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Poetry's Afterthought: Kalidasa and the Experience of Reading

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ABSTRACT

Poetry's Afterthought:
Kalidasa and the Experience of Reading

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This dissertation concerns the reception of the poet Kalidasa (c. 4th century), one of the central figures in the Sanskrit literary tradition. Since the time he lived and wrote, Kalidasa's works have provoked many responses of different kinds. I shall examine how three writers contributed to this vast tradition of reception: Kuntaka, a tenth-century rhetorician from Kashmir; Vedantadesika, a South Indian theologian who lived in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries; and Sri Aurobindo, an Indian English writer of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries who started out as an anticolonial activist and later devoted his life to spiritual exercises. While these readers lived well after Kalidasa, they were all deeply invested in his poetry. I wish to understand why Kalidasa's poetry continued to provoke extended responses in writing long after its composition. It is true that readers often use past literary texts to various ends of their own devising, just as they often fall victim to reading texts anachronistically. In contradistinction to such cases, the examples of reading I examine highlight the role that texts themselves, not just their charisma or the mental habits of their readers, can have in constituting the reading process. They therefore urge us to formulate a more robust understanding of textual reception, and to reconsider the contemporary practice of literary criticism.

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List of Transliterations

I have used diacritical marks in the titles of all works composed in Indian languages. The names of authors and characters, as well as certain words, are not always given in diacritics: sometimes I have used diacritics only in a name's first appearance, and sometimes not at all. Here is a list of some names and words that appear in the main text, together with their diacritical variants:

Alvar	Āḻvār
Andal	Āṇṭāḷ
apsara	apsaras
Anandavardhana	Ānandavardhana
Anasuya	Anasūyā
Arunagirinatha	Aruṇagirinātha
Aushinari	Auśinarī
Asvaghosha	Aśvaghoṣa
Bana	Bāṇa
Bhamaha	Bhāmaha
Dandin	Daṇḍin
Dasharatha	Daśaratha
Dharini	Dhāriṇī
Dilipa	Dilīpa
Durvasa	Durvāsas
Dushyanta	Duṣyanta
Galava	Gālava
Ganadasa	Gaṇadāsa
Goda	Godā
Godavari	Godāvarī
Hamsapadika	Haṃsapadikā
Hanuman	Hanumat
Harsha	Harṣa
Kaikeyi	Kaikeyī
Kalidasa	Kālidāsa
Kama	Kāma
Kamandaki	Kāmandakī
Kanva	Kaṇva
Kartikeya	Kārttikeya
Keshava	Ḱeśava
Krishna	Kṛṣṇa
Lakshmi	Lakṣmī
Lavangika	Lavaṅgikā
Madhavya	Mādhavya
Malati	Mālatī
Mallinatha	Mallinātha
Manavaka	Māṇavaka
Mandanamishra	Maṇḍanamiśra
Manipravala	Maṇipravāḷa
Maricha	Mārīca
Mena	Menā
Nanda	Nanda
Nandi	Nandin
Nandini	Nandinī
Narayana	Nārāyaṇa
Nipunika	Nipuṇikā
Nishadha	Niṣādha
Parvati	Pārvatī
Pelava	Pelava
Priyamvada	Priyaṃvadā
Pururavas	Purūravas
Purushottama	Puruṣottama
Pushpaka	Puṣpaka
Rama	Rāma
Ramanuja	Rāmānuja
Ravana	Rāvaṇa
Samskara	Saṃskāra
Sanumati	Sānumatī
Shakuntala	Śakuntalā
Shankara	Śaṅkara
Shiva	Śiva
Sita	Sītā
Srivaishnava	Śrīvaiṣṇava
Taraka	Tāraka
Uma	Umā
Urvashi	Ūrvaśī
Valmiki	Vālmīki
Vasishta	Vasiṣṭha
Varuni	Vāruṇī
Visvakarma	Viśvakarman
Vedantadesika	Vedāntadeśika
Vishnu	Viṣṇu
Vyasa	Vyāsa
yaksha	yakṣa
yakshini	yakṣiṇī
Yashoda	Yaśodā

List of Abbreviations

I have used abbreviations only when the section number and verse number are sufficient for locating the passage I am referencing. For example, the opening verse of Kalidasa's *Raghuvaṃśa* would be given as *R* 1.1. In all other cases, I have provided in a footnote the full title of the work, the page number of the passage I am referencing, and (if applicable) the section and verse numbers for the text being commented on in the passage. For example, the citation for Kuntaka's remarks on the educative function of poetry would be given as follows:

> [1]Kuntaka, *Vakroktijīvita*, ed. K. Krishnamoorthy (Dharwad: Karnatak University, 1977), 3–4, commentary on 1.3.

A	*Abhijñānaśākuntala*
H	*Haṃsasandeśa*
HC	*Harṣacarita*
K	*Kumārasaṃbhava*
KĀ	*Kāvyādarśa*
MA	*Mālavikāgnimitra*
MD	*Meghadūta*
MM	*Mālatīmādhava*
R	*Raghuvaṃśa*
RS	*Ṛtusaṃhāra*
S	*Saṅkalpasūryodaya*
SN	*Saundarananda*
VJ	*Vakroktijīvita*
VŪ	*Vikramorvaśīya*
Y	*Yādavābhyudaya*

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for appa and amma

Poetry's Afterthought: Kalidasa and the Experience of Reading

Chapter 1: Introduction

This dissertation concerns the reception of the poet Kālidāsa (c. 4th century), one of the central figures in the Sanskrit literary tradition. Since the time he lived and wrote, Kalidasa's works have provoked a number of responses of many kinds, including commentaries, literary critical essays, poems, tributes, apocryphal verses, and biographical legends. I shall examine how three writers contributed to this vast tradition of reception: Kuntaka, a tenth-century rhetorician from Kashmir; Vedāntadeśika, a South Indian theologian who lived in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries; and Sri Aurobindo, an Indian English writer of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries who started out as an anticolonial activist and later devoted his life to spiritual exercises. While these readers lived well after Kalidasa, they were all deeply invested in his poetry. I wish to understand why Kalidasa's poetry continued to provoke extended responses in writing long after its composition. It is true that readers often use past literary texts to various ends of their own devising, just as they often fall victim to reading texts anachronistically. In contradistinction to such cases, the examples of reading I examine highlight the role that texts themselves, not just their charisma or the mental habits of their readers, can have in constituting the reading process. They therefore urge us to formulate a more robust understanding of textual reception.

While the central chapters on Kuntaka, Vedantadesika, and Sri Aurobindo are all related by the general argument I will make about reading, the relationships among them will be made explicit only in the conclusion. In similar fashion, I will begin this chapter by introducing the four main figures of the dissertation individually, specifying for each reader the nature of his engagement with Kalidasa and the ways that my reconstruction of his reading builds on the work of previous scholars (section 1). In order to contextualize my case studies, I will then offer a broad

overview of Kalidasa's reception (section 2). I will conclude by considering the current state of Kalidasa studies, indicating the possibilities for literary scholarship that my dissertation tries to make possible in the study of premodern South Asia (section 3).

1. Dramatis Personae

Kalidasa. We know nothing about Kalidasa the man, other than that he likely lived under the Guptas between the fourth and fifth centuries. This biographical void, together with the popularity of Kalidasa's poetry, has for centuries invited a great deal of speculation. For instance, in his sixteenth-century narrative poem *Bhojaprabandha* ("The Story of Bhoja"), Ballāla impossibly presents Kalidasa as a contemporary of the seventh-century poet Bāṇa and the eighth-century poet Bhavabhūti, and has all three writing in the court of the tenth-century king Bhoja.[1] In the seventeenth century, a group of South Indian Sanskrit intellectuals whom Elaine Fisher has called Smārta-Śaivas, and who were concerned with consolidating a religious identity for themselves, imagined Kalidasa as a devotional figure who had composed hymns to the goddess.[2] The Hindi playwright Mohan Rakesh (1925-1972) imagined yet another life for the poet in his play *Aṣaṛha kā ek din* ("A Day in the Month of Rain"), suggesting that if Kalidasa wrote so powerfully on the pain of abandonment, it is because he himself abandoned the woman he had loved before becoming famous.[3] In addition to such written speculations, there is a vast oral tradition of apocryphal verses

[1] Ballāla, *Bhojaprabandha*, ed. Parasanatha Dvivedi (Agra: Vinod Pustak Mandir, 1972).

[2] Elaine M. Fisher, "'Just Like Kālidāsa': The Making of the Smārta-Śaiva Community of South India," in *Hindu Pluralism*, Religion and the Public Sphere in Early Modern South India (University of California Press, 2017), 57–98.

[3] For a discussion of Rakesh's engagement with Kalidasa, see Simona Sawhney, "Who Is Kalidasa? Sanskrit Poetry in Modern India," *Postcolonial Studies* 7, no. 3 (November 1, 2004): 295–312.

attributed to Kalidasa, often accompanied by anecdotes recounting the situations in which he composed them. A comprehensive account of Kalidasa's reception would consider the many legends about his life, as well as the works which have been spuriously attributed to him (not only solitary verses but also longer works such as *Ghaṭakarpara* and *Nalodaya*), as essential evidence for reconstructing Kalidasa's place in the cultural history of South Asia. I do not attempt here to offer such an account, however, and will primarily be interested in the reception of a set of texts. In what follows, Kalidasa thus refers to the author of the following seven works: the dramas *Abhijñānaśākuntala* ("The Recognition of Śakuntalā"), *Vikramorvaśīya* ("Ūrvaśī Won by Valor"), and *Mālavikāgnimitra* ("Malavikā and Agnimitra"); the *mahākāvya*s or "court epics" *Kumārasaṃbhava* ("The Birth of the Prince") and *Raghuvaṃśa* ("The Lineage of Raghu"); and the extended lyrics *Meghadūta* ("The Cloud-Messenger") and *Ṛtusaṃhāra* ("The Round of Seasons").

Even specifying Kalidasa as the author of these works—that is, even identifying him by a set of texts he produced, not by the associations that have accumulated around his name—isn't without its share of ambiguity. Text-critical studies have documented the several variations which abound in extant manuscripts of his poems, at levels ranging from the single syllable to entire cantos. For example, the first line of the *Meghadūta* ends in some versions with *svādhikārāt pramattaḥ*, in others with *svādhikārapramattaḥ* (both expressions might be translated as "negligent of his duty"); likewise, the number of cantos in *Kumārasaṃbhava* is in some manuscripts seven, in some eight, in some seventeen.[4] Scholars have even doubted whether the

[4] For a discussion of the genuine extent of the *Kumārasaṃbhava*, see Gary Alan Tubb, "The Kumārasaṃbhava in the Light of Indian Theories of the Mahākāvya" (Harvard University, 1979), 22–23; for text-critical discussions of *Raghuvaṃśa* and *Abhijñānaśākuntala*, see Dominic Goodall and Harunaga Isaacson, *The Raghupañcikā of Vallabhadeva: Being the Earliest*

Ṛtusaṃhāra is the genuine work of Kalidasa, a question to which I shall return in chapter 4. The readers of Kalidasa studied in this dissertation certainly would not have used the exact same versions of his poems. Notwithstanding this variability, Kalidasa's canonical oeuvre has retained enough stability that, as the following chapters make clear, Kuntaka, Vedantadesika, and Aurobindo can reasonably be said to have responded in writing to the same Kalidasa. In other words, if it were somehow possible to sit them down for a conversation about Kalidasa over coffee, each would leave convinced they had all been talking about the same poet.

Reader 1: Kuntaka. As with Kalidasa, we know nothing about Kuntaka's life, other than that he likely lived in Kashmir around the middle of the tenth century.[5] The only work of Kuntaka we have is the *Vakroktijīvita* ("The Life of Indirect Expression"), a treatise which belongs to a tradition of Sanskrit rhetoric called *alaṅkāraśāstra* ("the science of rhetorical figures"). Sanskrit rhetoricians were concerned with a range of intellectual projects, including enumerating figures of speech, formulating guidelines for the proper construction of good poetry, and describing the special ways that language and consciousness work in literary experience. While Kuntaka certainly belongs to this tradition, quoting from its previous authors and responding to their arguments, scholars have nonetheless considered him an outlier, finding it difficult to characterize Kuntaka's thinking in terms of the questions that interested his forebears and even his successors. Lawrence McCrea, for instance, has noted that while most rhetoricians writing after Ānandavardhana (9th

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Commentary on the Raghuvaṃśa of Kālidāsa: Critical Edition with Intrduction and Notes (E. Forsten, 2003), xiii-lxiii and Lyne Bansat-Boudon, "Le Texte Accompli Par La Scene: Observations Sur Les Versions de Sakuntala," *Journal Asiatique* 282 (1994): 280–333.

[5] On the date and provenance of Kuntaka, see Krishnamoorthy's introduction to Kuntaka, *Vakroktijīvita*, ed. K. Krishnamoorthy (Dharwad: Karnatak University, 1977), xiv.

century) in one way or another absorbed his influential idea that *rasa*, or the kind of emotion generated by poetry in an ideal reader, should serve as the primary criterion for judging literary works, Kuntaka's interests seem to lie elsewhere (where exactly is a question open to debate). However we understand Kuntaka's theory of poetry, it is at least clear that his approach to writing on literature is unique. Early rhetoricians rarely ever cited examples from actual literary works, most often composing their own verses to illustrate the principles and definitions of rhetorical figures they proposed. And while later rhetoricians started to engage more directly with the Sanskrit literary canon (mainly by the influence of Anandavardhana), Kuntaka's comments on literary works are uniquely characterized by a density of observation and style of attention that make him seem more of a "practical literary critic," as K. Krishnamoorthy puts it, than a literary theorist.[6] Since Kalidasa is among the poets he most often discusses, the *Vakroktijīvita* provides ample material for studying Kuntaka's engagement with him.

While scholarly interest in Kuntaka has grown in the past decade or so, Krishnamoorthy remains the only scholar who has specifically focused on Kuntaka's reading of Kalidasa. In an appendix to his book on Kalidasa, he indicates many of the crucial features of that reading, such as Kuntaka's characterization of Kalidasa's style as "delicate" (*sukumāra*), his interest in analyzing some of his works in their entirety (as opposed to examining only solitary verses), and his attention to the ethical content of his poems.[7] I shall build on Krishnamoorthy's analysis in chapter 2, developing these points in greater detail while also relating Kuntaka's comments on Kalidasa to his theory of poetry more explicitly. My chapter also contributes to the larger body of scholarship

[6] Kuntaka, xxxv.

[7] K. Krishnamoorthy, "Kālidāsa in the Eyes of Kuntaka," in *Kālidāsa* (Sahitya Akademi, 1994), 130–40.

on Kuntaka, primarily in two ways. The first concerns his concepts of *svabhāvokti* ("naturalistic description") and *pratibhā* ("poetic power" or "imagination"), which David Shulman has suggested are central to Kuntaka's thought.[8] I will develop that suggestion in my explanation of what Kuntaka means when he asserts that Kalidasa's poetry puts "emphasis on the nature of things" (*bhāvasvabhāvaprādhānya*), while slightly differing from Shulman in my interpretation of these concepts. The second concerns Kuntaka's broader theory of poetry, in which McCrea claims to find no coherent system: "If Kuntaka's analysis of *vakrokti* ['indirect expression'] can be described as a 'theory' of poetics at all, it is one so flexible and so open ended as to be virtually devoid of substantive content."[9] Yet, in the course of studying his reading of Kalidasa, I have found that Kuntaka's theory of poetry is not only systematic but also compelling. The difficulties in grasping that system appear to lie in the fact that, whereas the approach to poetry inaugurated by Anandavardhana focuses on the reader's experience, the questions that motivate Kuntaka's theory most often concern the psychology of the poet. To elaborate this shift in theoretical emphasis is beyond the scope of my dissertation, which does not primarily focus on Kuntaka; nonetheless, something of that reorientation comes through in Kuntaka's discussion of Kalidasa.

Reader 2: Vedantadesika. Veṅkaṭanātha (traditional dates 1268-1369), or Vedantadesika ("Teacher of Vedanta") as he is most commonly known, was a major theologian of Srivaishnavism, a South Indian religious tradition whose central deity is Vishnu and whose

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[8] David Shulman, *More Than Real: A History of the Imagination in South India* (Harvard University Press, 2012), 89-98.

[9] Lawrence J. McCrea, *The Teleology of Poetics in Medieval Kashmir* (Department of Sanskrit and Indian Studies, Harvard University, 2008), 360.

theology is inspired both by the Sanskrit Vedantic corpus and by the Tamil devotional poetry of twelve saints known as the Alvars.[10] Vedantadesika produced a vast body of writing in Sanskrit, Tamil, Prakrit, and Manipravala (a hybrid of Sanskrit and Tamil), which includes works of theology, poetry, and commentary on Srivaishnava scriptures and previous theological writings. We can tell that Vedantadesika was an enthusiastic reader of Kalidasa mainly from his poetry: his *Haṃsasandeśa* ("Message of the Goose") is modeled closely on Kalidasa's *Meghadūta*, his *Yādavābhyudaya* ("The Rise of the Yadus") is modeled loosely on Kalidasa's *Raghuvaṃśa*, and his poetry is filled throughout with allusions to Kalidasa. While Kalidasa's poetry features many divine characters, his poetry is by no means religious, concerning itself more with the emotions of ordinary (*laukika*) life, such as human love and homesickness, than with religious emotions such as self-surrender and cosmic gratitude. By contrast, everything Vedantadesika ever wrote, including his poetry inspired by Kalidasa, is religious. This difference raises the question of how exactly to understand Vedantadesika's investment in Kalidasa, which I shall try to answer in chapter 3 by reading his poetry alongside Kalidasa's work, as well as consulting relevant texts from his theological writings.

Most of the scholarship on Vedantadesika's relation to Kalidasa has focused on the *Haṃsasandeśa*'s relation to the *Meghadūta*, which is indeed the most significant link between the two poets. Yigal Bronner and David Shulman have read the poem as indexical for the vitality and new local emphasis of Sanskrit poetry in the second millennium;[11] Steven Hopkins has situated

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[10] For a discussion of the biography and hagiographical traditions around Vedantadesika, as well as a study of his devotional poetry, see Steven Paul Hopkins, *Singing the Body of God: The Hymns of Vedantadesika in Their South Indian Tradition* (Oxford University Press, 2002).

[11] Yigal Bronner and David Shulman, "'A Cloud Turned Goose': Sanskrit in the Vernacular Millennium," *The Indian Economic & Social History Review* 43, no. 1 (March 1, 2006): 1–30.

the poem within the major genre of messenger poetry;[12] and Ajay Rao has argued that the poem should be seen as part of a larger hermeneutic enterprise wherein Srivaishnava theologians read religious meanings into the *Rāmāyaṇa*.[13] That Vedantadesika's poem can be examined from so many perspectives speaks to what Shulman and Bronner have called its "depth," or its simultaneous participation in multiple traditions and literary canons.[14] In understanding specifically why Vedantadesika turns to Kalidasa's poem for his model, I have found that the most illuminating context in which to situate *Haṃsasandeśa* is his own oeuvre as well as that of Kalidasa. In addition to exploring connections between the two writers which have not yet been discussed in detail, then, I will propose another comparative reading of *Haṃsasandeśa* and *Meghadūta*, which highlights the connection between Kalidasa's obsession with daydreaming and Vedantadesika's understanding of devotional meditation.

Reader 3: Sri Aurobindo. Aurobindo Ghose (1872-1950), or Sri Aurobindo as he would come to fashion himself later in his life, is the author of a vast body of writing that includes poetry, philosophy, literary criticism, translations, and essays on culture and politics.[15] While he is most commonly known today as the guru who founded the Sri Aurobindo Ashram in Pondicherry partway through his life, I wish to pull aside the aura surrounding his name, which has inspired

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[12] Steven Hopkins, *The Flight of Love: A Messenger Poem of Medieval South India by Venkatanatha* (Oxford University Press, 2016).

[13] Ajay K. Rao, *Re-Figuring the Ramayana as Theology: A History of Reception in Premodern India* (Routledge, 2014), 19–43.

[14] Bronner and Shulman, "'A Cloud Turned Goose,'" 28.

[15] For an account of Sri Aurobindo's life and work, see Peter Heehs, *The Lives of Sri Aurobindo* (Columbia University Press, 2008).

devotion in some and revulsion in others, and regard him primarily as a writer of English, and of course as a reader of Kalidasa. Aurobindo spent most of his formative years in England, where he studied Latin and Greek at Cambridge, read widely in the literary traditions of Europe, and started learning Sanskrit. When he returned to British India in 1893 never to leave again, he deepened his knowledge of Sanskrit and its literature and philosophy. It is within a decade of his return that most of Aurobindo's texts on Kalidasa were written, on the eve of his immersion in anticolonial politics. Around the time he first took an interest in Kalidasa, then, Aurobindo was rediscovering his cultural roots and contemplating what his involvement in Indian politics would look like.

