similar enterprises: The *Ilakkaṇa-ṣiḷakkam* of Vaittiyanāta Tecikar and the *Ilakkaṇak-kōttu* of Cuvāmināta Tecikar merged Tamil and Sanskrit linguistics (the former monumental work includes a new poetics); Cuppiramaṇiya Tīkṣitar took this merger to an idiosyncratic extreme, deriving Tamil entirely from Sanskrit in his *Pirayoka-vivekam*. Rival social and institutional backing for these grammarians led to “grammar wars”—one of the most salient features of Tamil intellectual life in our period. Perhaps the most creative attempt to rethink Tamil poetic grammar (including Daṇḍin-style figuration, the old *akattiṇai* system, and metrics) was carried out by Tirukkuruḱkaipērumāḷ Kavirāyar in the far south of the Tamil country in the first half of the sixteenth century.¹⁵ This effervescence in linguistic thought, broadly conceived, culminates in philosophies of grammar such as Civañāṇa muṇivar’s eighteenth-century commentary on the preface and first *sūtra* of the *Tōlkāppiyam*—creative works yet to be fully studied.

¹⁵ See Jennifer Clare and D. Shulman, *Folding Figures*.

Broadly parallel to the proliferation in Tamil of new texts in grammar and poetics are Telugu works such as *Appakaviyam*, of which only the early chapters on phonology and metrics have survived (along with a meta-poetic introduction). Appakavi is aware of the Telugu grammar of Yelakūci Bālasarasvati, supposedly produced by a learned Brahmin from Mataṅga Hill at Hampi in the form of a commentary on Nannaya's putative *sūtras*. Slightly later we find a highly creative Sanskrit commentary, the *Ahobila-pāṇḍitīya*, on these *sūtras*. The great poet Bhaṭṭumūrti, author of the *Vasu-caritramu*, also composed a large-scale Telugu work on poetics, the *Kāvya-lāṅkāra-saṅgrahamu*. Poetics remains an intrinsic part of grammar in all the South Indian languages; one might even say that the telos of grammar, in South India, is the production of good poetry. Hence the natural bonding of grammarians and poets in the prabandha period in all the regions. Note that the *Līlā-tilakam* grammar of Maṇi-pravālam, a shockingly modern work,¹⁶ must be part of this same intrinsic linkage; there is reason to think that the usual dating of this maverick text is too early and that it belongs to the early sixteenth century, as we might expect.

6. Aesthetic Totality

Prabandha texts invite questions: What is the overall aesthetic effect of this work? What does the totality of the text look and sound like? Is there a sense of integral composition, a unified range of tonalities and textures, a complex unity of speech registers and recurrent figures, a thematic range that appears and regularly reappears, perhaps in recursive and self-referential ways? We can ask such questions about any literary or musical or painted or sculpted text. But, for reasons that need to be explored, earlier *mahākāvya* texts tend to be studied in non-linear segments. Some of them elude the above questions because they remained unfinished (*Raghuvamśa*, *Kumāra-sambhava*). Others, such as the *Naiṣadhīya*, may be too overwhelming to allow such issues to dominate interpretation. We see in the medieval commentaries an atomistic approach to such books; only very rarely, for example, in Kuntaka, does anything like a global interpretation of a major work appear.

The early-modern prabandha, however, easily focuses the listener's attention on the totality, largely in response to the new protocol of reading (without interspersed commentary, and in linear progression from beginning to

¹⁶ See Sivan Goren.

end).¹⁷ If one listens to a prabandha as recited over, let us say, a week or two, or more, the cumulative aesthetic power of the work will generate its magic. In this sense, a good reader can readily come to grips with the text as a self-contained, though thoroughly intertextual, unit informed by the sensibility of its shared community and grammaticalized, in one way or another, by the new discursive poetics of this period. Prabandhas are always a whole, though that wholeness may be built from the most diverse and dissonant materials (as is possibly the case of the *Āmukta-mālyada*, for example). From the earlier discussion it should be clear that dissonance is often the most effective adhesive for complex prabandha texts.

Despite what I have just said, it remains the case that many prabandha works are read and recited today only in part. The *Manu-caritramu* is known almost exclusively through its first three cantos, the *Pārijātapaharaṇamu* mainly through its first chapter alone. The *Vasu-caritramu* functions like a *mahākāvya* in need of continuous explication, in individual segments, though I have heard it recited in full, in musical form, without any breaks or commentary whatsoever. I think it is probably impossible to read or hear the *Kaḷā-pūrṇodayamu* or the *Prabhāvatī-prādyumnamu* in any way other than a straightforward linear sequence and in relatively fast-paced recitation. Some prabandha texts thus resist segmentation. Evidence from the nineteenth century in the Kaveri Delta shows that the Tamil *sthala-purāṇas* were always recited in a linear and complete manner that left a unified aesthetic impression on the listeners. In general, this is a topic in which the author's intentionality needs to come into play. In most cases, it is clear that the author was thinking from the start of a poetic-aesthetic whole.