Passing references to Aurobindo frequently appear in Indian scholarship on Kalidasa from the mid to late twentieth century, indicating that at least among Sanskritists in India, he has long been regarded as a major interpreter of Kalidasa.[16] This is largely thanks to the Ashram's publication department, which in 1954 brought out much of Aurobindo's unpublished writing on Kalidasa in a single volume.[17] Despite the availability of this material, scholarship on Aurobindo has not yet looked in detail at the precise nature of his engagement with Kalidasa, which I will attempt to reconstruct in chapter 4.[18] Unlike many other nineteenth and early twentieth-century readers, whose investment in Kalidasa focused mainly on *Abhijñānaśākuntala* and *Meghadūta*,

[16] See, for instance, Shrikrishna Sakharam Bhawe, *Kalidasa: The National Poet of India* (Good Companions, 1964), 25–26; Dimbeswar Sarma, *An Interpretative Study of Kālidāsa* (Sarma, 1968), 82; Samudrala Nagaiah, *Kalidasa* (Super Power Press, 1978), 197; K. Krishnamoorthy, *Kālidāsa* (Sahitya Akademi, 1994), 64.

[17] For a full publication history of Aurobindo's writings on Kalidasa, see Sri Aurobindo, *Kalidasa: Essays and Translations* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Publication Department, 2004), 329.

[18] The only other attempt I have encountered is Prafulla K. Mishra, "Shri Aurobindo's Vision on Kalidasa," *Journal of the Oriental Institute University of Baroda* 43 (1994): 219–24.

Aurobindo seems to have been especially fascinated by the play *Vikramorvaśīya*, writing extensively on its themes and characters, translating it into English, and composing a blank-verse poem in four cantos inspired by it called *Urvasie*. Analyzing these materials, I will show how Kalidasa's poetry prompted Aurobindo to explore the nature of, and relationship between, ascetic life and revolutionary politics. My chapter on Aurobindo's reading of Kalidasa adds to a number of recent studies which suggest that Aurobindo's investment in ancient materials is too complex to be characterized as merely reactionary or derivative, and which try to deal with that complexity by furnishing less obvious but more illuminating intellectual contexts for his writing.[19]

2. Kalidasa's Reception: An Overview

Although my dissertation does not offer a comprehensive history of Kalidasa's reception, a brief overview of it will help contextualize my case studies. Kalidasa has been known as the master-poet of Sanskrit literature since at least (and likely before) 634 C.E., when his poetic skill was acknowledged in an inscription issued by Pulakeśin II at Aihole. While his fame has remained essentially undiminished till today, the reasons that people have been drawn to Kalidasa's poetry have fluctuated over time, and might be understood as falling into three historical phases. The first corresponds to what Sheldon Pollock has called the cosmopolitan era (around the first millennium C.E.), when Sanskrit served as the primary language of literature and power in courts across South

[19] See for example Andrew Sartori, "The Transfiguration of Duty in Aurobindo's Essays on the Gita," *Modern Intellectual History; Cambridge* 7, no. 2 (August 2010): 319–34; Leela Gandhi, *The Common Cause: Postcolonial Ethics and the Practice of Democracy, 1900-1955* (University of Chicago Press, 2014); Tamara Chin, "Anti-Colonial Metrics: Homeric Time in an Indian Prison, Ca. 1909," *ELH* 81, no. 3 (2014): 1029–53.

Asia.[20] One major source for understanding Kalidasa's reception in this period is the Sanskrit poetic corpus. Around the time of the seventh-century Aihole inscription but at the court of a rival king, the poet Bāṇa praises Kalidasa in the prologue of his *Harṣacarita* ("The Life of King Harsha"): "Who has not delighted in the blossoming utterances of Kalidasa, as in full and honey-sweet bouquets?"[21] This verse, the first of many references to Kalidasa we find in poetry, indicates how widely revered he was among poets, at the same time as it anticipates the great influence he would never cease to have in the Sanskrit literary tradition. Kalidasa's canonical status is also attested in the work of Sanskrit rhetoricians, many of whom (especially from the ninth century onward) considered his work to exemplify the qualities of poetry most worthy of emulation. For example, in his ninth-century book *Dhvanyāloka* ("Light on Suggestion"), Anandavardhana writes, "In this world, which has seen a long tradition of all kinds of poets, only two or three like Kalidasa, or maybe five or six, can be counted as great."[22] The late tenth-century rhetorician Abhinavagupta doesn't just admire Kalidasa but uses his intuitions about literature to develop his own theory of aesthetic experience.[23] Yet another source for Kalidasa's reception, in addition to epigraphy, poetry, and rhetoric, is a tradition of direct commentaries on his poems (soon to be

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[20] The logic of this periodization is most extensively laid out in Sheldon Pollock, *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men: Sanskrit, Culture, and Power in Premodern India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

[21] nirgatāsu na vā kasya kālidāsasya sūktiṣu |
prītir madhurasāndrāsu mañjarīṣviva jāyate || *HC* 1.16 ||

[22] asminn ativicitrakaviparamparāvāhini saṃsāre kālidāsaprabhṛtayo dvitrāḥ pañcaṣā vā mahākavayaḥ iti gaṇyante | (Ānandavardhana and Abhinavagupta, *Dhvanyālokalocana: Kerala Commentaries*, vol. 1 (Kochi, Kerala: Centre for Heritage Studies, 2011), 300, commentary on 1.6.)

[23] See Sheldon Pollock, *A Rasa Reader: Classical Indian Aesthetics* (Columbia University Press, 2016), 195.

described in some detail) which indicate that for many of Kalidasa's earlier readers, his poems served a range of pedagogical functions as well.

Kalidasa continued to be a major influence in poetry of the vernacular era, when Sanskrit and the cosmopolitan order for which it served as *lingua franca* started ceding ground to local languages and forms of governance. This era appears to mark a second phase in Kalidasa's reception, the crucial features of which Yigal Bronner has usefully summed up in the following comment on *Meghadūta* ("The Cloud-Messenger"):

> Between the thirteenth and the fifteenth centuries there seems to have been a sudden surge of engagement with Kālidāsa's [*Meghadūta*] throughout South Asia in a variety of languages and in regions as remote from one another as Gujarat in the northeast and Sri Lanka in the far south. This textual engagement, although by no means uniform, seems to be part of regional efforts to envision and create local maps—political, cultural, linguistic, religious, and sectarian—and thus is often done in conversation not just with the classical Kālidāsan template but also with local traditions and texts.[24]

The *Meghadūta* certainly wasn't unpopular before; however, the enthusiasm it generated in the vernacular millennium was so remarkable as to inspire an entire genre of poetry, which for Bronner is "perhaps the richest and most vital of South Asia's premodern literary genres."[25] While the messenger poems mentioned by Bronner retain the form of Kalidasa's poem, their concerns are markedly different: not only are many of them written in languages other than Sanskrit, but they also record new local geographies, landscapes, and styles of thinking.[26] This trend of localization

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[24]Yigal Bronner, "Birds of a Feather: Vāmana Bhaṭṭa Bāṇa's Haṃsasandeśa and Its Intertexts," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 133, no. 3 (2013): 522.

[25] Ibid., 496.

[26] See also Steven Paul Hopkins, "Lovers, Messengers, and Beloved Landscapes: 'Sandeśakāvya' in Comparative Perspective," *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 8, no. 1/3 (2004): 29–55 and Erin Epperson, "Kālidāsa in Tibet: Messenger Poetry in Translation" (The University of Chicago, 2017).

suggests that in the vernacular era, Kalidasa's poetry was activated by (that is, read as pertaining to) a wider range of contexts than before, not just Sanskrit cosmopolitan courts but regional cultures, vernacular literatures, and religious traditions.

The commentaries I just mentioned, the earliest of which were written by Vallabhadeva in the tenth-century, document another significant strain in the reception of Kalidasa, both in the cosmopolitan and vernacular eras.[27] While varying widely in aim and level of detail, these commentaries typically offer helpful clarifications for each individual verse of the poem, somewhat resembling lecture notes for a close and continuous reading of Kalidasa's poems. To Ingalls, the format of the commentaries suggests that "these poems were taught by school teachers verse by verse, explaining the formation of each word, furnishing the appropriate rule for each construction, and defining each figure of speech."[28] In his discussion of *Prakāśikā* ("Lamp"), Aruṇagirinātha's fourteenth-century commentary on the *Kumārasaṃbhava*, Pollock has argued that Kalidasa's poem would not only have offered instruction in the finer points of Sanskrit (the relative ease of Kalidasa's language making it an ideal entry-point for such instruction) but would have served other needs as well. Arunagirinatha ends his work by specifying three kinds of readers for whom it is intended: "those who have pedagogical needs (who 'have difficulty understanding the meaning of the sentences'); those who have aesthetic needs (who 'are addicted to bathing in the deep water of aesthetic emotion [*rasa*]'); and those who have religious needs (who are

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[27] For a discussion of Vallabhadeva and his commentaries, see Goodall and Isaacson, *The Raghupañcikā of Vallabhadeva*, xv-xxi.

[28]Daniel H. H. Ingalls, "Kalidasa and the Attitudes of the Golden Age," *Journal of the American Oriental Society; New Haven, Etc.* 96, no. 1 (January 1, 1976): 19.

‘devotees of Śiva and the goddess’).”[29] And in his analysis of Arunagirinatha’s comments on the first canto, Pollock makes the following inference:

> The traditional reader could…be said to have made sense of the first chapter of *Kumārasaṃbhava* when he understood the paradigms—in grammar, rhetoric, the moral sciences, logic, erotics, law, and the like—the poet was striving at once to suggest and thereby to reaffirm, all in service of the reader’s *Bildung*.[30]

Pollock’s study suggests that for many readers of Kalidasa who lived in the millennium after he wrote, his poems weren’t consumed for enjoyment alone but also for the social and even religious values they were seen as reflecting and reinforcing. As of now, however, this suggestion is just a promising starting-point for understanding a vast archive that awaits systematic analysis.

In 1789, William Jones translated *Abhijñānaśākuntala* into English for the first time under the title *Sacontalà; or, The Fatal Ring*, and two years later, Georg Forster translated Jones’ version into German. These translations inaugurated a third phase in Kalidasa’s reception, an era when his poetry came to be almost indissociable from the question of India and indeed was often understood as the expression of India’s essence. For German readers including Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803) and Friedrich Schiller (1759-1805), *Abhijñānaśākuntala* expressed an earlier, primitive world where Europe’s civilizational childhood was imagined to have transpired.[31] The famous British Indologist Sir Monier-Williams (1819-1899) seems to have believed that *Abhijñānaśākuntala* still captured the essential culture of India in the mid-nineteenth century,

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[29] Sheldon Pollock, “What Was Philology in Sanskrit?,” in *World Philology*, ed. Benjamin A. Elman, Ku-ming Kevin Chang, and Sheldon Pollock (Harvard University Press, 2015), 125.

[30] Ibid., 127.

[31] In chapter 4 of this dissertation, I will discuss the German reception of Kalidasa in some detail. See also Chapter 2 of Amanda Culp, “Searching for Shakuntala: Sanskrit Drama and Theatrical Modernity in Europe and India, 1789-Present” (Columbia University, 2018).

describing it in the preface to his own translation of the play as "the most popular of Indian dramas, in which the customs of the Hindus, their opinions, prejudices and fables; their religious rites, daily occupations and amusements, are reflected as in a mirror."[32] Such a cultural-essentialist approach to Kalidasa, and to Sanskrit literature more generally, was widespread in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, not only among European Indologists but also Indian intellectuals; as Simona Sawhney notes, "the very question of what India is…is deeply connected to the status and place of Sanskrit texts in the life of the modern nation."[33] In India, this approach thus led to the common understanding of Kalidasa as the national poet, a view which at a basic level amounts to seeing his poetry as a repository for what is distinctive about India and associating it, as nationalist historiographers did, with the idea of an Indian Golden Age under the Guptas.[34] Even for Indian writers who didn't see Kalidasa in such unambiguous terms, his poetry was nonetheless tied to the question of India, specifically of modern India's relationship to its own antiquity. Ananya Vajpeyi has shown how, while Rabindranath Tagore differed from his nationalist contemporaries in the way he related to India and its history, he still turned to Kalidasa to explore that relationship, finding in the *Meghadūta* "an allegory of the modern self's encounter with the past."[35] Likewise,

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[32] Quoted in Romila Thapar, "Kalidasa in the Ninteenth Century in Europe and in India," in *Mapping Histories: Essays Presented to Ravinder Kumar*, ed. Neera Chandhoke (Anthem Press, 2002), 17. Thapar's essay provides a quick survey of the reception of *Abhijñānaśākuntala* in this period.

[33] Simona Sawhney, *The Modernity of Sanskrit* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 5.

[34] On the concept of the Golden Age in Indian historiography, see Romila Thapar, *The Penguin History of Early India: From the Origins to AD 1300* (Penguin Books India, 2003), 16–17; 280–281.

[35] Ananya Vajpeyi, *Righteous Republic* (Harvard University Press, 2012), 112.

in her analysis of the aforementioned play *Aṣārḥa kā ek din*, Sawhney argues that Mohan Rakesh's unflattering and controversial characterization of Kalidasa as somewhat egotistical—for instance, when he distorts the nature of his lover Mallika's suffering by aestheticizing it again and again in his poetry (as the suffering of Shakuntala, of the yakshini, of Uma, of Rati)—casts suspicion on the reality of the India evoked in Kalidasa's poetry, as well as the impulse to idealize that India.[36]

In focusing on how three figures read Kalidasa, my dissertation contributes to the body of scholarship which has allowed me to reconstruct this picture of Kalidasa's reception. In certain ways, Kuntaka, Vedantadesika, and Sri Aurobindo confirm the trends outlined above: in *Vakroktijīvita*, Kuntaka values Kalidasa's poetry both for the great pleasure it yields and for the instruction it offers princes and courtiers; Vedantadesika's messenger-poem *Haṃsasandeśa* ("Message of the Goose") typifies the regionalization of Kalidasa in the vernacular millennium, as David Shulman and Yigal Bronner have demonstrated;[37] and in passages such as the following, Aurobindo joins the many readers who regarded Kalidasa as India's preeminent national poet:

> India, her great mountains and forests and plains and their peoples, her men and women and the circumstances of their life, her animals, her cities and villages, her hermitages, rivers, gardens and tilled lands are the background of narrative and drama and love poem. [Kalidasa] has seen it all and filled his mind with it and never fails to bring it before us vivid with all the wealth of description of which he is capable.[38]

But the ways these readers instantiate general tendencies shouldn't distract us from what is distinct about each of them. While Kuntaka is not alone in admiring Kalidasa, the questions and criteria that guide his thinking about poetry (and therefore about Kalidasa) distinguish him from nearly all

[36] Simona Sawhney, "Who Is Kalidasa? Sanskrit Poetry in Modern India," *Postcolonial Studies* 7, no. 3 (November 1, 2004): 295-311.

[37] See Bronner and Shulman, "'A Cloud Turned Goose.'"

[38] Sri Aurobindo, *Kalidasa: Essays and Translations*, 131.

other Sanskrit rhetoricians; as much as the *Haṃsasandeśa* resembles messenger poems of the same period that record local geographies, it also connects Kalidasan themes to theological ideas which are specific to the Srivaishnava religious tradition; and while in some passages Aurobindo is interested in explaining how Kalidasa's poetry is characteristically Indian, in others he emphasizes themes in Kalidasa's poetry that have much broader implications—for example, the idea of the poet-leader. I will be interested, then, not only in how these readers confirm the understanding of Kalidasa's reception afforded by existing scholarship but also in how they add to that understanding.

3. Reading Kalidasa in the Present

Kalidasa is still widely acknowledged as one of the most influential figures in India's literary traditions. Despite that reputation, however, his work draws little critical attention. Here is how the state of Kalidasa studies seemed to Sawhney in 2004:

> We have come to a peculiar kind of juncture when Kalidasa's poetry is fast vanishing from our horizon. …While the work of the early Greek dramatists, for instance, continues to be widely read in the Humanities, and moreover to inspire significant new readings, not only by literary critics but also by philosophers, political theorists, psychoanalysts, and anthropologists, Kalidasa's work seems to be virtually unread today outside of a small circle of Sanskritists and dramatists, even in India.[39]

Sawhney's observations still hold true today. Kalidasa's poetry is of course still read by students of Sanskrit, often taught to them as their first example of *kāvya* (belletristic poetry), and is regularly translated by Sanskritists and poets. However, scholarship on Kalidasa tends to focus more on moments in his reception than on how we might ourselves read his poetry. When questions about

[39] Sawhney, "Who Is Kalidasa?," 296.

his present-day relevance are raised—as they were, for example, in a panel titled "Kalidasa: The Eternal Poet" at the 2017 Jaipur Literary Festival—he is typically regarded either as a cultural treasure of India or as the composer of eminently graceful or beautiful verses, as "an indulgent aesthete, culling blossoms of poetry for his own pleasure."[40] It is certainly true that Kalidasa is an important figure in India's cultural history, and that many have derived immense pleasure from reading him. However, the idea that Kalidasa's poetry could feed thought, not just an appetite for beauty or patriotic sentiment, is strangely uncommon, and in the last four decades has been taken seriously only in a handful of articles. Some of these have anticipated or echoed Sawhney's call for new approaches to the study of Kalidasa. In an essay written in 1976, for example, Sudipta Kaviraj observes that "The *Meghadoota*…is a richer and more complex art object than is commonly supposed.… Critics have usually been rather unimaginative about the *Meghadoota*."[41] Kaviraj's essay is as much about Kalidasa's poem as it is about the idea of poetry as a form of thinking, and thus implicitly of a certain mode of literary criticism (hence its title, "The Theory in the Poem: Alienation Themes in *Meghadūta*"). To his 1988 essay "Kalidasa's Metadrama: *Mālavikāgnimitra*," Robert Goodwin adds the subtitle "Redressing critical neglect," and notes of the play that "the numerous monographs on Kalidasa and the histories of Sanskrit literature and drama deal with it, of course, but usually on the level of plot description."[42] In 2014, David Shulman made a similar diagnosis of Kalidasa criticism in his essay on the *Raghuvaṃśa*:

[40] Sawhney, "Who Is Kalidasa?," 296.

[41] Sudipta Kaviraj, "The Theory in the Poem: Alienation Themes in Meghadūta"," *Journal of the School of Languages* 4.1 (1976): 29; ibid., 32.

[42] Robert E. Goodwin, "Kalidasa's Metadrama: Mālavikāgnimitra," *Journal of South Asian Literature* 23, no. 1 (1988): 119.

"Simplicity, clarity, a certain sustained 'sweetness' or elegance (*lalitodgāra*) of style and diction—we are used to characterizing Kālidāsa in such terms, at once undeniable and largely meaningless."[43] Part of what I want to do in the following pages is foreground this persisting sense that something is lacking in how we write on Kalidasa, and to interrogate that sense: why haven't more "significant," "imaginative," or "meaningful" approaches to Kalidasa gained traction?

The version of the question that animates this dissertation runs as follows: what exactly prevents or disinclines us from reading Kalidasa's poetry how Kuntaka, Vedantadesika, and Sri Aurobindo read it—that is, as though we ourselves could still be addressed by it? The bias against such reading in South Asian literary studies, which I will examine closely in the concluding chapter, seems to involve a suspicion of the idea that a work could mean something beyond its context of production without its readers being either naïve or strategic. It is to challenge this suspicion—to question whether naïveté is really a necessary precondition for reading a past text as though it had implications for one's current circumstances—that I have chosen to examine very closely three particular instances of reading Kalidasa, rather than come up with a more comprehensive but general account of his reception. In addition to contributing to the scholarship on Kalidasa's reception, then, each chapter is also a case study in what it is to read.

Forming a clear picture of reading seems to be a priority in premodern South Asian literary studies today, not just for the general reason that reading happens to be the vocation of textualists but because of a recent sense in the field that the practice of reading should be made the object of explicit reflection. This sense appears, for example, in the idea of "sensitive reading," a phrase which has come to be associated with Shulman's scholarship and is in fact the title of a forthcoming

[43] Yigal Bronner, David Dean Shulman, and Gary Alan Tubb, *Innovations and Turning Points: Toward a History of Kāvya Literature* (Oxford University Press, 2014), 35.

edited volume in his honor.[44] Shulman has characterized his own approach as a practice of "listening hard or well" to texts, as opposed to "disemboweling" or "displacing" them.[45] It also shows itself in Pollock's recent work outlining a new philology—for instance, in his idea of "learning to read in three dimensions," which he glosses as a "philological practice that orients itself simultaneously along three planes of a text's existence: its moment of genesis; its reception over time; and its presence to my own subjectivity."[46] Since the word *reading* is taken to mean many things in these discussions, among them the variety of ways that scholars make arguments with and about texts, it would be helpful to disambiguate the senses in which it is used. As an ensemble, the thinkers discussed in this dissertation invite us to confront the ambiguities around reading, because it isn't at first clear how each one's writings constitute a reading of Kalidasa in the same sense of the word. However much Kuntaka references Kalidasa in *Vakroktijīvita*, his treatise isn't about Kalidasa but about poetry; Vedantadesika writes a lot of poetry inspired by Kalidasa but says close to nothing about him explicitly; and Aurobindo's engagement with Kalidasa is documented not only in critical essays but also in translations and original poetry. What could it mean to characterize these diverse written engagements as readings of Kalidasa?

Despite their differences, the three readers have one thing in common, which will serve as my starting-point: all of them read Kalidasa. In beginning with this simple and obvious fact, I am guided by Marielle Macé's suggestion that we "consider reading as a conduct, a behavior rather

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[44] Yigal Bronner and Charles Hallisey, eds., *Sensitive Readings: Essays in Honor of David Shulman* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, Forthcoming).

[45] David Dean Shulman, *The Wisdom of Poets: Studies in Tamil, Telugu, and Sanskrit* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 2; ibid., 137.

[46] Sheldon Pollock, "Philology in Three Dimensions," *Postmedieval: A Journal of Medieval Cultural Studies* 5, no. 4 (December 1, 2014): 409; 399.

than a decoding."[47] Macé helps me distinguish between two senses of the word: (1) reading as an interpretation of a text and therefore, in an extended sense, as a genre of writing (for instance, when we refer to Tagore's essay on *Abhijñānaśākuntala* as his reading of that play), and (2) reading as an act (for instance, when we speak of Pururavas' reading of Urvashi's love letter, or a parent's reading of a bedtime story to a child). By drawing attention to the more ordinary sense of *reading*, I do not mean to favor one definition of the word over others arbitrarily, or pick the one that suits me best; rather, I wish to momentarily loosen the tight grip that its more specialized senses have on us, so that we may understand those senses a little more clearly and thus come to use the word with greater precision. As an illustration of what I mean, consider two texts that I examine in this dissertation: Aurobindo's character sketch of Pururavas, the king in Kalidasa's *Vikramorvaśīya*; and Vedantadesika's poem *Haṃsasandeśa*, whose structure and content are inspired by Kalidasa's *Meghadūta*. If the first text more obviously counts as what we would call a reading of Kalidasa than the second—that is, if the use of Vedantadesika's poem in reconstructing his reading of Kalidasa seems to demand a special explanation, but the use of Aurobindo's character sketch doesn't—this is likely because reading has come to be synonymous with the modern genre of the critical essay. However, it in fact bears asking of Aurobindo's essay too how it constitutes a reading of Kalidasa; or to put it more concretely, we should ask of both Vedantadesika's poem and Aurobindo's essay what experience of reading Kalidasa each one presupposes, and why each reader was moved to record that experience in the specific written form he did. For the form in which an experience of reading is reflected is significant: not all reading culminates in explicitly worded commentaries or interpretations—indeed, most instances of

[47] Marielle Macé, "Ways of Reading, Modes of Being," trans. Marlon Jones, *New Literary History* 44, no. 2 (August 8, 2013): 215.

reading do not, such as reading a life-changing book, or Vedantadesika's reading of Kalidasa—and it strikes me as arbitrary to privilege the ones that do. Accordingly, in the following chapters, the various texts I use (essays, poems, treatises, commentaries) are treated not as documents from which I could more or less directly read off interpretations of Kalidasa's poems that are paraphrasable as propositions, but as records testifying to different experiences of reading Kalidasa, which I shall attempt to describe in detail.

My interest in the variety of ways that reading provokes extended responses in writing ultimately stems from the question that motivates this dissertation: how might we write on Kalidasa's poetry today? It is in fact a relatively small group of people who read texts with the intention of writing about them, including religious exegetes, literary reviewers, literary critics, philosophers, and academics. What moves certain readers of literature to write about it, or to write inspired by it, if not just a cultural or institutional habit? What exactly is the contemporary practice of writing on literature known as literary criticism, and what kind of knowledge does it yield? These questions, to which I return in the conclusion, are worth asking because there isn't a consensus on how literary criticism should be practiced today. In his introduction to Kuntaka's *Vakroktijīvita*, Krishnamoorthy characterizes criticism as the "appreciation and appraisal" of a work, observing that "Kuntaka always is concerned with the oft-repeated question—'what has the poet tried to express and how [has he] expressed it?' It is the only possible method open for practical criticism."[48] Walter Benjamin, who found inspiration for his approach to writing on literature in the concept of criticism developed by the German Romantics, explains that concept as follows: "the critique is not meant to do anything other than discover the secret

[48] Kuntaka, *Vakroktijīvita*, xxxvi; ibid., xxxviii.

tendencies of the work itself, fulfill its hidden intentions.…For the Romantics, criticism is far less the judgment of a work than the method of its consummation."[49] And in the middle of one of his critical essays, Stanley Cavell explains his own method by analogizing it to the way he practices philosophy: "If philosophy can be thought of as the world of a particular culture brought to consciousness of itself, then one mode of criticism (call it philosophical criticism) can be thought of as the world of a particular work brought to consciousness of itself."[50] Different as these characterizations are, the lack of consensus in how literary criticism should be written isn't a problem to be solved, since as Cavell's generous phrasing suggests, there are many ways of responding to literature in writing. Nonetheless, in forming one's own way of responding to Kalidasa, it is helpful to study what some of these have been; that is what I shall attempt to do in the following chapters.

[49] Walter W Benjamin, *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings. Vol. 1 Vol. 1*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W Jennings (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press, 2004), 153.

[50] Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?: A Book of Essays* (Cambridge University Press, 2015), 288.

Chapter 2: Kuntaka's Kalidasa
Poet of the Court

All of Kuntaka's writing on Kalidasa is contained in his one surviving work titled *Vakroktijīvita*, or "The Essence of Indirect Expression." Since the aim of this book is not to offer interpretations of particular poems but to propose a general theory of poetry, Kuntaka's comments on Kalidasa are intended less to offer interpretations of his poetry than to clarify the various theoretical points he is making. Nonetheless, his analyses of literary works are often so detailed that they reveal much about how he read them; as Krishnamoorthy observes, "in the whole range of Sanskrit poetical theory, we do not have anyone who can be termed a practical literary critic in the modern sense of the term except Kuntaka."[51] Moreover, Kuntaka clearly has a special investment in Kalidasa, devoting a large passage in the first chapter to characterizing his poetic style and commenting throughout the book on many individual moments in Kalidasa's poetry. It is on the basis of such passages that I will reconstruct his reading of Kalidasa. Following the logic of an early section of *Vakroktijīvita*, where pleasure and instruction (*camatkāra* and *upadeśa*) are specified as the two main purposes of poetry, Kuntaka's comments on Kalidasa tend to emphasize one or the other of these.[52] Accordingly, I shall begin the chapter by explaining what exactly Kuntaka finds pleasurable about Kalidasa's poetry (section 1). I will then shift attention to those passages where Kuntaka is concerned with the capacity of Kalidasa's works to instruct members

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[51] Kuntaka, *Vakroktijīvita*, xxxv.

[52] In *VJ* 1.5, Kuntaka writes, "A taste of the nectar that is poetry creates pleasure in the mind" <kāvyāmṛtarasenāntaś **camatkāro** vitanyate>. In *VJ* 1.3, he characterizes a work of poetry as "a means for success in morality, power, enjoyment, and spirituality" <dhārmādisādhanopāyaḥ>, and glosses his characterization as follows: "[poetry is such] a *means* because it is essentially a lesson in attaining the four-fold benefit <[dharmāder upeyasya] caturvargasya [sādhane] saṃpādane tad**upadeśa**rūpatvād upāyas> (Ibid., 3.)

of royal courts how best to conduct themselves (section 2). I will conclude by suggesting how these two sets of remarks might be related to each other (section 3).

Kuntaka develops a rich set of concepts in the *Vakroktijīvita*, and I would like to comment briefly on some of the choices I have made in writing on these. One common approach to translating concepts is grounded in a principle of consistency (for example, translating *vakratā* in every instance as "obliquity," or *rasa* as "aestheticized emotion"). I have opted against such an approach here, mainly because each of Kuntaka's concepts brings together a range of senses that no English word encompasses by itself. A word appearing in its conventional sense in one passage of the *Vakroktijīvita* will appear elsewhere in its etymological sense, and still elsewhere in a sense that Kuntaka wishes to confer on it. I have therefore chosen to translate *vakratā* on different occasions as "deviation," "modification," "technique," and "artistry"; *pratibhā* as "inspiration," "poetic power" and "the poetic faculty"; *parispanda* as "throbbing out," "nature," "essential aspect," and "vibrancy"; *alaṃkāra* as "figure of speech" and "that which renders sufficient"; *svabhāvokti* as "natural description" and "the telling of a thing's nature"; *rasa* as "depicted emotion," "emotion in literature," "literary emotion," and "state of mind"; and so on. Such fluctuations aren't symptoms of a lack of rigor but respond to the fluctuations inherent in Kuntaka's use of concepts. More generally, my approach rests on the presumption that we don't really know a concept by defining it—by pinning it down to a single analogue or synonym in English—but by observing how it behaves in a range of different environments.

1. The Pleasure of Kalidasa: Kuntaka's Account of the Delicate Style

An important passage in Kuntaka's first chapter gives us the closest thing we find in his writing to an explicit characterization of Kalidasa's oeuvre in its entirety. In a series of brief

statements (*kārikā*s), Kuntaka offers a description of what he calls *sukumāra-mārga*—the "delicate path" or "delicate style." The description is meant to apply to the work of any poet composing in this style, but Kuntaka clearly has Kalidasa in mind while writing it: not only does he name Kalidasa as the style's foremost exponent, but every example he provides in his subsequent commentary on these statements is drawn from Kalidasa's poetry.[53] It is thus possible to read the passage as a comment on Kalidasa:

> 25 The style which is beautiful due to novel phrases and ideas arising from an unfailing inspiration (*pratibhā*); which includes a few attractive figures of speech, added effortlessly;
>
> 26 whose emphasis on the nature of things (*bhāva-svabhāva*) outdoes acquired skill; which is beautiful for resonating with the minds of sensitive readers who understand the true meaning of depicted emotions (*rasa*) and their assisting factors;
>
> 27 which is delightful, thanks to a beauty whose precise locus is indiscernible; which resembles the remarkable handiwork resulting from the skill of Brahma;
>
> 28 in which all the brilliance (*vaicitrya*) we find has arisen from inspiration, and appears dripping with the nature of delicateness (*saukumārya*)—
>
> 29 this style is called the delicate style. Great poets travel along it, like bees along groves of blooming flowers.[54]

The difficulties in grasping the precise sense of this passage involve Kuntaka's use of complex concepts which are central to his theory of poetry, including *pratibhā*, *svabhāva*, *vaicitrya*, and *saukumārya*. In the interpretation that follows, I will therefore be consulting the sections of his

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[53] "It is the path by which true poets travel, starting with Kalidasa." <yena mārgeṇa satkavayaḥ kālidāsaprabhṛtayo gatāḥ|> (Kuntaka, *Vakroktijīvita*, 43, commentary on 1.29.)

[54] amlānapratibhodbhinnanavaśabdārthasundaraḥ | ayatnavihitasvalpamanohārivibhūṣaṇaḥ ||
bhāvasvabhāvaprādhānyanyakkṛtāhāryakauśalaḥ | rasādiparamārthajñamanaḥsaṃvādasundaraḥ ||
avibhāvitasaṃsthānarāmaṇīyakarañjakaḥ | vidhivaidagdhyaniṣpannanirmāṇātiśayopamaḥ ||
yat kiṃcanāpi vaicitryaṃ tatsarvaṃ pratibhodbhavam | saukumāryaparispandasyandi yatra virājate ||
sukumārābhidhaḥ so'yaṃ yena satkavayo gatāḥ | mārgeṇotphullakusumakānaneneva ṣaṭpadāḥ ||
VJ 1.25-29 ||

book which discuss these concepts in detail in addition to Kuntaka's own commentary on these statements.[55] By examining this passage, then, we will simultaneously come to understand both Kuntaka's theory of poetry and his account of the specific pleasure of reading Kalidasa.

It is significant that Kuntaka begins his own explanation of the features listed in the passage not at the beginning, but with statement 1.28: "in [the delicate style], all the brilliance (*vaicitrya*) we find has arisen from inspiration, and shines out dripping with the nature of delicateness (*saukumārya*)." Kuntaka here relates the concepts of *brilliance* and *delicateness*, two terms of a polarity that structures many of his thoughts.[56] It is the same polarity explicitly invoked here which in fact informs the other features listed in the passage. Thus, for example, whereas poetry in the delicate style (*sukumāra-mārga*) generally has only a "few captivating figures of speech," poets writing in the brilliant style (*vicitra-mārga*) "heap figure upon figure"; if the source of beauty in Kalidasa's poetry is "indiscernible," brilliant poetry sources its appeal in the sheer skill of the poet; and if Kalidasa's figures of speech have been added "effortlessly," figuration in brilliant poetry is the result of intensive training.[57] A list of examples for each style, selected by Kuntaka himself, may serve as a helpful point of reference:

[55] The format of *Vakroktijīvita*—a number of brief statements (*kārikā*s) accompanied throughout by an expansive prose commentary—is common in Sanskrit scientific writing (i.e., *śāstra*).

[56] Kuntaka also describes a third style, *madhyama* or "middle," but since this style is defined in terms of *sukumāra* and *vicitra*, it suffices here to focus on just these two.

[57] The references here are, in order, to *VJ* 1.25 (-svalpamanohārivibhūṣaṇaḥ); 1.35 (alaṃkārasya kavayo yatrālaṃkaraṇāntaram…nibadhnanti); 1.27 (avibhāvitasaṃsthānarāmaṇīyakarañjakaḥ); 1.39 (…pratibhollekhamahattvena mahākaveḥ); 1.24 (ayatnavihita-); and 1.43 and commentary (vidagdhakavayo kecid eva vyutpannāḥ).

Delicate poetry

(All of these examples are from Kalidasa.)

The day's heat had grown too intense
and the night too thin; at odds
in their opposed deeds, the two were like
a quarreling wife and husband.[58]

The too red flames-of-the-forest,
curved like crescent moons—
for they hadn't yet bloomed—
appeared like nail-marks on
the body of the forest-groves,
who had recently made love with Spring.[59]

Before him appeared a pack of antelope:
the does' mouths filled with grass,
their movement stalled by their young
drinking again and again at their udders,
the proud bucks advancing ahead.[60]

The couples revealed their love with deeds…[61]

When the antelope scratched his lover with an antler,
her eyes squinted at the touch.[62]

Remembering your trembling embrace at night
that I'd felt once, fearful Sita,
I somehow endured the cloud's thundering
as it passed through the caves.[63]

Brilliant poetry

O ocean, who easily surpasses the Buddha!
What's the use of many words?
There is no one who, like you,
has vowed to ensure others' welfare.
For in famously refusing
to comfort thirsty journey-goers,
you show compassion for the desert,
upbearing his burden of selfishness.[64]

Is this a fresh vine upon the tree of youth,
budding forth by the burden of its juice?
Is it a wave on the ocean of beauty,
tossed with playful grace?
Or, is what I see before my eyes
the instructor's rod of the Love God,
confident in explaining his philosophy of love,
teaching them whose longing is intense?[65]

Which land suffers love-sickness by your absence and thus goes to waste? (i.e., "Where are you from?")[66]

And what are the pure indestructible syllables that partake of fame?[67] (i.e., "What is your name?")

If the sun, sole illuminator
of all of Brahma's creations,
didn't enter the ocean for a little while,
how else would that creator of rays
reveal with any clarity the darkness,
or the moon, or this flickering cluster of stars?[68]

[58] pravṛddhatāpo divaso'timātram atyarthameva kṣaṇadā ca tanvī |
ubhau virodhakriyayā vibhinnau jāyāpatī sānuśayāvivāstām || *VJ* 1.ś74; *R* 16.45 ||

[59] bālenduvakrāṇyavikāsabhāvād babhuḥ palāśānyatilohitāni |
sadyo vasantena samāgatānāṃ nakhakṣatānīva vanasthalīnām || *VJ* 1.ś75; *K* 3.19 ||

[60] tasya stanapraṇayibhir muhur eṇaśāvair vyāhanyamānahariṇīgamanaṃ purastāt |
āvirbabhūva kuśagarbhamukhaṃ mṛgāṇāṃ yuthaṃ tadagrasaragarvitakṛṣṇasaram || *VJ* 1.ś76; *R* 9.55 ||

[61] dvandvāni bhāvaṃ kriyayā vivavruḥ || *VJ* 1.ś77; *K* 3.35 ||

[62] śṛṅgeṇa ca sparśanimīlitākṣīṃ mṛgīm akaṇḍūyata kṛṣṇasāraḥ || *VJ* 1.ś78; *K* 3.36 ||

[63] pūrvānubhūtaṃ smaratā ca rātrau kampottaraṃ bhīru tavopagūḍham |
guhāvisārīṇyativāhitāni mayā kathaṃcid ghanagarjitāni || *VJ* 1.ś79; *R* 13.28 ||

[64] he helājitabodhisattva vacasāṃ kiṃ vistarais toyadhe nāsti tvatsadṛśaḥ paraḥ parahitādhāne gṛhītavrataḥ |
tṛṣyatpānthajanopakāraghaṭanāvaimukhyalabdhāyaśo bhāraprodvahane karoṣi kṛpayā sāhāyyakaṃ yan maroḥ || *VJ* 1.ś90 ||

[65] kiṃ tāruṇyataror iyaṃ rasabharodbhinnā navā mañjarī līlāprocchalitasya kiṃ laharikā lāvaṇyavārāṃnidheḥ |
udgāḍhotkalikāvatāṃ svasamayopanyāsaviśrambhiṇaḥ kiṃ sākṣād upadeśayaṣṭir athavā devasya śṛṅgāriṇaḥ || *VJ* 1.ś92 ||

[66] katamaḥ pravijṛmbhitavirahavyathaḥ śūnyatāṃ nīto deśaḥ || *VJ* 11.ś94 ||

[67] kāni ca puṇyabhāñji bhajantyabhikhyām akṣarāṇi || *VJ* 1.ś95 ||

[68] viśati yadi no kaṃcit kālaṃ kilāmbunidhiṃ vidheḥ kṛtiṣu sakalāsveko loke prakāśatāṃ gataḥ |
katham itarathā dhāmnāṃ dhātā tamāṃsi niśākaraṃ sphurad idam iyattārācakraṃ prakāśayati sphuṭam || *VJ* 1.ś99 ||

At first glance, Kuntaka's distinction between delicate and brilliant poetry may strike us as familiar. Within the Sanskrit tradition, it seems to resemble to the distinction Daṇḍin made between the poetic styles *vaidarbhī* and *gauḍī*, which he defined on the basis of formal characteristics of language such as the degree of figuration, selection of consonants, and length of compounds.[69] It may also remind us of distinctions made by writers in other critical traditions. For instance, in his *Preface to Lyrical Ballads*, William Wordsworth famously opposes the "deluges of idle and extravagant stories in verse" to his own simpler "language near to the real language of men"; and when Kuntaka writes of delicate poetry that "all the figurative elements we find in it have arisen from inspiration," he seems to anticipate Wordsworth's much later remarks on the role of personifications in his poems: "they are a figure of speech occasionally prompted by passion, and I have made use of them as such; but have endeavoured utterly to reject them as a mechanical device of style."[70] Such parallels are no doubt helpful in identifying a range of contexts to which Kuntaka's distinction between brilliance and delicateness might pertain. Yet my main reason for introducing them here is to grasp the specificity of Kuntaka's concepts, by showing where they diverge from apparent analogies. For while it is true that Kuntaka's descriptions of style do touch on formal characteristics of poetic language (as in statements 1.25 and 1.27), we will see that their

[69] *KĀ* 1.40: "There are many poetic styles, each distinguishable from the other by minute differences. Among them, I shall describe the two styles called *vaidarbhī* and *gauḍī*, since the difference between them is quite clear…." <asty aneko girāṃ mārgaḥ sūkṣmabhedaḥ parasparam | tatra vaidarbhagauḍīyau varṇyete prasphuṭāntarau ||>

[70] William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads: 1798 and 1802*, ed. Fiona Stafford (OUP Oxford, 2013), 100; ibid., 112.
I have chosen here to translate *vaicitryam…sarvam* as "all the figurative elements" primarily to emphasize its similarity to Wordsworth's comment. Yet the choice is also supported by Kuntaka's own commentary on this statement: "*vaicitrya* means 'the state of being captivating,' or again, 'being possessed of indirect speech [*vakrokti*]'; *sarva* or '*all* [that is captivating]' refers to the lot of poetic factors, such as figures of speech." <vaicitryaṃ vicitrabhāvo vakroktiyuktatvam | tatsarvam alaṃkārādi>

primary concern lies elsewhere. Nor are brilliance and delicateness evaluative concepts, since unlike theorists who would assert the superiority of one style to another, Kuntaka strictly excludes any hierarchy from his own typology of styles: "it makes no sense to say that there are three styles ranked best, average, and lowest."[71] If his concepts are neither merely rhetorical nor evaluative, then how are we to understand them?