We have seen examples in our reading throughout the year. Naresh Keerthi will be speaking about the *Varadāmbikā-pariṇaya*, so let us await his conclusions. The *Cikāḷatti* text continuously returns us to the premises and problems that are articulated in the *pāyiram* introduction: What is Tamil? Is the old grammar still operative in seventeenth-century Tōṅṭai-maṇḍalam? How far can a new poet go in his or her experiments? What constitutes useful knowledge for a poet, or for his or her audience? What is the role of Sanskrit in this field of force? How irreverent (or skeptical) can one be (Naresh has spoken of "centripetal irreverence" as a mental mode cutting through contexts)? Ofer Peres identified the central role of the narrator (at Śrī Kāḷahasti, Śiva himself, disguised—a necessity—and simultaneously director, actor, and stage in a set of stories that are entirely about himself). Talia Ariav speaks of vividness, the

¹⁷ Naresh Keerthi's paper on Kannada gamaki recitation, always without commentary and elaboration.

pramāṇam of truthfulness in historiography (citing Carlo Ginzburg). All of these criteria are critical to the creation of an artistic whole.

Once again, the *Cīkāḷattippurāṇam*, with its three fraternal authors: We have read only two chapters, but already it is clear that self-reference, with its twists and paradoxes, is a recurrent aspect of the book. The king who fails to see the god who is walking down the street outside his palace is akin to the poet-scholar Nakkīraṇār, who can't see Śiva for who he is when the god stands before him—and no less akin to us, the readers and listeners of a text that makes that same god visible or, rather, audible. Sometimes I think we will do anything to escape seeing or hearing him (we take refuge in historical asides, etymologies, cognate words, available schemes of categorization, variant readings, the whole heavy apparatus). Here is one way a totality reaches out to us.

Themes, tones, textures do not have to be consistent. In fact, they should be dissonant and disjunctive. Thus the mode of weaving together disparate contents in the prabandha is at odds with Daṇḍin's list of *sarga-bandha* themes, even though many of the latter turn up in our texts. Prabandhas from our period do not cumulate their topoi in a manner conducive to any such list. They tend to return, in recursive twists, to earlier moments, themes, tensions in order to toy with them, imagine them anew, or reconfigure them. The aesthetic power of this totality is largely a function of recursion. But apart from our own responses to close readings of such works, and along with the grammars that purport to elucidate them, we have, in plenty, the oral *cāṭu* literature that situates them as wholes in conversation with one another. This kind of oral commentary may be our best guide to the lost protocols of reading. For example, the tradition tells us that Ativīrarāma Pāṇṭiyaṇ's *Naiṭatam*, an eccentric prabandha but one of the finest we have in Tamil, was harshly judged by the poet's sister-in-law, who said: "It starts off like a hunting dog, barking furiously, that then gets exhausted and comes to a halt" (*itu nāy veṭṭaikku viraint' oṭi cēṇr' iraikka iraikka iḷaittu niṇṇāl poṇṇa taṇmai uṭaiyatu*).¹⁸ She is right: the first 19 cantos are leisurely, elaborate, hypotactic, complexly configured, and lyrical, and the last 9 cantos race by in a narrative flash. Only a perspective that takes the work as a whole into account could produce such an insight. But this snippet of oral commentary is even richer—for it points not only to the disparity in styles and textures of a single, total work but also to the peculiar originality of its author, who added the remaining parts of the story of Nala to his *Naiṣadhīya* model, where they are notoriously absent. In fact, this particular story of composition has another layer of complexity: for the author is said to have given a copy of his finished work to

¹⁸ Arunachalam 1977:44.

his elder brother, who disparaged it, so the younger brother and poet, deeply hurt, went to war against this brother. Only a new Tamil poem by the elder brother, citing the example of Bharata in relation to *his* brothers, brought the war to a close. We can take this story as an attempt to make sense of the overloaded relation between Tamil and her older brother or sister, Sanskrit, in the making of this Tamil classic.

7. Why Does it Matter?

I have been trying to define a literary mode, most trenchantly embodied in the sixteenth-century prabandha form but not limited to that form, which comes with a set of relatively stable, shared features. The most reliable diagnostic feature of this mode is the set of new reading practices that accompany it and that presume an audience of listeners or readers that is itself distinctive. Still, we should ask ourselves why the existence of this audience and of the reading practices implicit in the works themselves should be so important. What is at stake?

The short answer is: A change in the protocols of reading signals cultural, even civilizational, change. Think, if you like, of similar moments in other eras: fifth-century B.C. Athens; Florence in the fourteenth century, and the precisely contemporaneous shift in taste and practice in Ilkhanid Iran; sixteenth-century Iberia; nineteenth-century Russia. In all such cases, the shift in both composition and reception, *kārayitrī pratibhā* and *bhāvayitrī pratibhā*, came with a commensurate reorganization of the predominant cultural thematics—that is, of competing visions of the world, of the nature of the human being (among other beings), and of primary issues or domains such as sexual love, politics, ethics, and godliness. Put simply, something recognizably new, hence consequential, appears.

I have tried to direct attention to some of the themes that we see emerging in south India during our period. There is much work to be done here. Theme, however, is in many, perhaps most, cases overshadowed by tone and texture.

Since the prabandha mode seems so widely diffused throughout the south, in all the languages, each with its own emphases and singular patterns and experimental designs, it would seem that there may be something to the notion that a regional system, or a complex of intimately linked systems, existed

at this time, with the self-reflexive feed-back mechanisms that are required and with continuous interchanges among languages and artistic media. Even if the word “system” itself is, as seems likely, an example of *avivakṣita-vācya*, that is *lakṣaṇā-mūla-dhvani*, or a suggestive metaphor, that means, first, that it must be motivated (by both a trigger and a purpose) and, second, that—in the imaginary universe I am still temporarily inhabiting—it must also embody or constitute a causal connection. I think it would be good to figure this out.