We find a clue in statement 26 of the passage: "[in the delicate style], an emphasis on the nature of things outrivals acquired skill…." This remark might be coupled with statements Kuntaka will later make in his description of the brilliant style:

> 36 Just as pieces of jewelry covering a woman's body generate beauty, radiating cascading streams of light with their precious stones,
>
> 37 so [in the brilliant style] intrinsically radiant figures of speech illuminate the content (*alaṅkārya*), which lies within their beauty.
>
> 38 In [this style], even an object whose treatment in poetry isn't new is sufficient, since it is brought to a remarkable height just by brilliance in the expression;
>
> 39 In [this style], all that appears one way seems another just as a great poet pleases, simply by the greatness of his imaginative presentation.[72]

The aim of delicate poetry is to remain faithful to some aspect of the object being described. By contrast, what matters in brilliant poetry is not the actual nature of the described object, but the way that object is made to seem; hence, even a hackneyed idea is suitable for poetic treatment,

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[71] na ca rītīnām uttamamadhyamādhamatvabhedena traividhyaṃ vyavasthāpayituṃ nyāyyam | (Kuntaka, *Vakroktijīvita*, 41, commentary on 1.24.)

[72] ratnaraśmicchaṭotsekabhāsurair bhūṣaṇair yathā | kāntāśarīram ācchādya bhūṣāyai parikalpyate ||
yatra tadvad alaṃkārair bhrājamānair nijātmanā | svaśobhātiśayāntaḥstham alaṃkāryaṃ prakāśate [alt: prakāśyate] ||
yadapyanūtanollekhaṃ vastu yatra tadapyalam | uktivaicitryamātreṇa kāṣṭhāṃ kāmapi nīyate ||
yatrānyathābhavat sarvam anyathaiva yathāruci | bhāvyate pratibhollekhamahattvena mahākaveḥ || *VJ* 1.36-39 ||

reinvigorated "just by brilliance in the expression." Both of these descriptions (the first of delicate poetry, the second of brilliant poetry) share a concern with the relationship that language has with the things it describes. More precisely, they rest on an assumption which may at first seem too obvious to state explicitly: that all language presents the nature of something or another, whether this presentation is true to life or fanciful; as Kuntaka elsewhere puts it, "only something connected with its nature ever enters the path to expression."[73] However obvious this idea may initially appear, it is in fact the central thesis of Kuntaka's theory of poetry, as we can infer from the attention he devotes to a figure of speech called *svabhāvokti*, sometimes translated as "natural" or "naturalistic description." Indeed, as I will try to show in what follows, it is no exaggeration to say that *svabhāvokti* is the most important concept developed in the *Vakroktijīvita*, for while the title of the book seems to grant this status to *vakrokti* ("crooked" or "indirect expression"), the full significance of that word can be properly understood only in terms of Kuntaka's interpretation of *svabhāvokti*.

Well before Kuntaka uses it, the word *svabhāvokti* already appears in the pages of earlier Sanskrit rhetoricians, to whom we must now briefly turn. These writers (including the earliest rhetoricians Bhāmaha and Daṇḍin) are more interested in proposing guidelines for writing poetry than in explicitly raising theoretical issues, and in that regard their statements more closely resemble the stylistic prescriptions we might find in a writing manual than a philosopher's reflections on poetic language. Nonetheless, in positioning his own theoretical claims in relation to the writers who precede him, Kuntaka in effect draws out some of their implicit assumptions about the nature of poetry. Most crucially for Kuntaka, insofar as these writers are preoccupied

[73] svabhāvayuktam eva sarvathābhidheyapadavīm avatarati | (Kuntaka, *Vakroktijīvita*, 21, commentary on 1.12.)

with cataloguing figures of speech, they seem to adopt a view of poetry that sees figuration as its defining feature.[74]

One of the challenges such a view might face concerns how it would account for poetry devoid of figurative language. Consider a line taken from the *Kumārasambhava*, one of numerous instances of non-figurative poetry to be found in Kalidasa's oeuvre:

> When the antelope scratched his lover with an antler,
> her eyes squinted at the touch.[75]

While impressionistically it might be easy to recognize such a sentence as poetic, what makes it so? More generally, in the absence of an easily discernible figure of speech, what distinguishes a poetic utterance from the speech we encounter in everyday life? The early rhetoricians seem to have bypassed the question by granting such examples their own figure of speech, which came to be called *svabhāvokti*.[76] However, Kuntaka finds this solution inadequate; for if *svabhāvokti* were considered a figure of speech, then "even a cart-driver's sentences, being possessed of *svabhāvokti*, would be figurative…."[77] Neither scholastic pedantry nor an elitist disdain for the way laborers speak motivates Kuntaka's objection. Rather, if Kuntaka takes issue with positing *svabhāvokti* as a figure of speech, it is because doing so covers up rather than confronts the provocation that non-figurative verse poses to the theory of poetry. Or to put the same argument in less polemical terms: if Kuntaka does not consider *svabhāvokti* a figure of speech, it is because in a certain sense *all*

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[74] For a detailed discussion of the theory implicit in the works of early rhetoricians, see McCrea, *The Teleology of Poetics in Medieval Kashmir*, 34–39.

[75] śṛṅgeṇa ca sparśanimīlitākṣīṃ mṛgīm akaṇḍūyata kṛṣṇasāraḥ || *VJ* 1.ś78; *K* 3.36 ||

[76] On the history of the concept of *svabhāvokti*, see V. Raghavan, *Studies on Some Concepts of the Alaṃkāra Śāstra* (Adyar Library and Research Centre, 1973), 92–116.

[77] śākaṭikavākyānām api sālaṃkāratā prāpnoti svabhāvoktiyuktatvena | (Kuntaka, *Vakroktijīvita*, 21, commentary on 1.12.)

language ("even a cart-driver's sentences") is *svabhāvokti*. We might better appreciate Kuntaka's point if we translated *svabhāvokti* not as "natural description" but, more literally and as Kuntaka himself recommends, as "the telling of [a thing's] nature" (*svabhāvasya uktiḥ*).[78] Taken in this more fundamental sense, the word *svabhāvokti* no longer designates a distinct figure of speech but offers a description of language as such.

Such a description evidently holds true in a trivial sense for statements like "The sky is blue," which predicates blueness of the sky. But in Kuntaka's readings of individual poems, we find a more nuanced understanding of his claim that all language tells the nature of things. His reading of *Raghuvaṃśa* 5.15 is particularly instructive here, since it very clearly differentiates between a purely formal predication, which exists only as a grammatical structure, and a more fundamental predication, which for Kuntaka is the kind of predication that occurs as language itself. Canto 5 of Kalidasa's *Raghuvaṃśa* opens with the arrival of the sage Kautsa at the court of Raghu. The sage has come to request money from the generous king, but he quickly learns that the king has nothing left to give:

> Lord of men! Standing there with your body only,
> having gifted away your wealth to blessed suppliants,
> you appear like a rice plant standing with its stalk only,
> after foresters have plucked all the grain.[79]

While the apparent subject here (what Kuntaka calls the *vācya* or *abhidheya*) is the king, Kuntaka is primarily interested in what the utterance reveals about the speaker: "While describing the nature of such a great king as praiseworthy, the sage [has used] a figure of speech that refers back to an

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[78] svabhāvoktir…yā **svabhāvasya** padārthadharmalakṣaṇasya parispandasya **uktir** abhidhā | (Ibid., 20, commentary on 1.11.)

[79] śarīramātreṇa narendra tiṣṭhann ābhāsi tīrthapratipāditarddhiḥ |
āraṇyakopāttaphalaprasūtiḥ stambena nīvāra ivāvaśiṣṭaḥ || *VJ* 118; *R* 5.15 ||

activity rooted in his own experience….”[80] Rather than understand Kalidasa's image as merely decorative, or as a free-floating description unconditioned by the one who speaks it, Kuntaka's instinct is to place it within the context of the sage's "own experience" of living in an ashram. Another character would have spoken differently in Kautsa's situation; the god Indra, for example, might have constructed the impossible image of a tree in heaven bereft of all its gifts. Kalidasa's verse thus adds less to our understanding of the king than to our understanding of Kautsa: "the nature of the subject appears almost entirely covered up by the nature of the speaker."[81] Therefore, in Kuntaka's claim that "only an entity connected with its nature can ever enter the path to expression,"[82] the entity whose nature is revealed in language need not coincide with what is grammatically predicated. Even the monosyllable "Help!" might be understood to predicate fear on the part of the one who has cried out.

All language thus tells the nature of things; what distinguishes poetic language is the way it tells this nature. To see what changes for Kuntaka in this shift from "all language" to "poetic language"—from *svabhāvokti* to *vakrokti*, we might say—let us consider the objection of a hypothetical interlocutor with which Kuntaka opens his book:

> If the things in the universe were shown just as they are, then there would be no wonder at all; for it is by universal law that the *kimśuka* tree is red.[83]

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[80] atra ślāghyatayā tathāvidhamahārājaparispande varṇyamāne munināsvānubhavasiddhavyavahārānusāreṇālaṃkaraṇayojanam [aucityaparipoṣam āvahati] | (Kuntaka, *Vakroktijīvita*, 68, commentary on 1.54.)

[81] atra vaktuḥ svabhāvena ca vācyaparispandaḥ saṃvṛtaprāyaḥ lakṣyate | (Ibid., commentary on 1.54.)

[82] svabhāvayuktam eva sarvathābhidheyapadavīm avatarati | (Ibid., 21, commentary on 1.12.)

[83] yathātattvaṃ vivecyante bhāvās trailokyavartinaḥ | yadi tan nādbhutaṃ nāma daivaraktā hi kiṃśukāḥ || *VJ* 1.ś2||

The objection rests on a static interpretation of a thing's nature; that is, it assumes that the nature of a thing is plain for all to see in the same way. Since language that adheres to a thing's actual nature amounts to stating the obvious, writing devoid of figures of speech would simply be redundant, adding nothing new to our knowledge or experience of the world.

It is in order to distance himself from this view, I take it, that in referring to an entity's nature Kuntaka generally prefers the word *parispanda*—literally a "throbbing out"—repeating it with an almost obsessive frequency in his main text while using the more common *svabhāva* to gloss it in his commentary. The concept of *parispanda* has a rich history in the theological tradition commonly known as Kashmiri Shaivism. Here I would simply like to note that in preferring this word, Kuntaka draws our attention to what we might call the partial or aspectual nature of perception—the fact that, in any perception, certain aspects of the perceived object throb out while others recede into the background. A well-known philosophical example serves as a useful illustration of this point: since in any perception of a cube at most three faces are visible while the rest remain concealed, no single perception of it could possibly include all the faces at once. The same is true of non-geometric facets of a cube, including color, texture, its use as a die, the dots on its faces, and its temperature while pressed against our palm: in a given moment, some of these aspects will attract our attention while others elude it.

For Kuntaka too all perception is necessarily aspectual. What distinguishes poetic perception lies in the kinds of aspects it registers:

> Even if it is possible for an object to be inlaid with all sorts of qualities, what is expressed [in poetry] is an object's connection with just the kind of quality capable of giving pleasure to sensitive readers. And a quality is deemed capable of giving such pleasure if, because of it, the grandeur of the thing's nature is brought to light,

> or alternatively, if what is brought to light is the thing's capacity to develop an emotion in literature (*rasa*).[84]

While all utterances present an object under some aspect or another, poetic utterances record specifically those aspects that "give pleasure." As the second sentence specifies, the pleasure that Kuntaka means here is not a vaguely defined sense of aesthetic enjoyment but derives quite precisely from the intensity of the sensations which poets create in their work. Since poets writing in the brilliant style (where "all that is one way seems another") project onto entities aspects of their own contrivance, poetic power (*pratibhā*) for them amounts to something like a superior imaginative faculty. By contrast—and more relevant in the present context—since poets writing in the delicate style place "emphasis on the nature of things," poetic power in their case amounts to something like a heightened attentiveness, both to sensibilia as well as to mental phenomena. Indeed, as even a cursory glance at Kalidasa's famous descriptive passages would confirm, the strength of his poetry often issues from his powers of minute observation (recall for instance his depictions of the gestures of Indumati's anxious suitors [*R* 6], of animals exasperated by summer

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[84] yadyapi padārthasya nānāvidhadharmakhacitatvaṃ saṃbhavati tathāpi tathāvidhena dharmeṇa saṃbandhaḥ samākhyāyate yaḥ sahṛdayahṛdayāhlādam ādhātuṃ kṣamate | tasya ca tadāhlādasāmarthyaṃ saṃbhāvyate yena kācideva svabhāvamahattā rasaparipoṣāṅgatvaṃ vā vyaktim āsādayati | (Kuntaka, *Vakroktijīvita*, 17, commentary on 1.9.)
For Kuntaka, *rasa* is a formal concept referring to an emotion depicted in a work of literature. By contrast, for writers like Abhinavagupta, *rasa* refers to the reader's experience of a depicted emotion (what Kuntaka instead calls *āhlāda* with almost systematic rigor). Krishnamoorthy's comment on Kuntaka's use of these terms is illuminating: "As Prof. Daniel H. H. Ingalls observes penetratingly, 'The word *rasa* possesses an ambiguity of denotation; a particular *rasa* is said to lie in a given literary work as a sweet taste or a bitter taste may lie in a given food or drink. The connoisseur of poetry is also said to have a *rasa* (a taste) for the poetry he enjoys, much as a wine-taster has a taste for wine.' After Abhinavagupta the two meanings have been confounded so often that it is difficult to determine what exactly is meant by any writer in a given context. But Kuntaka is blissfully free from this ambiguity. He restricts his usage of the word *rasa* to the first meaning only unlike post-Abhinavagupta writers. He invariably uses words like *āhlāda* to mean the second" (Kuntaka, *Vakroktijīvita*, xxxviii).

heat [*RS* 1], or of Rama's mental states on seeing significant landmarks of personal and general history [*R* 13], to list just a few). In Kuntaka's account, what makes Kalidasa's description of the antelope poetic is therefore not a figure of speech but the kind of notice-taking that yielded it.

Many of Kuntaka's remarks on individual verses of Kalidasa reveal that his theory of poetic language deeply informs his style of reading. Consider, for example, his analysis of *Raghuvaṃśa* 14.70, which describes a sage moments before finding Sita abandoned in the forest:

> One who was on his way
> to gather grass and sticks for the fire
> approached her, following
> the sound of her weeping;
> it was the poet whose grief (*śoka*),
> surging up at the vision of a bird
> slain by a hunter, had turned to verse (*śloka*).[85]

The incident of the bird referenced here marks what the Sanskrit literary tradition sees as its originary moment. As the *Rāmāyaṇa* narrates in its opening pages, Valmiki's sighting of a bird wrenched suddenly from its lover so moved him with grief that the first line of poetry spontaneously leapt from his mouth. One way of reading Kalidasa's verse then would be to take it as a reiteration of the *Rāmāyaṇa*'s general account of poetic creation, or even as a fanciful explanation of how Valmiki came to compose the *Rāmāyaṇa*. On this latter reading, the association that Kalidasa makes between Valmiki's sighting of the bird and his following Sita's cry would have the effect of proposing a new impetus for the epic's composition: if Valmiki's compassion for a lovelorn bird stirred him to compose the first verse of poetry, then how much more would he sympathize with Sita when he finds her in a comparable situation, and how much richer would be the poem that results?

[85] tām abhyagacchad ruditānusārī muniḥ kuśedhmāharaṇāya yātaḥ |
niṣādaviddhāṇḍajadarśanotthaḥ ślokatvam āpadyata yasya śokaḥ || *VJ* 1.ś31; *R* 14.70 ||

While Kuntaka might not disagree with this interpretation, his own reading certainly shifts its point of emphasis, taking the verse less as an instance of metapoetic reflection than as one of characterization:

> All that needs to be given here is the synonym "Valmiki" to specify who the sage is. But by calling him "the one whose grief, arising at the mere sight of the bird slain by a hunter, turned to verse," we learn that this sage is supremely compassionate. The poet thus intends to communicate an essential aspect of the mind (*antaḥkaraṇaparispanda*) of Valmiki when he breaks down on seeing the condition of Janaka's daughter in that situation….[86]

Issuing directly from Kuntaka's understanding of language, these comments seek to show how the verse predicates the nature of an entity, which in this case happens to be Valmiki (or more precisely Valmiki's mind). Of all the possible names and biographical facts by which the sage could be identified, Kalidasa has chosen one that tolls us to a time Valmiki had been moved by another's grief. In Kuntaka's account, the bird incident therefore does not primarily function as an unconnected aside, whether about poetic creation in general ("Valmiki found Sita dejected—and by the way, this is how poets compose") or about the *Rāmāyaṇa*'s creation ("—and by the way, this is how Valmiki came to compose the *Rāmāyaṇa*"). Rather, it serves to reveal Valmiki's instinctive compassion, an aspect of his nature whose registration develops the depicted emotion ("he found her dejected, and if you recall how compassionate Valmiki is, you would realize how difficult this must have been for him"); an aspect, moreover, which readers may well overlook in versions of the *Rāmāyaṇa* that are primarily concerned with its sequence of events.

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[86] atra ko'sau munir vālmīkir iti paryāyapadamātre vaktavye paramakāruṇikasya niṣādanirbhinnaśakunisaṃdarśanamātrasamutthitaḥ śokaḥ ślokatvam abhajata yasyeti tasya tadavasthajanakarājaputrīdaśādarśanavivaśavṛtter antaḥkaraṇaparispandaḥ [karuṇarasaparipoṣāṅgatayā sahṛdayahṛdayāhlādakārī] kaver abhipretaḥ | (Kuntaka, *Vakroktijīvita*, 17, commentary on 1.9.)

Kuntaka's concept of *vakrokti* or "indirect expression" identifies a tendency inherent in all poetic language, and exemplified here in Kalidasa's description of Valmiki, to record details that escape (or deviate from) common ways of perceiving and feeling and thus also our habitual ways of speaking. As Kuntaka lucidly puts it, "*vakrokti* is captivating expression that goes beyond well known expression."[87] It is true that this going-beyond often appears as a figure of speech. Yet even where a figure of speech does turn up in poetry, Kuntaka understands it as the effect of a deeper principle of deviation (*vakratā*):

> It is not the case that word and idea (*śabdārthau*) exist separately, and are then affixed with some *alaṅkāra* which is different from them. Rather, the expression itself, being connected with a strikingness brought about by a deviation, just *is* the *alaṅkāra*—insofar as *alaṅkāra* (*tat*) is simply that which creates great beauty.[88]

The import of this passage hinges on how we understand the word *alaṅkāra*. If we take it in its conventional sense to mean "ornament" or "figure of speech," then the second sentence becomes almost impenetrable. Kuntaka seems to anticipate this difficulty, for in his final clause he reminds us that *alaṅkāra* literally refers to anything which completes something else, or renders it sufficient; hence, in the case of entities like bodies and words, "that which creates great beauty." If *alaṅkāra* ends up conventionally meaning "figure of speech," it is presumably because figures of speech are typically regarded as the source of poetry's beauty. Yet for Kuntaka, as we have seen, the beauty of poetry does not come from an external element which is superadded to the bare statement of an idea, and which could therefore be removed from the statement without significantly altering the idea. Poetry's true *alaṅkāra*, that in it "which creates great beauty," must

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[87] vakroktiḥ prasiddhābhidhānavyatirekiṇī vicitraivābhidhā | (Ibid., 20, commentary on 1.10.)

[88] śabdārthau pṛthagavasthitau na kenāpi vyatiriktenālaṃkaraṇena yojyete kintu vakratāvaicitryayogitayābhidhānamātram evānayor alaṃkāraḥ tasyaiva śobhātiśayakāritvāt | (Ibid., commentary on 1.10.)

instead be sought at an earlier stage of the poetic process, in a deviation which affects first how an entity is conceived (*artha*) and only subsequently how that conception is expressed in words (*śabda*).

Therefore, while Kuntaka's frequent use of words meaning "expression" (*ukti*, *abhidhāna*, *bhaṇiti*, etc.) might seem to suggest that *vakrokti* pertains to a poet's skill with words, elsewhere he clearly indicates that it pertains no less to a poet's ideas. Both thought and language are intimately involved in the process that Kuntaka calls "the poet's indirect operation" (*vakrakavivyāpāra*), which he describes in an early passage as follows:

> An idea first flashes before the poetic faculty (*pratibhā*) like a jewel which is no better than a chunk taken from raw stone. When this idea meets the indirect speech (*vakravākya*) of a skilled poet, it becomes a poem that delights sensitive readers, being as attractive as the jewel when it is polished on a grindstone.[89]

Kuntaka later returns to this process with a more penetrating formulation, offering two accounts of what it is to have a poetic idea which correspond to the delicate and brilliant styles:

> When inspiration strikes (*pratibhāyām*), entities shine forth by some aspect of their nature which has at that moment become clear (*tatkālollikhitena parispandena*); alternatively, the nature of entities is veiled over by a remarkable contrivance (*kenacid utkarṣeṇa*) which is suitable to the context. They then set out on the path to expression in a manner governed by the poet's intention, since only when objects are thus set down in words capable of communicating the poet's specific idea do they give pleasure to the mind.[90]

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[89] prathamaṃ ca pratibhāpratibhāsamānam aghaṭitapāṣāṇaśakalakalpamaṇiprakhyam eva vastu vidagdhakaviviracitavakravākyoparūḍhaṃ śāṇollīḍhamaṇimanoharatayā tadvidāhlādakārikāvyatvam adhirohati | (Ibid., 8–9, commentary on 1.7.)

[90] pratibhāyāṃ tatkālollikhitena kenacit parispandena parisphurantaḥ padārthāḥ prakṛtaprastāvasamucitena kenacid utkarṣeṇa vā samācchāditasvabhāvāḥ santo vivakṣāvidheyatvenābhidheyatāpadavīm avatarantas tathāvidhaviśeṣapratipādanasamarthenābhidhānenābhidhīyamānāś cetaścamatkāritām āpadyante | (Ibid., 16, commentary on 1.9.)

In both of these passages, the act of expression is crucially preceded by a moment of ideation. The difference between the brilliant and delicate styles of poetry is thus grounded not merely in two different ways of selecting words but, more radically, in two styles of encountering the world (one attentive, the other aestheticized), both of which deviate from our conventional representations of it. To write a poem is not just to compose beautiful or effective sentences but to propose a new mode of experience. Moreover, while Kuntaka might seem to be reducing all the variety of poetry to just a few styles (i.e., brilliant, delicate, and intermediate), he specifies that his concepts don't offer an exhaustive typology but simply indicate two poles and a midpoint on a stylistic spectrum:

> Because the styles are grounded in types of poetic temperament (*svabhāva*), it inevitably follows that they would be divided into a number of subvarieties. Nonetheless, since it would be impossible to enumerate all of them, it is reasonable to classify them generally according to just three types.[91]

There are therefore as many possible styles of poetry as there are temperaments in the world.[92]

Accordingly, the task of characterizing Kalidasa's style becomes coupled with that of specifying a distinctively Kalidasan mode of experience. I read statement 1.29 of the passage as Kuntaka's attempt to make just such a specification with the aid of a simile: "…great poets travel along [this path], like bees traveling along groves of blooming flowers." Bees offer a model for understanding how poets writing in the delicate style encounter the world; as Kuntaka elaborates

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[91] yadyapi kavisvabhāvabhedanibandhanatvād anantabhedabhinnatvam anivāryaṃ tathāpi parisaṃkhyātum aśakyatvāt sāmānyena traividhyam evopapadyate | (Ibid., 42, commentary on 1.24.)

[92] While Shulman's account of Kuntaka's theory of poetry offers an excellent description of the delicate style, it appears to miss the full extent to which Kuntaka is proposing a typology of different styles. For instance, when in chapter three Shulman reads of "a mode of poetic creativity by no means exhausted or, for that matter, even roughly defined by his discussion so far," he overlooks the fact that this mode has not only been defined precisely but even discussed in some detail in *VJ* 1.49-52. See Shulman, *More Than Real: A History of the Imagination in South India*, 94–95.

in his commentary, "the likeness of poets with bees indicates their devotion to collecting the essence [of entities], which is akin to the nectar of flowers."[93] Other creatures that pass through groves—deer, for example, or people, or even the wind—may certainly catch something of the fragrance of flowers from a distance, but only the bee can travel to the flower's center and taste the sweetness hidden there. In drawing out some of the crucial implications of Kuntaka's image, I have found it helpful (if at first it seems somewhat arbitrary) to compare it with a passage of Sri Aurobindo, whose writing similarly shifts to a metaphorical register while describing Kalidasa's poems:

> His creations in fact live in a peculiar light, which is not the light that never was on sea or land but rather our ordinary sunshine recognisable though strangely & beautifully altered. The alteration is not real; rather our vision is affected by the recognition of something concealed by the sunbeams & yet the cause of the sunbeams; but it is plain human sunlight we see always.[94]

The two passages are no doubt separated by what seems an abyss, not only because they are written many centuries apart but, more significantly, because they offer accounts of different situations. While Kuntaka's simile characterizes the perception of a poet (it is *Kalidasa's* eye that penetrates to the core of things like a bee entering the chamber of a flower), Aurobindo's light imagery dramatizes the effects that Kalidasa's poetry has on the reader's perception (it is *we* who come away from Kalidasa's poems with refreshed eyes, such that a new radiance seems to emanate from the world). It is all the more striking then that both passages should share the same underlying intuition about Kalidasa's poetry; namely, that while it is characterized by a style of perception which "alters" or "deviates from" our usual ways of perceiving, it is nonetheless our own world to

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[93] teṣāṃ ca bhramarasādṛśyena kusumamakarandakalpasārasaṃgrahavyasanitā | (Ibid., 44, commentary on 1.25-29)

[94] Sri Aurobindo, *Kalidasa: Essays and Translations*, 66.

which it gives us new access and not a world of Kalidasa's fancies. For just as Kuntaka's poet-bee finds in the sweet nectar a rarely accessed but nonetheless real part of the flower, Aurobindo insists that the strange and beautiful light illuminating Kalidasa's works is in fact nothing but "our ordinary sunshine." For both writers, the distinction of Kalidasa's poetry lies in a peculiar strength of characterization—in a power to see the same things we see, but to bring to their surface a sweetness that renders them momentarily unfamiliar.

2. Learning from Kalidasa: Kuntaka on the Educative Function of Poetry

My analysis thus far has followed a thread in the *Vakroktijīvita* which corresponds to Kuntaka's general remark that "a taste of the nectar that is poetry creates pleasure in the mind."[95] I have tried to show that for Kuntaka, the pleasure of Kalidasa's poetry derives from the particular way it alters our attunement to the world, getting us to notice nuances in it that we tend to pass over. I will now shift to a second thread in Kuntaka's writing on Kalidasa, which follows from his remarks on the educative function of literature. Early in his book, Kuntaka reveals to us the kind of reader he has in mind when writing about poetry:

> A work of poetry, which is a means for achieving dharma and the other life-ends [i.e., success in the four domains of morality, power, enjoyment, and spirituality], and which is expressed in a beautiful sequence of words, delights the hearts of people of nobility.[96]

In his commentary on this statement, Kuntaka clarifies that by "people of nobility" (*abhijāta*) he means members of royalty, such as princes:

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[95] kāvyāmṛtarasenāntaś **camatkāro** vitanyate (*VJ* 1.5). In his commentary, Kuntaka glosses *antaḥ* with *cetasi* (Kuntaka, *Vakroktijīvita*, 5.).

[96] dharmādisādhanopāyaḥ sukumārakramoditaḥ | kāvyabandho'bhijātānāṃ hṛdayāhlādakārakaḥ (*VJ* 1.3)

> It is well known that princes have inherited their wealth, and if on their way to taking control of the whole world's fate they are left to their own devices without any good instruction, they would be capable of uprooting all the customary ways of dealing with things. For precisely this reason, in order to teach them how to rule properly [*tat*], poets tell the stories of past kings of good conduct who can serve as examples.[97]

Princes assume power with a dangerous but constitutive weakness: entrusted with huge responsibilities like maintaining the treasury, arbitrating disputes, and leading military campaigns, they yet lack the rich store of experiences that would give them a sense of what does and doesn't work in a given situation. Literature can help fill this lack, introducing princes to a range of situations they may face in the future while shielding them from the real-life consequences of being involved in those situations. Of course, not all readers of poetry are princes, and "anyone who has spent time reading even a fraction of a good poem would acquire much grace in their everyday dealings and so receive a worthy benefit."[98] But Kuntaka goes on to reveal that in his mind, even these other readers belong in one way or another to the court:

> When the everyday dealings of kings and other members of the royalty are being described, all their subsidiaries, such as chief ministers, are also portrayed as being skilled in their respective duties, thus offering instruction for conducting oneself in all walks of life.[99]

Each scene in literature involving a king or courtier thus has the potential to shape courtly readers into more judicious political actors. These passages suggest that when Kuntaka theorizes poetry,

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[97] rājaputrāḥ khalu samāsāditasvavibhavāḥ samastajagatīvyavasthākāritāṃ pratipadyamānāḥ ślāghyopadeśaśūnyatayā svatantrāḥ santaḥ samucitasakalavyavahārocchedaṃ pravartayituṃ prabhavantīty etadartham eva tadvyutpattaye vyatītasaccaritacaritarājacaritaṃ tannidarśanāya nibadhnanti kavayaḥ | (Kuntaka, *Vakroktijīvita*, 4, commentary on 1.3.)

[98] sarvaḥ kvacit kamanīyakāvye kṛtaśramaḥ samāsāditavyavahāraparispandasaundaryātiśayaḥ ślāghanīyaphalabhāg bhavati | (Ibid., commentary on 1.4.)

[99] mahatāṃ hi rājādīnāṃ vyavahāre varṇyamāne tadaṅgabhūtāḥ sarve mukhyāmātyaprabhṛtayaḥ samucitapratisvikakartavyavyavahāranipuṇatayā nibadhyamānāḥ sakalavyavahārivṛttopadeśatām āpadyante | (Ibid., commentary on 1.4.)

the reading situation he instinctively imagines, or at least one that he is often concerned with, is a courtly one.

Kuntaka's preoccupation with courtly readers and characters is apparent in many of his discussions of Kalidasa. Of course, Kalidasa's poems feature a variety of characters—not just courtly personages but also gods, semi-divine creatures, nonhumans, and the men and women of ashrams and cities—and as we saw above, Kuntaka is attentive to this variety. Nonetheless, when he writes about scenes involving courtly characters, often he not only describes how a particular verse or scene styles the reader's attention but also passes judgment on what is being depicted. To illustrate the nature of these judgments, below I have gathered passages from across the *Vakroktijīvita* where Kuntaka examines the following six scenes in Kalidasa's poetry, each of which features members of a court: Raghu's determination and generosity (*R* 5); Dilīpa's failure in moral reasoning (*R* 2); Duṣyanta's amnesia and grief (*A* 5 and 6); Rāma's love and bitterness (*R* 13); Kāma's bad influence (*K* 2); and Daśaratha's error (*R* 9). In elaborating Kuntaka's arguments about these scenes, I have sometimes needed to quote verses of Kalidasa which Kuntaka himself doesn't explicitly cite; these are marked with an asterisk.

Scene 1: Raghu's determination and generosity. Canto 5 of the *Raghuvaṃśa* opens with a customary display of courtly decorum. King Raghu receives Kautsa with a series of questions suggesting that he is prepared to do anything for the sage:

> Does sage Varatantu's askesis remain unafflicted by obstacles…?
> Are the ashram trees unharmed by the wind and other such agitations…?
> Are the fawns healthy…?
> …Do the ripened rice and grain remain uneaten by the town-cattle that feed
> on straw…?

…My mind longs to carry out your command….[100]*

Kuntaka's remarks on this scene draw our attention to a number of extreme circumstances surrounding Raghu's speech: (1) Having gifted away all his wealth, the king is so poor that he can't afford more than a clay pot as the container for Kautsa's offering.[101] (2) Kautsa's request of fourteen crores' worth of gold to pay off his tuition is especially demanding.[102] (3) Since Raghu has already conquered the entire earth in Canto 4, there is literally nowhere in the world he could go to acquire the money.[103] (4) The heap of gold that the god Kubera finally gives Raghu, which is like "a quarter of mount Meru," amounts to "a hundred or a thousand times more" than what Kautsa requires.[104]

In Kuntaka's reading, the extremity of these circumstances serves to elicit certain qualities of Raghu. Without the first three extremes, which threaten to undermine the king's hospitality, the opening speech would have no occasion to pass the test of action and would therefore remain a mere gesture. The constraints thus force Raghu to make good on his word: in order to come up with the gold in the face of such abject incapacity, he must prove that he is courageous enough to

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[100] …āpadyate na vyayam antarāyaiḥ kaccin maharṣes…tapaḥ? (*R* 5.5); kaccin na vāyvādir upaplavo vaḥ…āśramapādapānām? (*R* 5.6); kaccin mṛgīṇām anaghā prasūtiḥ? (*R* 5.7); nīvārapākādi kaḍaṅgarīyair āmṛśyate jānapadair na kaccit? (*R* 5.9); …mano niyogakriyayotsukam me (*R* 5.11)

[101] viśvajidākhyamakhadīkṣādakṣiṇīkṛtasamastasaṃpadaḥ (Kuntaka, *Vakroktijīvita*, 246, commentary on 4.1-2.)

[102] samāveditacaturdaśakoṭiparimāṇacāmīkarām ācāryaprad[ey?]adakṣiṇām (Ibid., 247, commentary on 4.1-2.)

[103] caturudadhikāñcīkalāpālaṃkaraṇakāśyapīparivṛḍhasya (Ibid., 246, commentary on 4.1-2.)

[104] The first quote is from Kalidasa: …pādaṃ sumeroriva…. (*VJ* 4.ś6; *R* 5.18). The second is from Kuntaka: prārthitāt śataguṇaṃ sahasraguṇaṃ vā (Ibid., 248, commentary on 4.1-2.)

battle the heavens, to consider even the god Kubera "as though he were a neighboring and subordinate king." It is the king's unrelenting determination to achieve success (*jayādhyavasāyaḥ*), occasioned by a seemingly impossible situation, that for Kuntaka gives the scene "its remarkable capacity to delight sensitive readers."[105]

The amount of gold gifted by Kubera presents a similar kind of test. If Raghu were given just the required amount, a basic sense of decorum alone would compel him to fulfill Kautsa's request and give him all the gold. The excess gold thus tests the true limits of the king's generosity: because Raghu gifts away even the surplus so freely, "what emerges is an incredible height of nobility outshining even the wish-granting trees of heaven, which are inferior in their generosity since they are marred by the fault of requiring a desire."[106] The wish-granting trees are typically paragons of generosity because they fulfill any wish one might have. Yet one must have a wish in the first place before the trees can fulfill it; in this regard Raghu's generosity exceeds that of the trees, since his gift goes above and beyond what Kautsa had initially requested.

Each extreme circumstance thus distills an essential quality of Raghu, making it "throb out."[107] For Kuntaka, the opening of Canto 5 instantiates a more general technique of scene-construction (*prakaraṇa-vakratā*) which readers could find in other poetry too: "In the same way [as I have done here], sensitive readers should themselves look out for this kind of beauty which

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[105] kuberaṃ prati sāmantasaṃbhāvanayā jayādhyavasāyaḥ kāmapi sahṛdayahṛdayāhlādakāritāṃ pratipadyate | (Ibid., 247, commentary on 4.1 and 2.)

[106] sarvasya viśrāṇāt…kalpanākalaṅkakadarthitārthavitaraṇānuccatarān kalpatarūnapi tiraskurvāṇaḥ sa kopyaudāryasīmāviśeṣaḥ samujjṛmbhate (Ibid., commentary on 4.1 and 4.2.)

[107] yatra niryantraṇotsāha**parispando**paśobhinī pravṛttir vyavahartṝṇām…|| *VJ* 4.1 ||

flows with emotion (i.e., the beauty resulting from this technique) in the works of great poets."[108] If the beauty of such scenes "flows with emotion," it is because extreme circumstances often give rise to the emotions worthy of literary representation. The emotional range of daily life is typically narrow: it is not every day that people are driven to intense determination, rage, love, grief, or terror. That is why literature often stages situations that exceed the conditions of everyday life, since often it is by the pressure of extreme circumstances that one's nature expresses itself to the fullest.

Scene 2: Dilipa's failure in moral reasoning. The king Dilipa also encounters a set of extreme circumstances that reveal his nature, in Canto 2 of *Raghuvaṃśa*. When Dilipa seeks Vasishta's help to ensure the continuation of his lineage, the sage instructs him to honor the magical cow Nandini, tending to all her needs until she is satisfied. After twenty-one days pass with no significant obstacles, Nandini creates an obstacle of her own in order to test the king's mettle: in a rare moment when Dilipa loses focus, she wanders into a cave and simulates being attacked by a lion. The king draws an arrow to shoot the lion but finds that his hand has been mysteriously paralyzed—"as though its deed had been set down in a painting"*—and that a physical contest has turned into a rhetorical one.[109]

The ensuing debate tests Dilipa's ability to distinguish genuine arguments from spurious ones. While all the lion's arguments seem reasonable, they simply use the language of reason to justify a desired result. The king's task is to counter these sophistical arguments with sound

[108] evam eṣā mahākaviprabandheṣu prakaraṇavakratāvicchittiḥ rasaniṣyandinī sahṛdayaiḥ svayam utprekṣaṇīyā | (Kuntaka, *Vakroktijīvita*, 248, commentary 4.1 and 2.)

[109] karaḥ…citrārpitārambhaḥ… || *R* 2.31||

reasoning that would recommend the proper course of action, however perilous that may be—in this case, to offer himself in place of the cow. But resisting the lion's seductive logic is not easy, as Kalidasa's narrative voice suggests:

> Having spoken this much, the lion stopped;
> but by his echo which filled the cave, it seemed
> the mountain too boomed the same thoughts
> to the king with affection.*[110]

If the echo sounds affectionate, it is because it rings with the alluring subtext of the lion's speech. For in addition to justifying why he is right to eat the cow, the lion's arguments also show Dilipa a way to avoid a premature death while at the same time protecting his honor. It is more likely the king than the narrator, then, who imagines the echo as the mountain's affectionate voice.

In Kalidasa's poem, Dilipa is ultimately successful in resisting the lion's false arguments that would save his life: when he drops his bow and willingly submits to his own death, Nandini puts off her disguise and honors the king, eventually granting him an heir in Raghu. For Kuntaka, however, one of Dilipa's responses has a crucial flaw, which goes unremarked even by Nandini. In 2.49 the lion proposes that the loss of a single cow might be compensated by a gift of other cows:

> So you fear that your teacher,
> the very image of fire,
> shall be enraged at a crime
> committed against this one cow.
> But you can quell his anger
> by presenting him crores' worth
> of cows with udders full as brimming pots.[111]

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[110] etāvad uktvā virate mṛgendre pratisvanenāsya guhāgatena | śiloccayo'pi kṣitipālam uccaiḥ prītyā tam evārtham abhāṣateva || *R* 2.51 ||

[111] athaikadhenor aparādhacaṇḍād guroḥ kṛśānupratimād bibheṣi |
śakyo'sya manyur bhavatā'pi netuṃ gāḥ koṭiśaḥ sparśayatā ghaṭoghnīḥ ||

The lion's logic here distorts the nature of Dilipa's situation in two ways: first, it suggests that the king's deeds should be motivated by a fear of adverse consequences rather than the inherent dignity of actions; second, it presumes that Nandini's life is suitable to be exchanged. While the king adequately responds to the first distortion ("For a man to let perish what is meant to be protected, then stand before his master while he remains unhurt—this is impossible"*),[112] in Kuntaka's view his response to the second distortion misses the point:

> How can the sage be placated
> by a gift of other cows?
> Know this cow to be no inferior
> to [her mother] Surabhi;
> you could only have attacked her
> by the strength of Shiva.[113]

In order to expose the troubling implication of the king's response, Kuntaka rephrases it as follows: "'If it were ever possible to match this cow with other cows, then it might indeed be admissible for the sage and me to consider giving up on the protection of this life.'"[114] In other words, by invoking Nandini's superiority to other cows, Dilipa implies that certain cows are intrinsically more worth protecting than others. Yet the true error in the lion's argument consists not in its underestimation of Nandini's life, but in the presumption that life can be evaluated at all and even exchanged. As a king who must ensure the well-being of all creatures in his dominion, Dilipa

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[112] …sthātuṃ niyoktur na hi śakyam agre vināśya rakṣyaṃ svayam akṣatena || *R* 2. 56 ||

[113] katham nu śakyānunayo maharṣir viśrāṇanād anyapayasvinīnām |
imām anūnāṃ surabher avehi rudraujasā tu prahṛtaṃ tvayāsyām || *R* 2.54 ||

[114] ityanyāsāṃ gavāṃ tatprativastupradānayogyatā yadi kadācit saṃbhavati tatas tasya muner mama cobhayorapyetaj jīvitaparirakṣaṇair apekṣyam upapannam iti (Kuntaka, *Vakroktijīvita*, 71, commentary on 1.57)

should instead have argued that each life, regardless of whose, is valuable in its singularity. For Kuntaka, "[his] statement thus has a great unfittingness."[115]

Scene 3: Dushyanta's amnesia and grief. Kalidasa bases his drama *Abhijñānaśākuntala* on an episode recited in the *Mahābhārata*. In both versions of the story, the king Dushyanta elopes with Shakuntala, a young woman he meets in the forest on a hunting trip, before returning to his court in Hastinapura. Some months later, when Shakuntala arrives at Dushyanta's court pregnant with his child, he bizarrely "forgets" her, refusing to acknowledge he has even seen the girl. Kalidasa's most significant change to the original story concerns the nature of this refusal: "whereas the reason for the forgetting is untold in the epic, the poet [has created] a curse spoken by the sage Durvasa."[116] In Kalidasa's play, the sage casts this curse when Shakuntala fails to show him hospitality (wrapped up as she is in the thought of Dushyanta) and, enraged, he intends to teach her how it feels to be neglected:

> You fail to notice me, vessel of askesis, as I approach!
> The man whom you contemplate with undivided attention
> shall forget you, even when reminded,
> like one intoxicated forgets a story he has told before.[117]

For Kuntaka, Kalidasa's invention of the curse is another example of the artistry involved in scene-construction (*prakaraṇa-vakratā*). But what is so artistic about this invention? That is, what effects does it generate in Kalidasa's play?

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[115] [iti tātparyaparyavasānād] atyantam anaucityayukteyam uktiḥ | (Ibid.)

[116] …duṣyantasya vismaraṇakāraṇam itivṛttāgaditam api…muner durvāsasaḥ śāpam utpāditavān kaveḥ | (Kuntaka, *Vakroktijīvita*, 249, commentary on 4.3 and 4.)

[117] vicintayantī yam ananyamānasā taponidhiṃ vetsi na mām upasthitam |
smariṣyati tvāṃ sa na bodhito'pi san kathāṃ pramattaḥ prathamaṃ kṛtāmiva || *A* 4.1 ||

We find one answer in the final sentence of Kuntaka's remarks on *Abhijñānaśākuntala*: "If this scene [i.e. the scene of the curse]…weren't included, then the distastefulness of Dushyanta's inexplicable forgetting would result in the misfortune of the play's deformation…."[118] Kuntaka's analysis here accords well with that of recent scholars who also approach Kalidasa's play by relating it to its precursor in the *Mahābhārata*, including Wendy Doniger and Romila Thapar.[119] There are of course important differences between Kuntaka and these modern readers. Most significantly, the latter tend to prefer the original story, because it portrays Shakuntala as a strong woman capable of defending herself and makes no excuses for Dushyanta, permitting us to direct our rage at him; by contrast, Kuntaka prefers Kalidasa's version because it portrays Dushyanta as a righteous king, saving his character and shielding him from our rage. All these readers nonetheless agree that the curse introduced by Kalidasa has the privative effect of absolving Dushyanta of any willful cruelty towards Shakuntala.

Yet sanitizing Dushyanta is not the only consequence of Kalidasa's plot-change. In Kuntaka's reading, the curse also makes the play "a vessel for depositing literary emotions" such that "the whole play acquires a remarkable beauty"; that is, the circumstances precipitated by the curse produce states of mind that are entirely absent in the original and that moreover "give

[118] avidyamāne punar etasmin [utpādyalavalāvaṇyalalāmni] prakaraṇe niṣkāraṇavismaraṇavairasyam [itihāsāṃśasyeva rūpakasyāpi] virūpakatāpattinimittatām avagāhate | (Kuntaka, *Vakroktijīvita*, 251, commentary on 4.3-4.)

[119] See Romila Thapar, *Sakuntala: Texts, Readings, Histories* (Columbia University Press, 2011), 73–74, and Wendy Doniger, *The Ring of Truth and Other Myths of Sex and Jewelry* (Oxford University Press, 2017), 74–83.

pleasure to sensitive readers."[120] Most of Kuntaka's analysis of *Śākuntala* is devoted to identifying the new states of mind made possible by Kalidasa's version of events.

The most famous of these appears near the beginning of Act 5, when Dushyanta hears a woman in his palace sing the following words:

> Haṃsapadikā:
> *Bee! After kissing the mango-blossom*
> *like that, panting for its fresh honey,*
> *how could you now have forgotten it,*
> *resting at ease inside a mere lotus?*[121]

The song fills Dushyanta with an inexplicable sense of compunction, prompting him to ask himself, "Hearing a song with such a meaning, though not far from anyone I love, why am I suddenly filled with sorrow?"* The audience knows that if Hamsapadika's reproach of a neglectful bee disturbs Dushyanta, it is because at some level he remembers his own neglect of Shakuntala. Dushyanta is shut out from this crucial knowledge, and must therefore formulate his own remarkable hypothesis:

> When even a happy man is disturbed
> on seeing visions beautiful, and hearing sweet words,
> perhaps then he remembers with his soul,
> though not his wakeful mind, affections
> of another birth rooted in the heart.[122]

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[120] evaṃvidhasya saṃvidhānakasya rasanidhānakalaśāyamānasya [māhātmyād] akhilasyāpi nāṭakasya kāpi (vicchittiḥ) | (…Kuntaka's list of various scenes…) parasparaṃ prakāśībhavad anargalānurāgaprāgbhārasaṅgād atīva] sahṛdayāhlādakāri | (Kuntaka, *Vakroktijīvita*, 250, commentary on 4.3-4.)

[121] ahiṇavamahulolùvo tumaṃ taha paricumbia cūamaṅjarīm |
kamalavasaimettaṇivvudo mahuara vimhario si ṇaṃ kahaṃ || *A* 5.1 ||
(*Skt. chāyā*: abhinavamadhulolupas tvam tathā paricumbya cūtamañjarīm |
kamalavasatimātranirvṛto madhukara vismṛto 'sy enām katham ||)

[122] rājā (ātmagatam)—kiṃ nu khalu gītam evaṃvidhārtham ākarṇyeṣṭajanavirahād ṛte'pi balād utkaṇṭhito'smi | athavā |
ramyāṇi vīkṣya madhurāṁśca niśamya śabdān
paryutsuko bhavati yatsukhito'pi jantuḥ |

It is clear from Dushyanta's words that his memory of Shakuntala has not been razed out entirely; as Kuntaka writes, "although the sage's curse has blocked the memory of her, an impression of his lover tremble[s] forth."[123] In addition to shifting the blame from Dushyanta, then, the curse allows Kalidasa to explore in his writing the workings of a passive domain of thinking (*cetas*), inaccessible to the "waking" or conscious mind (*bodha*) while nonetheless influencing it. Or as Krishnamoorthy puts it in his account of Kuntaka's analysis, it is not just a question of guilt-clearing but also a "question of probing the inmost depths underlying the psychology" of Dushyanta.[124]

At another moment in his analysis, Kuntaka has us attend to Dushyanta's state of mind in Act 6 when, after seeing the ring he had gifted Shakuntala, he suddenly remembers her. Shakuntala had lost this ring on her way to Dushyanta's court and was consequently unable to remind him of their love. When it finally reaches the court by an unlikely route—Shakuntala's finger, a river, the belly of a fish, the hands of a fisherman, and finally the hands of the king's officers—Shakuntala is long gone, and Dushyanta is "[ruined] by the intensity of an insufferable fever of separation."[125] The chamberlain describes the king's state of mind in words that Kuntaka quotes for their exemplarity:

> He refuses to wear beautiful ornaments:
> only one shining gold bangle adorns his left wrist.

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taccetasā smarati nūnam abodhapūrvaṃ
bhāvasthirāṇi jananāntarasauhṛdāni || *A* 5.2 ||

[123] muniśāpāpasāritapreyasīsmṛter api tadadhivāsanāpi ca parisphurantī… | (Kuntaka, *Vakroktijīvita*, 250, commentary on 4.3-4.)

[124] Krishnamoorthy, "Kālidāsa in the Eyes of Kuntaka," 131.

[125] …duḥsahavirahajvarapātāvegavikala[tvam] | (Kuntaka, *Vakroktijīvita*, 251, commentary on 4.34.)

His lower lip is red from sighs,
his eyes wearied from insomnia.
On account of his own radiance, he is
like a brilliant gem cut to perfection:
reduced, though it doesn't seem that way.[126]

Kuntaka doesn't explain in detail why Dushyanta's sadness should so "give pleasure sensitive readers." We might guess, however, that here too it has partly to do with Kalidasa's treatment of memory. Perplexed by the belatedness of his recollection, Dushyanta wonders aloud what could have caused his amnesia: "Was it a dream? Or an illusion? Or a mental glitch? Or did my fortune diminish after completely exhausting itself?"*[127] He makes another attempt at understanding his amnesia in Act 7, where he describes the episode with an astonishing simile:

Suppose a man were to say 'there is no elephant'
when one is before his eyes;
were to doubt himself when it passes by;
then, having seen footprints,
were convinced that one had been there.
Such was my mind's transformation."*[128]

The simile astonishes precisely because it corresponds to no conceivable experience, failing to deliver on the concreteness it seems to promise. For one could reasonably struggle to perceive a flash of lightning, an eye's glint, or a hummingbird's wing, registering these only by the traces they leave behind; not so an elephant. I take the bluntness of Dushyanta's choice of example to stress the unconscionability of forgetting a loved one. We often remember those we love suddenly

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[126] pratyādiṣṭaviśeṣamaṇḍanavidhir vāmaprakoṣṭhārpitaṃ
bibhrat kāñcanam ekam eva valayaṃ śvāsoparaktādharaḥ |
cintājāgaraṇapratāmranayanas tejoguṇād ātmanaḥ
saṃskārollikhito mahāmaṇiriva kṣīṇo'pi nālakṣyate || *A* 6.6 ||

[127] svapno nu māyā nu matibhramo nu kliṣṭaṃ nu tāvatphalam eva puṇyam || *A* 6.10 ||

[128] yathā gajo neti samakṣarupe tasminn apakrāmati saṃśayaḥ syāt |
padāni dṛṣṭvā tu bhavatpratītis tathāvidho me manaso vikāraḥ || *A* 7.31 ||

and in absentia—stumbling on old gifts or letters, flipping through albums, hearing a name mentioned in passing—when it seems both impossible and unforgivable that we ever failed to acknowledge them while they were in our presence. While Durvasa's curse may seem a magical cause of Dushyanta's amnesia, external to the workings of his mind, the condition it creates in him in fact amounts to a bizarre exaggeration of a recognizable experience.[129] Here as before, Kuntaka highlights a state of mind that the curse uniquely generates (in this case Dushyanta's grief at having forgotten), demonstrating that Kalidasa's invention not only "touches up" Dushyanta's character but also makes possible the depiction of new emotions that give pleasure to sensitive readers by resonating with their experience—much as Hamsapadika's song moves Dushyanta by resonating with his.[130] While Kuntaka's analysis doesn't interfere with readings that rightly emphasize the sexism haunting Shakuntala's story, it presses us to also consider these other complexities in Kalidasa's play.

[129] Cf. Mark Freeman, "'Too Late': The Temporality of Memory and the Challenge of Moral Life," *Journal für Psychologie* 11 (2003): 54–74. Freeman's discussion of the relations among time, memory, and morality strike me as especially pertinent to Dushyanta's situation. Consider for instance the following passage: "There is something missing now, in my immediate experience. This something is that future which, in due time, will come along and allow me to see what it is that seems to have gone on. This is often when the trouble begins. Looking backward, suddenly cognizant of the inexorable limits of my earlier view of things, I may be taken by the sheer pain of knowing what I couldn't see, what I couldn't anticipate" (Ibid., 61).

[130] The idea of "touching up" comes directly from Kuntaka's description of how Kalidasa has changed the *Mahābhārata*'s version of the Shakuntala story: "When a writer develops a beautiful radiance by means of an excellent new embellishment, it helps bring about the same indescribable beauty we find in a ruined, old painting that has been restored again by a single brushstroke." <*pravaranavasaṃskārakāraṇaramaṇīyakāntiparipoṣaḥ rekhārājamānapurātanatruṭitacitradaśāspadasaubhāgyam anubhavati* |> (Kuntaka, *Vakroktijīvita*, 249, commentary on 4.3-4.)

Scene 4: Rama's love and bitterness. To illustrate his claim that delicate poetry "resonates with the minds" of sensitive readers (statement 1.26 of the passage examined in section 1), Kuntaka points us to a set of verses in *Raghuvaṃśa* Canto 13: "When Rama has killed off Ravana and is returning on the sky-car named Pushpaka, he describes to Sita the hardships he underwent in each of several locations while his heart was suffering from their separation. All his sentences [there] serve as examples."[131] If these sentences are exemplary for their resonance (*saṃvāda*), it is because of the complex states of mind they record. Consider for instance 13.28, quoted in full by Kuntaka:

> Remembering at night your trembling embrace
> which I'd once enjoyed, fearful Sita,
> I somehow endured the cloud's thundering
> as it passed through the caves.[132]

Rama here remembers a time he remembered Sita, thus relating three moments: the moment of speaking (present), the moment of enduring solitude (recent past), and the moment of being embraced by Sita (distant past). While it is possible to represent these moments as distinct points on a timeline, Rama's thoughts do not respect such a clean divide between past and present. For in describing Sita as "fearful," Rama clearly has in mind Sita of the distant past, whose fear of thunder made her cling to him. Yet Rama's use of the vocative (*bhīru*, "O fearful one!") suggests he is talking about Sita in the present, as though the intensity of his memory has so overwhelmed him that for a brief moment—the moment of calling out to Sita—that memory becomes his present reality. The peculiar temporality of reminiscence is made even more explicit in verse 35:

> Here by the Godavari, retired from the hunt,

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[131] atrodāharaṇāni raghau rāvaṇaṃ nihatya puṣpakeṇāgacchato rāmasya sītāyās tadvirahavidhurahṛdayena mayāsminn asmin samuddeśe kimapy evaṃvidhaṃ vaiśasam anubhūtam iti varṇayataḥ sarvāṇy eva vākyāni | (Ibid., 46, commentary on 1.25-29.)

[132] pūrvānubhūtaṃ smaratā ca rātrau kampottaraṃ bhīru tavopagūḍham |
guhāvisārīṇyativāhitāni mayā kathaṃcid ghanagarjitāni || *R* 13.28 ||

my fatigue carried off by wind from the waves,
alone, my head resting on your lap,
I remember, asleep among the reed bowers.[133]*

The fourteenth-century Sanskrit commentator Mallinatha glosses "I remember asleep" (*smarāmi suptaḥ*) with the more grammatical expression "I remember that I slept" (*supta iti yat tat smarāmi*), replacing Kalidasa's ambiguous phrasing with one that clearly distinguishes between the remembered moment and the moment of remembering.[134] However, it is precisely the blurring of these moments that makes Kalidasa's words adequate to the lived experience of reminiscence. For here too Rama's memory has so absorbed him that the distinction between past and present momentarily vanishes. The syntax likewise expresses this ambiguity: the compounds crowded in the first three quarters of the verse lack a temporal marker, as if the experience they report were purified of tense.

Whereas the memories in verses 28 and 35 derive their intensity from Rama's love for Sita, the intensity of the memory recorded in verse 59 arises from a different emotion:

This is that city of the king of Nishada where
after removing my crest jewel
I tied up my matted hair, and Sumantra cried,
"Kaikeyi, your wishes have come true!"[135]

What strikes Kuntaka here is "the fact that [Rama] should not only remember so small a remark as this but also repeat it…." Rama's exact recollection of words uttered more than fourteen years

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[133] atrānugodaṃ mṛgayānivṛttas taraṅgavātena vinītakhedaḥ |
rahas tvadutsaṅganiṣaṇṇamūrdhā smarāmi vānīragṛheṣu suptaḥ || *R* 13.35 ||

[134] Kālidāsa, *Raghuvaṃśa (Raghuvaṁśam of Kālidāsa, Sanjivini Commentary of Mallinatha and Chandrakala Hindi Commentary)*, ed. Shrikrishnamani Tripathi (Varanasi: Chaukhamba Surbharti Prakashan, n.d.), 441.

[135] puraṃ niṣādādhipates tad etad yasmin mayā maulimaṇiṃ vihāya |
jaṭāsu baddhāsvarudat sumantraḥ kaikeyi kāmāḥ phalitās taveti || *R* 13.59 ||

earlier points to a residual bitterness which he hasn't managed to overcome, even as he is on the verge of reclaiming his kingdom. When he repeats Sumantra's words to Sita, then, he isn't simply recounting an autobiographical fact but reliving the experience of being uncrowned, harboring its sting in the present. According to Kuntaka, "Rama is described" elsewhere in the *Raghuvaṃśa* "as one possessing the virtues of a great and faultless man"; by contrast, the depiction of Rama in verse 59 "brings a great unfittingness" to the work, since it introduces a pettiness unworthy of a king and therefore unworthy of being represented in literature.[136]

Scene 5: Kama's bad influence. Because all its characters are mythic or divine, the *Kumārasaṃbhava* may seem the farthest removed among Kalidasa's works from human life. Nonetheless, Kuntaka finds in Canto 3 a representation of the court, understanding the relationship between Indra and Kama as that between a king and his friend or adviser (and thus somewhat resembling the relationship between Agnimitra and Gautama, or Dushyanta and Madhavya): "At the moment when Indra, king of the gods, desires to defeat his enemy called Taraka, who has devoted all his might to trespassing on the three worlds, he is addressed by Manmatha [i.e., Kama] as follows:

> What devoted wife, troubling you with her faithfulness,
> has entered your fickle mind with her beauty;
> what wide-hipped woman, whom you wish would
> give up her shame and wrap her arms freely about your neck?"[137]

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[136] atra raghupater anarghamahāpuruṣasaṃpadupetatvena varṇyamānasya kaikeyi kāmāḥ phalitās tava ityevaṃvidhatucchatarapadārthasaṃsmaraṇaṃ tadabhidhānaṃ cātyantam anaucityam āvahati | (Kuntaka, *Vakroktijīvita*, 71, commentary on 1.57.)

[137] trailokyākrāntipravaṇaparākramasya tārakākhyasya ripor jigīṣāvasare surapatir manmathenābhidhīyate—
kām ekapatnīṃ vrataduḥkhaśīlāṃ lolaṃ manaś cārutayā praviṣṭām |
nitambinīm icchasi muktalajjāṃ kaṇṭhe svayaṃgrāhaniṣaktabāhum || *VJ* 1.ś125; *K* 3.7 || (Ibid., 72, commentary on 1.57.)

The language Kuntaka uses to introduce these words suggests that, at least in Kalidasa's portrayal, the difference between divine and human courts is merely one of scale: both function according to the same basic principles, both answerable to the same criteria of judgment, and for Kuntaka this means there is a problem with the way that Kama speaks to Indra:

> [His statement] pertains to the performance of improper deeds, and it is said in such a way [as to suggest] that even Indra, though he stands as ruler of the three worlds, is given to entertaining such thoughts.

From the epics and puranas it is well known that Indra often abuses his power, engaging in petty wars and antics in order to satisfy his personal desires. However, it is not Kama's place to remind either Indra or the audience of those desires: in Indra's case, such speech encourages the very behavior that good advisers should be discouraging; in the case of the audience, it mars an otherwise sound depiction of model behavior (i.e., a ruler's tactfully dealing with a genuine threat to his kingdom). Kama's statement "thus brings a great unfittingness."[138]

Scene 6: Dasharatha's error. Canto 9 of the *Raghuvaṃśa* retells an episode of the *Rāmāyaṇa* whose events might be summarized, as Kuntaka demonstrates, in a single sentence: "When Dasharatha was occupied in the hunting ground along the edges of the riverbank, he lost focus and killed the son of a blind old ascetic."[139] An attempt to justify Dasharatha's accident might go something like this:

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[138] ityavinayānuṣṭhānaniṣṭhaṃ triviṣṭapādhipatyapratiṣṭhitasyāpi tathāvidhābhiprāyānuvartanaparatvenābhidhīyamānam anaucityam āvahati | (Ibid.

[139] taraṅgiṇītīralekhāsv ākheṭavāṭodyatena pramādyatā daśarathena rājñā sthavirāndhatapasvibālavadho vyadhīyata [iti ekavākyaśakyapratipādanaḥ…ayam arthaḥ] | (Ibid., 259, commentary on 4.7-8.)

> For many days and nights, Dasharatha's mind had been constantly under the influence of various kinds of hunting, such that it had neglected all other activities; such was the greatness of his desire for hunting....[140]

But for Kuntaka, such a justification is weak, and the appropriate response to the story should be moral outrage:

> Living creatures of that kind should not be killed. Therefore, the fact that this man, who is the pinnacle of the solar lineage which is famous for displaying good conduct and entrusted with providing fearlessness in all the worlds; this man who has thoroughly studied all the disciplines, who values his good fame; Dasharatha, the king who graced half the throne of heaven—the fact that this man has done such a deed which must not at all be done, and which is yet exemplified by the great sage [i.e., Dasharatha], at first strikes us as not at all right.[141]

Now, Kalidasa also offers something of a justification for Dasharatha's error in verse 74: "Even the wise misstep when they are blinded by dust."[142] But this should be sharply distinguished from Kuntaka's hypothetical justification, which we might imagine as coming from someone with a deficient moral sense. What is remarkable about Kalidasa's extended retelling of the story is that it inspires sympathy for Dasharatha without minimizing his egregious error or explaining it away. Most of Kuntaka's analysis of the scene demonstrates how exactly Kalidasa's poetry simultaneously inspires shock and forgiveness in the reader. Kuntaka directs us to three verses that demonstrate Dasharatha's hunting prowess as well as his innate compassion:

> That fearless archer, his hands deft from excellent training,

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[140]anekanaktaṃdinānubandhivividhamṛgayāvyāpāraparavaśīkṛtāntaḥkaraṇakavalitasakalataditara vyāpāravyāvṛttyavasara [prasaradabhyāsarasasodarātmaka] mṛgayānurāgagarimātaḥ | (Ibid.)

[141] prāṇy etādṛgrūpo na pratihanyeta tadā sadācārasaṃpādanacaṇe tribhuvanābhayadīkṣāvidhikāriṇi kiraṇamālinaḥ kule tilakkāyamānasyākhilavidyāpārāvārapāradṛśvanaḥ kīrtidhanasya dhanya (daśaratha) nāmno dharitrīpateḥ pavitritatridivādhipārdhāsanasya tathāvidhākaraṇīyakaraṇaṃ maharṣiṇāpy udāhriyamāṇam anupapannaprāyam eva pratibhāsetāpātataḥ | (Ibid., 259–60, commentary on 4.7-8.)

[142] …apathe padam arpayanti hi śrutavanto'pi rajonimīlitāḥ || *R* 9.74 ||

> turned into quivers the tigers that leapt right at him from the caves:
> they were like trees blooming at their tips, cleft by the wind;
> their mouths filled with arrows were the quivers' openings.[143] (*R* 9.63)

> When the king strong as Indra took aim at a stag,
> a doe stood protecting it with her body. Seeing this
> the archer, his mind soft with compassion (for he was a lover),
> withdrew his arrow, though it had been drawn to his ear.[144] (*R* 9.67)

> A peacock with its radiant fan flew up beside his horse.
> He didn't even aim his arrow, for suddenly
> his mind went to his lover's mass of hair
> dappled with a torn garland, its band having slipped in passion.[145] (*R* 9.73)

We see that while Dasharatha doesn't hesitate to inflict harm on aggressive animals like tigers, at times he treats more vulnerable animals with tenderness. Such moments show that Dasharatha's error cannot be attributed to his nature, which is in fact deeply compassionate; for instance, the sight of the loving doe triggers memories of Dasharatha's own experiences with love, which urge him not to kill the stag. Verse 67 more explicitly traces out these relations of perception, memory, and action: Dasharatha's sudden memory of a lover's hair so overwhelms his perception of the peacock that his hand freezes. It is illuminating to compare this verse to 9.73, which describes the moment Dasharatha kills the boy in similar terms:

> The loud, clear sound of a pot filling
> arose from the Tamasā's water.
> Thinking *it is the trumpeting of an elephant!*
> Dasharatha released an arrow into the sound.*[146]

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[143] vyāghrān abhīr abhimukhotpatitān guhābhyaḥ phullāsanāgraviṭapāniva vāyurugṇān |
śikṣāviśeṣalaghuhastatayā sa dhanvī tūṇīcakāra śarapūritavaktrarandhrān || *VJ* 4.ś25; *R* 9.63 ||

[144] lakṣyīkrtasya hariṇasya hariprabhāvaḥ prekṣya sthitāṃ sahacarīṃ vyavadhāya dehāt |
ākarṇakṛṣṭam api kāmitayā sa dhanvī bāṇaṃ kṛpāmṛdumanāḥ pratisaṃjahāra || *VJ* 4.ś26; *R* 9.67 ||

[145] api turagasamīpād utpatantaṃ mayūraṃ na sa rucirakalāpaṃ bāṇalakṣīcakāra |
sapadi gatamanaskaś chinnamālyānukīrṇe rativigalitabandhe keśahaste priyāyāḥ || *VJ* 4.ś27; *R* 9.73 ||

[146] kumbhapūraṇabhavaḥ paṭur uccair uccacāra ninado'mbhasi tasyāḥ |

Both verses share the basic structure of a recognitional slippage: Dasharatha's sense falls on one thing (a peacock's fan, water being drawn) but his mind registers something else (an elephant's cry, his lover's hair), altering his course of action. It is possible that the two memories differ in intensity: whereas Dasharatha's memory of his lover's hair might simply accompany his awareness of the peacock fan without replacing it, his memory of an elephant's cry completely overrides any perception of water being drawn. Yet the more significant difference concerns the consequences of these slippages, that the same kind of slippage which in one instance takes life in another saves it. While the very fact of the killing may thus provoke a response of outrage, Kalidasa's portrayal of it gets us to sympathize with Dasharatha despite the gravity of his crime.

The same slippage which saved a peacock and killed a boy also appears at the formal level of Kalidasa's writing—a fact that Kuntaka doesn't explicitly acknowledge, though it accords well with his analysis. Each of the first fifty-four verses of Canto 9 concludes with a punning device called *yamaka*, where a repetition in sound (what is given to hearing) fails to produce a corresponding repetition in sense (what is supplied by memory). Here are some examples:

> daśadigantajitā raghuṇā yathā śriyam apuṣyad ajena tataḥ param |
> tam adhigamya tathaiva punar babhau na na [*mahīna*][*m ahīna*]parākramam || *R* 9.5 ||*
>
> kusumajanma tato navapallavās tadanu ṣaṭpadakokilakūjitam |
> iti yathākramam āvirabhūn madhur dru[*mavatī*][*m avatī*]rya vanasthalīm || *R* 9.26 ||*
>
> atha nabhasya iva tridaśāyudhaṃ kanakapiṅgataḍidguṇasaṃyutam |
> dhanur adhijyam anādhir upādade na[*ravaro*] [*ravaro*]ṣitakesarī || *R* 9.54 ||*

---

tatra sa dviradabṛṃhitaśaṅkī śabdapātinam iṣum visasarja || *R* 9.73 ||

Although this device is most commonly known as *yamaka*, Udbhaṭa's name for it—*punaruktavadābhāsa*, or "the semblance of a redundancy"—is more suggestive in the present context, since the experience of listening to Kalidasa's *yamaka*s is precisely that of an acoustic glitch: we think we are hearing the same word twice but are in fact met with entirely different words. By the time Kalidasa asks us to sympathize with Dasharatha in 9.74, then, we cannot help doing so, since we have committed the same fatal error fifty-four times.[147]

Across these analyses, Kuntaka shows a remarkable consistency in his approach, two features of which I would like to highlight here. The first concerns his manner of encountering characters: when Kuntaka meets Raghu, Dilipa, Dushyanta, Rama, Indra, Kama, and Dasharatha, he sees each one primarily as a possible model for ideal conduct, differing in this regard from Vedantadesika and Aurobindo. While the differences among the three readers will grow clearer in the coming chapters, I offer just two examples here as a quick preview: Vedantadesika is interested in Maricha of the *Rāmāyaṇa* not for how well he can model the behavior that one should follow or avoid, but rather for what his mental states reveal about the workings of the imagination;[148] likewise, Aurobindo writes about Pururavas not as an ideal king but in order to explore the nature of the political revolutionary. It may be that to encounter literary characters as models for conduct, the social order represented in a text must reflect, or be taken to reflect, that of its readers. The second notable feature of Kuntaka's approach is the subtlety of his didactic theory of literature. In each of

[147] This explanation adds to the ways that Gary Tubb has proposed we understand Kalidasa's *yamaka*s in *R* 9, in his essay "*Kāvya* with Bells On" in Bronner, Shulman, and Tubb, *Innovations and Turning Points*, 162–71.

[148] While it is likely that Vedantadesika also encounters Kalidasa's characters this way (as I will suggest in chapter 3), I use the Maricha scene as my example here because Vedantadesika explicitly comments on it.

the discussions of Kalidasa examined above, Kuntaka is interested not so much in obvious examples of virtue as in the borderline cases, where the right way of thinking, acting, or speaking is not entirely clear. The generosity exemplified by Raghu consists not just in his readiness to meet requests but in his willingness to go above and beyond what is asked of him; since Dilipa ends up outwitting the lion, it is easy for readers to pass over his mistake in formulating an argument that is only apparently sound, instead of the one Kuntaka thinks he should have made; the pleasure that Kalidasa's readers may take in nourishing vengeful thoughts is sanctioned, rather than questioned, by the depiction of Rama's residual bitterness; and while cultivating an informal relationship with one's superiors might seem a good way to win their favor, Kama really should have maintained a sense of professionalism with Indra. In each of these cases, Kuntaka is interested in distinguishing what he considers the right way of doing things not simply from the wrong way, but from the wrong way that masquerades as right. Nor is Kuntaka opposed to the depiction of admirable characters committing errors, as his analyses of the mistakes of Dushyanta and Dasharatha make clear. What matters in such cases is that errors be acknowledged as such. Dushyanta must therefore be shown to suffer from unbearable guilt, just as Kalidasa's narrator must save Dasharatha's reputation not by minimizing his mistake but rather by reminding readers that even the best among us sometimes falter. While the didacticism of Kuntaka's approach may at first seem to simplify Kalidasa's poetry, it in fact has the effect of cultivating attention to the subtleties (or to certain subtleties) of Kalidasa's characterizations.

3. Kalidasa and the Pedagogy of Pleasure

The *Vakroktijīvita* gives us two portraits of Kalidasa. The first shows us a Kalidasa whose poetry generates pleasure in readers by altering how they pay attention to the world; the second

shows us a Kalidasa whose numerous courtly scenes teach readers how to conduct themselves properly. Kuntaka offers a number of indications of how we might understand the relationship between these portraits. Some of these we have already encountered, in the moments when Kuntaka uses the language of pleasure and attention to describe Kalidasa's characterization of kings—for instance, when Kuntaka writes that the way Kalidasa imagines Dushyanta's mental states "gives pleasure to sensitive readers," or that in Kalidasa's portrayal of Raghu, the king's generosity "throbs out." Such statements suggest that the nuances of noble conduct are among the things to which Kalidasa's poetry can direct our attention. Indeed, Kuntaka explicitly says as much right after he points out the flaws in how Kalidasa has depicted Dilipa, Rama, and Kama:

> I have made these observations of [Kalidasa] because of the innate beauty of his verses which are stamped with a natural delicateness (*saukumārya*); such observations have not been made of other poets, who are known for their merely acquired skill in writing poems.[149]

As we saw in section 1, "delicateness" in Kuntaka's theory refers not just to an effortless feel in the poetry we happen to be reading, or a simplicity in the style. It also refers to a heightened attentiveness which, when turned on the nature of the mind (*antaḥkaraṇaparispanda*), brings to light the subtleties of thinking in all its complexity as remembering, feeling, judging, noticing, imagining, doubting, and so on. If Kuntaka is especially interested in pointing out Kalidasa's rare lapses in characterization, it is because Kalidasa shows us these subtleties as few other poets do, so that his poetry is particularly well suited to educating readers.

[149] etac caitasyaiva kaveḥ sahajasaukumāryamudritasūktiparispandasaundaryasya paryālocyate na punar anyeṣām āhāryamātrakāvyakaraṇakauśalaślāghinām | (Kuntaka, *Vakroktijīvita*, 72, commentary on 1.57.)

We find another indication of how the two portraits of Kalidasa relate to each other in the following passage, in which Kuntaka explains what he means by "deviation in a work" (*prabandha-vakratā*), or the artistry involved in selecting and arranging scenes:

> For an example of *deviation in a work*, consider any composition such as a drama, which has been written by a great poet and might be based on a story from the *Rāmāyaṇa*. What appears to us at first is a beautiful description of a great man that includes the other five varieties of deviation and thus captivates the minds of sensitive readers. But in the final analysis, what is achieved is an ethical lesson concerning what one should or should not do, such as "one should act like Rama, but not like Ravana."[150]

In Kuntaka's ideal scenario, the pleasure and the teaching of Kalidasa's poetry would be two aspects of a single experience of reading. A prince, say, might feel himself simply to be taking pleasure in hearing about Raghu's unparalleled generosity, whereas in fact the story has started burrowing into his memory without his realizing it, already shaping his moral impulses. Such passages suggest that while each of Kuntaka's remarks on Kalidasa taken by itself may seem to advance only one of the two accounts outlined above, both accounts in fact belong to the same reading, since pleasure is integral to the mechanism through which Kalidasa's poetry instructs its readers.

[150] prabandhe vakrabhāvo yathā kutracin mahākaviviracite rāmakathopanibandhe nāṭakādau pañcavidhavakratāsāmagrīsamudayasundaraṃ sahṛdayahṛdayahāri mahāpuruṣavarṇanam upakrame pratibhāsate | paramārthatas tu vidhiniṣedhātmakadharmopadeśaḥ paryavasyati rāmavad vartitavyaṃ na rāvaṇavad iti | (Ibid., 38, commentary on 1.21.)

A Note on Kuntaka's Theory of Literature

There is perhaps a temptation here to identify Kuntaka's view on the educative function of poetry with the didacticism that Asvaghosha famously articulates near the end of *Saundarananda* ("Handsome Nanda"), comparing his poetic presentation of the Buddhist teaching of liberation to "bitter medicine mixed with honey."[151] Kuntaka himself makes a similar point early in his book: "People of nobility…desire success but fear an intellectual challenge because they are soft-minded.…Because a work of poetry gives pleasure to people of nobility at the same time as it urges them to proper action, it comes to serve as a means for achieving the four aims of life [i.e., morality, wealth, pleasure, and spirituality]."[152] Here Kuntaka appears to share Asvaghosha's idea that the pleasurable aspects of poetry are extrinsic to the principles it illustrates, serving only to render those principles more digestible. Yet it seems to me that these sentences are merely rhetorical, intended more to persuade skeptics of the value of poetry than to express Kuntaka's full view on the matter. I feel forced to read them in such a way, since the crude separation they presume between form and content is entirely opposed to Kuntaka's insistence throughout *Vakroktijīvita* that matters of style are inseparable from those of substance. Several passages in the first chapter alone converge on this basic premise, including Kuntaka's definition of poetry as "word and idea together"; his claim that poeticity (*kavyatā*) belongs as much to ideas as to words; his interpretation of the word *sāhitya* ("literature") in its literal sense of "togetherness"; and his definition of a poetic word as "the single expressor of an intended meaning, even where synonyms

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[151] tiktam ivauṣadhaṃ madhuyutam || *SN* 18.65 ||

[152] abhijātāḥ [khalu rājaputradayo dharmādyupeyārthino] vijigīṣavaḥ kleśabhīravaś ca, sukumārāśayatvāt teṣāṃ | … abhijātānām āhlādakatve sati pravartakatvāt kāvyabandho dharmādiprāptyupāyatām pratipadyate | (Kuntaka, *Vakroktijīvita*, 3, commentary on 1.3.)

might do."[153] In each of these passages, Kuntaka insists that the features which differentiate poetic language from other kinds of speech are not gratuitous or merely seductive, but arise from the necessity to express ideas with adequate nuance. And in the remaining chapters of the book, he develops this claim by listing the particular ways that poets modify language to generate nuances of meaning. If he finds such possibilities for modification (*vakratā*) at every level of language—at levels of syllable, suffix, word (chapter 2), sentence (chapter 3), scene, and work (chapter 4)—it is because at each stage of the creative process, writers are confronted with choices that bear on how the objects of their attention are to be depicted. All this implies that for Kuntaka, the pleasure we experience while reading doesn't just come from the formal aspects of language, in the way that the sweetness of Asvaghosha's drug mixture comes solely from honey; rather, it is generated by the cognition uniquely called forth by a writer's words. Continuing with this line of thought would of course lead us beyond the domain of poetry to the general idea that using words well amounts to thinking well, and *vice versa*. As Kuntaka himself puts it in one of the finest passages of the *Vakroktijīvita*,

> The goal of literary inquiry[154] is to determine whether a given sentence will be able to captivate a reader by the force of its vibrancy (*parispandamāhātmya*). It may be true that each of the disciplines [grammar, hermeneutics, logic, and literary inquiry] is chief in its own domain, the others being secondary. Even so, the poet's work—

[153] The first passage is *VJ* 1.7 ff. (*śabdārthau sahitau…kāvyam*); the second passage is *VJ* 1.6 ff. (*…tattvaṃ sālaṅkārasya kāvyatā*) and continues in Ibid., 9, commentary on 1.7 ff. (*na śabdasyaiva ramaṇīyatāviśiṣṭasya kevalasya kāvyatvaṃ nāpyarthasya*); the third appears in Ibid., 24, commentary on 1.17 ff. (*sāhitayor bhāva iti sāhityam*); and the last passage with *VJ* 1.9 (*śabdo vivakṣitārthaikavācako'nyeṣu satsvapi*).

[154] While *sāhitya* usually refers to literature itself, the context clearly indicates that here it refers to the discipline concerned with literature (i.e., *alaṅkāraśāstra*, or "the study of literature," or "literary inquiry").

that is to say, literary work—is the very source of vibrancy in all sentences, and therefore exceeds all else.[155]

[155] idam eva parispandamāhātmyāt sahṛdayahāritāṃ pratipannam iti sāhityasyopayujyamānatā | eteṣāṃ yadyapi pratyekaṃ svaviṣaye prādhānyam anyeṣāṃ guṇībhāvas tathāpi sakalavākyaparispandajīvitāyamānasyāsya sāhityalakṣaṇasyaiva kavivyāpārasya vastutaḥ sarvātiśāyitvam | (Kuntaka, *Vakroktijīvita*, 25, commentary on 1.17.)

Chapter 3: Vedantadesika's Kalidasa
Poet of Daydreams

Since Vedantadesika's reading of Kalidasa is reflected mainly in allusive references, it differs from the readings of Kuntaka and Aurobindo in the kind of challenge it presents. My task in this chapter will be to show that such references do indeed tell us much about how Vedantadesika read Kalidasa, and to reconstruct that reading with the help of Vedantadesika's wider body of writing. Unlike the canonical texts of Srivaishnavism on which Vedantadesika has written direct commentaries, Kalidasa's poems don't command any sort of religious authority; they don't offer Vedantadesika any effective personal prayers, access to metaphysical truths, or assistance in leading a religious life. Nothing is gained by unearthing their hidden meanings. Nonetheless, Vedantadesika clearly spent a lot of time reading Kalidasa's poetry: his memory is stored with it, as we can tell from the allusions to Kalidasa which turn up throughout his writing. If truth is not what Vedantadesika is after in Kalidasa's poetry, then what drew him to it? Especially given that Vedantadesika was first and foremost a theologian, how are we to understand his investment in Kalidasa?

Many have understood Vedantadesika's relationship to Kalidasa to be confined to the domain of poetry (understood in a belletristic sense), and within that domain to be primarily agonistic. For instance, a traditional account runs that Vedantadesika's description of Sita in fifteen adjectives (*H* 2.10) was meant to outdo Kalidasa's fourteen-adjective description of the yakshini (*MD* 2.22).[156] Yigal Bronner and David Shulman paint a similar picture when they characterize Vedantadesika's allusions to Kalidasa in *Haṃsasandeśa* ("The Message of the Goose") as attempts to supersede him: "It is as if Vedanta Deshika were telling us that the [*Meghadūta*] had to be

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[156] The account continues that Vedantadesika didn't succeed, since Kalidasa's single word *śyāmā* had four different meanings.

superseded so that his own composition could emerge in all its uniqueness."[157] Many of Vedantadesika's references to Kalidasa do indeed appear to be competitive in the way these accounts suggest; however, not all of them are. As we will see below, we also find Vedantadesika deferring to Kalidasa's wisdom, deepening his thoughts, disagreeing with his statements (which is not to say competing with Kalidasa), glossing his expressions, repurposing his images, thinking with his metaphors…. For each reference, whatever its tone, what remains to be understood is why Vedantadesika engages Kalidasa on the specific point that he does. In section 1, I assemble a number of Vedantadesika's references to Kalidasa selected from across his oeuvre, in order to determine first which aspects of Kalidasa's poetry impress Vedantadesika enough for him to reproduce them in his own work. I then look to a range of sources to understand why these aspects have impressed him more than others, and why he reproduces them in the particular ways that he has: in section 2, I examine the understanding of devotional attention developed in the writings of Ramanuja and Vedantadesika, and in section 3, I examine the episodes of trance-like daydreaming that turn up repeatedly in Kalidasa's poetry. The affinities between Kalidasa and Vedantadesika that emerge in these sections suggest that if Vedantadesika is interested in Kalidasa's poetry, it is because he finds recorded in it experiences of the imagination that align with his own thinking on devotional meditation. In section 4, I look to Vedantadesika's *Haṃsasandeśa* for explicit confirmation of this suggestion. Last, in section 5, I propose that much of Vedantadesika's poetry should be read not as compositions intended to generate in their audience an aesthetic response but as transcripts of his devotional meditations; that is, as his performance of the kind of devotional meditation delineated in sections 2, 3, and 4.

[157] Appayya Dikshita, Nilakantha Dikshita, and Vedanta Deshika, *"Self-Surrender," "Peace," "Compassion," & "Mission of the Goose": Poems and Prayers from South India*, trans. Yigal Bronner and David Shulman (New York: NYU Press, 2009), xxvi.

1. The Presence of Kalidasa in Vedantadesika's Writing

Vedantadesika's references to Kalidasa, which traditional readers have often taken pleasure in pointing out, range from verbatim reproductions of particular phrases to subtle evocations. The latter cases present a peculiar sort of challenge: on one hand, they are harder to establish with certainty; on the other, their very subtlety might be taken as evidence of how deeply Kalidasa has entered the element of Vedantadesika's thinking (the way a charming friend's mannerisms, say, or a powerful thinker's thought-style, can rub off on us without our realizing it). By including a number of such references below, I am not trying to suggest that each one of them should be understood primarily in terms of its relation to Kalidasa, or even that its relation to Kalidasa is distinct from its relation to other poets in the tradition (indeed, readers familiar with Sanskrit literature may find that some of the lines I wish to draw from Vedantadesika to Kalidasa could also be drawn to other poets, such as Asvaghosha, Bana, or Bhavabhuti). Rather, my hope is that the references assembled below, varying in degree of subtlety, will together generate an impression of the kind of presence that Kalidasa has in Vedantadesika's writing.

At one point in Chapter 15 of *Rahasyatrayasāra* ("The Essence of the Three Secrets"), Vedantadesika quotes Kalidasa while urging devotees who have surrendered to god (*prapanna*s) to keep company with knowledgeable and pious teachers:

> [The devotee should] grow pure in knowledge in the very manner indicated in the verse, "Even an idiot becomes intelligent by seeking the company of the wise. Muddy water grows clear when it is mixed with the lather of a soapnut."[158]

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[158] mando'py amandatām eti saṃsargeṇa vipaścitaḥ |
paṅkacchidaḥ phalasyeva nikaṣeṇāvilam payaḥ || *MA* 2.7 ||
eṉkiṟapaṭiye pariśuddhajñānaṉāy…|

Vedantadesika is quoting here from Kalidasa's *Mālavikāgnimitra*, but not in the same way that he quotes from the *Bhagavadgīta* or *Viṣṇupurāṇa*, or even the works of Ramanuja. When Vedantadesika references the texts which are authoritative for his tradition, he is typically at pains to show how his own conclusions follow from them (however else he may wish to use them). By contrast, Kalidasa's words are brought in simply for their effective presentation of an idea that is generally true. If they have any authority in the *Rahasyatrayasāra*, it is the authority of traditional wisdom. Moreover, in reproducing Kalidasa's maxim in a book of theology, Vedantadesika has carried it far from its original context in Act 2 of *Mālavikāgnimitra*. When Ganadasa addresses it there to Queen Dharini, the kind of knowledge he has in mind is not religious but artistic, and whatever the maxim's general truth may be it ends up not holding true for Ganadasa's situation.[159] Such contextual details are irrelevant to Vedantadesika, who uses Kalidasa's figure primarily to underline his theological point, and while Kalidasa's words remain unaltered, their recontextualization has slightly modified their sense.

More often than direct quotation, however, what we find in Vedantadesika's texts is a practice of rewriting sentences from Kalidasa's poetry—that is, a practice of recalling recognizable statements of Kalidasa while modifying them in some way. At the start of *Mālavikāgnimitra*, the director makes a statement which is often understood as Kalidasa's protest against the conservatism of traditional critics:

> Not every poem is good simply because it is old,

Vedāntadeśika, *Rahasyatrayasāra (Srimad Vedanta Desika's Srimad Rahasya Trayasara with Sara Vistara (Commentary) by Sri Uttamur T. Viraraghavacharya)* (Ubhaya Vedanta Grantha Mala, 1980), 461.

[159] Gautama's comment ends up being a joke, so that Agnimitra's artistic sensibility doesn't seem to have rubbed off on him.

> nor is it inferior because it is new.
> The wise examine it before deciding which kind it is;
> the fool lets his mind be swayed by the judgments of others.[160]

Vedantadesika recalls this verse at the start of *Yādavābhyudaya*, where he similarly reflects on the relationship between old and new while proposing a different understanding of that relationship:

> All that is new lies in the past, and all that is old lies in what is to come.
> This pair makes for neither a virtue nor a fault.[161]

If old and new are not invariably good and bad, it is not only because, as the director of *Mālavikāgnimitra* suggests, such valuations are empirically false; more importantly, the distinction itself is ill-conceived. Anything we call new—whether a verse, thought, or metaphor—is in fact formed out of bits of the past, so that one would be hard-pressed to find in it pure novelty. Just as every sentence we speak or write quotes the words that compose it (almost all of which preexist us), all exists as new arrangements of the same old elements. There can be no question then of the relative merits of new and old since everything is indistinguishably both, and as Vedantadesika concludes, it would make little sense to say of absolutely everything that it is a fault or a virtue. Shaping his own verse from Kalidasa's thoughts, Vedantadesika attests to its truth even as he writes.

We find several instances of such rewriting in Vedantadesika's *Haṃsasandeśa* ("The Message of the Goose"). In *Meghadūta*, Kalidasa's yaksha once remarks to the cloud that

> For women, news from a lover brought by a friend
> is only a little inferior to an embrace.[162]

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[160] purāṇam ity eva na sādhu sarvaṃ na cāpi kāvyaṃ navam ity avadyam |
santaḥ parīkṣyānyatarad bhajante mūḍhaḥ parapratyayaneyabuddhiḥ || *MA* 1.2 ||

[161] tadātve nūtanaṃ sarvam āyatyāṃ ca purātanam |
na doṣāyaitad ubhayaṃ na guṇāya ca kalpate || *Y* 1.6 ||

[162] kāntodantaḥ suhṛdupanataḥ saṅgamāt kiñcidūnaḥ || *MD* 2.40 ||

Vedantadesika recalls this statement twice in the *Haṃsasandeśa*, once in tepid acknowledgement ("Isn't it true that just the arrival of a beloved's message gives women joy?")[163] and another time in what verges on disagreement ("For lovers, finding a messenger is greater fortune than embracing the beloved").[164] In the latter instance, Vedantadesika echoes Kalidasa by comparing the satisfactions of communicating with a distant beloved to those of actually embracing the beloved; however, whereas Kalidasa's statement rings true, Vedantadesika's rewriting of it is astonishingly counterintuitive. For while the chance to send tidings to one's beloved is indeed gratifying, how could it be more so than an actual embrace? Yet that is exactly what Vedantadesika's narrator is suggesting, and I shall try to make better sense of that suggestion in section 4.

Some of Vedantadesika's rewritings do not reformulate Kalidasa's ideas so much as they draw attention to his relationship to Kalidasa. Consider Vedantadesika's version of *Meghadūta* 1.5. After telling us that the yaksha is about to talk to a cloud, Kalidasa's narrator anticipates how implausible the scenario might seem and offers the following explanation:

> Those whom love has ruined suffer to the core,
> unable to tell thinking from unthinking.[165]

Vedantadesika's rewriting of this sentence likewise appears after we are told Rama is about to talk to a goose:

> Those whose minds are afflicted with separation
> suffer so much as to make requests to clouds, mountains,
> trees, and the like. What shall we say, then,
> of something capable of sensation?[166]

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[163] kiṃ na strīṇāṃ janayati mudaṃ kāntavārtāgamo'pi || *H* 2.30 ||

[164] kāntāśleṣād adhikasubhagaḥ kāminām dūtalābhaḥ || *H* 1.4 ||

[165] kāmārtā hi prakṛtikṛpaṇāś cetanācetaneṣu || *MD* 1.5 ||

[166] viśleṣeṇa kṣubhitamanasāṃ meghaśailadrumādau

What is the narrator getting at here? Shulman and Bronner take him to be implying that “Rama’s choice of messenger…makes better sense” than the yaksha’s choice of an insentient cloud, and that Vedantadesika’s verse therefore “includes a slight ‘dig’” at Kalidasa.[167] For Steven Hopkins, by contrast, the narrator’s rhetorical question means as much as “Why not a goose,” for “have not lovers in the past, crazy with love, asked insensible things…to bear their messages?”[168] The verse would then read as an appeal to tradition, as an acknowledgement that Kalidasa has made possible a certain kind of thought-experiment (“has built a door for speech,” as Kalidasa might say); a thought-experiment, moreover, which Vedantadesika commits himself to exploring in *Haṃsasandeśa*. Whatever its tone—whether Vedantadesika is here looking to supersede Kalidasa or to acknowledge him as an antecedent (or to acknowledge him by superseding him)—the verse announces the *Haṃsasandeśa* as a kind of response to Kalidasa’s poem. Again, in section 4 I will examine specifically what kind of response it is. For now, I would simply like to note that in the four instances examined thus far, what Vedantadesika takes from Kalidasa are general statements, which in his own writing he goes on to affirm, deny, or somehow qualify.

However, not all of Vedantadesika’s borrowings are on the order of statements. A number of expressions in his devotional prayer *Bhagavaddhyānasopāna* (“Staircase of Meditation on God”), for instance, reproduce images from Kalidasa’s description of Parvati in *Kumārasambhava*, such

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yācñādainyaṃ bhavati kimuta kvāpi saṃvedanārhe || *H* 1.5 ||

[167] Appayya Dikshita, Nilakantha Dikshita, and Vedanta Deshika, *“Self-Surrender,” “Peace,” “Compassion,” & “Mission of the Goose”: Poems and Prayers from South India*, xxv.

[168] Hopkins, *The Flight of Love*, 147.

as "legs curved and tapering."[169] Such borrowing should be distinguished from the quoting and rewriting of statements we saw above, since here Vedantadesika is not responding to any claim amenable to a criterion of correctness (e.g., "it's good to hang around good people," "old isn't better than new," "news from the beloved is almost as good as embracing the beloved," "the lovesick don't think clearly"); indeed, it makes little sense to agree or disagree with "legs curved and tapering." What Vedantadesika takes from Kalidasa here is rather a "shard of poetry," as Marielle Macé would call it, "whose memory has left its aspect and silhouette in his mind."[170]

Borrowing such shards or fragments is in fact Vedantadesika's most common way of referencing Kalidasa. Often what he borrows is Kalidasa's manner of creating a specific affect, as we see in his depictions of fatherhood and motherhood in Canto 4 of *Yādavābhyudaya*. Vedantadesika describes Nanda's excitement at Krishna's birth as follows:

> Nanda couldn't get enough
> of seeing his face,
>
> > beautiful with its innocent smile
> > radiant with the jewelled light of earrings
> > letting out confused syllables.[171]

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[169] Kalidasa: "**vṛttānupūrve** ca na cātidīrghe **jaṅghe**" (*K* 1.35); Vedantadesika: "citrākārām kaṭakarucibhiś cāru**vṛttānupūrvām**…**jaṅghām**" (*Bhagavaddhyānasopāna* 3).
Another instance is "thighs beautiful as banana stalks": Kālidāsa: "ekāntaśaityāt **kadalī**viśeṣāḥ…jātās tad**ūrvor** upamānabāhyāḥ" (*K* 1.35); Vedāntadeśika: kāmārāmasthira**kadalikā**stambhasaṃbhāvanīyam…**ūru**yugmam (*Bhagavaddhyānasopāna* 4).

[170] Macé, "Ways of Reading, Modes of Being," 222.

[171] nirvyājamandasmitadarśanīyaṃ nīrājitaṃ kuṇḍalaratnabhāsā |
nandas tadānīṃ na jagāma tṛptiṃ mugdhākṣaraṃ prekṣya mukhaṃ tadīyam || *Y* 4.15 ||

The phrase "couldn't get enough of" (*na jagāma tṛptim*) appears in *Kumārasaṃbhava* 1.27, where Kalidasa similarly describes Himalaya's insatiable joy on seeing his newborn daughter.[172] For R. L. Narasimhan, Vedantadesika's verse also recalls the thought which seizes Dushyanta as he beholds Bharata:

> Those who get to hold children
>
> > as they show their budding teeth
> > laughing who knows why,
> > letting out unclear but charming words,
> > delighting in resting on a lap,
>
> are blessed to be soiled from
> the mud on their bodies.[173]

Arising from regret at his missed chance at fatherhood (and perhaps from a presentiment of his being the father of Bharata), Dushyanta's words record two of the same details (unaffected smiling and babbling) that strike Nanda in his first interactions with Krishna.

These scenes of fatherhood contrast with the depictions of motherhood we find in the characters Yashoda, Mena, and Urvashi. Here is how Vedantadesika depicts Yashoda's concern for Krishna:

> "How will he walk
> on the rough ground

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[172] "Though the mountain-king already had a son, his seeing couldn't get enough of his daughter—like a line of bees, so fond of the mango tree when spring's flowers are unending."
mahībhṛtaḥ putravato 'pi dṛṣṭis tasminn apatye na jagāma tṛptim |
anantapuṣpasya madhor hi cūte dvirephamālā saviśeṣasaṅgā || *K* 1.27 ||
A variant of this phrase, *na tṛptim āyayau*, also appears in *R* 3.3, where Kalidasa describes Dilipa's anticipation of his first child.

[173] ālakṣyadantamukulān animittahāsair avyaktavarṇaramaṇīyavacaḥpravṛttīn |
aṅkāśrayapraṇayinas tanayān vahanto dhanyās tadaṅgarajasā malinībhavanti || *A* 7.17 ||
Narasimhan's comment appears in Vedāntadeśika, *Yādavābhyudayam, A Kavya on the Life of Lord Krishna*, ed. K. S. Krishna Thathachariar (Madras: Vedanta Desika Research Society, 1976), xvi.

with feet soft as buds?”

Thus Yashoda
dripping sweet milk
found no lifeboat in
an ocean of worry.[174]

Vedantadesika here recalls *Kumārasaṃbhava* 5.4, where Mena’s concern for Parvati likewise results from fathoming the danger the world poses to her defenseless child. When Parvati resolves to perform severe austerities in order to win Shiva, Mena wonders why she can’t just stay at home and pray:

The gods are worshipped in houses!
My child, how great is
the difference

between ascetic discipline
and your body!

A flower petal might withstand
the foot of a bee
but not that of a bird.[175]

So too, Vedantadesika’s expression “dripping sweet milk” recalls Pururavas’ words to Ayus in *Vikramorvaśīya* 5.12. There Kalidasa presents Urvashi’s flow of milk as her instinctive response to seeing her son:

Here comes your mother
her gaze fixed upon you;
the blouse she wears is saturated
with her loving flow of milk.[176]

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[174] kathaṃ vrajec charkarilān pradeśān padbhyām asau pallavakomalābhyām |
iti snutastanyarasā yaśodā cintārṇave na plavam anvavindat || *Y* 4.67 ||

[175] manīṣitāḥ santi gṛheṣu devatās tapaḥ kva vatse kva ca tāvakaṃ vapuḥ |
padaṃ saheta bhramarasya pelavaṃ śirīṣapuṣpaṃ na punaḥ patatriṇaḥ || *K* 5.4 ||

[176] iyaṃ te jananī prāptā tvadālokanatatparā |
snehaprasravanirbhinnam udvahantī stanāṃśukam || *VŪ* 5.12 ||

What Vedantadesika borrows in *Yādavābhyudaya* 4.67 are thus Kalidasa's ways of rendering maternal concern.

Such borrowings appear not only in Vedantadesika's *kāvya*s—that is, poems written in the genres Kalidasa also wrote in—but also in his devotional hymns (*stotra*s). In *Godāstuti* ("Praise for Goda"), Vedantadesika addresses the poet-saint Andal as follows:

> "Friend,
> your body is so beautiful!
>
> How did an ancient man
> who lies on a snake
> who rides a bird
>
> become your husband
> of choice?"
>
> Such mocking words
> of your friends
> prove your love is true.[177]

The characterizations of Vishnu given by Andal's friends redescribe attributes which are typically considered magnificent: infiniteness, the eagle Garuda, and the serpent Adisesha. When Vedantadesika writes that these unflattering characterizations "prove her love is true (*samucita*)," he means they furnish a context for Andal to prove the steadfastness of her love. A similar context is described in detail in *Kumarasaṃbhava* 5.65-84, where a brahmin passerby (who ends up being Shiva in disguise) tests Parvati's love by redescribing Shiva's attributes—his beginninglessness as obscure parentage, Nandi as a senile bull, his third eye as a deformity, and so on.[178] The brahmin's

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[177] nāgeśayaḥ sutanu pakṣirathaḥ kathaṃ te jātaḥ svayaṃvarapatiḥ puruṣaḥ purāṇaḥ | evaṃvidhāḥ samucitaṃ praṇayaṃ bhavatyāḥ saṃdarśayanti parihāsagiraḥ sakhīnām || *Godāstuti* 13 ||

[178] alakṣyajanmatā (*K* 5.72); vṛddhokṣa (*K* 5.70); vapur virūpākṣam (*K* 5.72).

redescriptions issue from the perspective of common opinion ("People will laugh!"[179] he once says), drawing on its power to urge conformity, and thus highlight the courage Parvati shows in disregarding what people think and asserting her love for Shiva. It is similarly Andal's courage in love that Vedantadesika brings out by showing her friends mocking Vishnu.

In these verses on Nanda, Yashoda, and Andal, Vedantadesika uses Kalidasa's expressions (or his versions of them) in contexts similar to those of their original appearance. In other instances, however, he borrows a Kalidasan expression but significantly alters the kind of context in which it is used. The *Raghuvaṃśa* famously opens with the narrator admitting his sense of inadequacy to his task:

> A fool after a poet's fame,
> I shall become a laughing-stock
>
> like a midget
> his arms raised up
>
> intent on a fruit
> only a tall man can reach.[180]

Vedantadesika recalls Kalidasa's metaphor in verse 25 of *Śaraṇāgatidīpikā* ("Light on Self-Surrender"), using the same words for most of its crucial elements:

> In the same way a dwarf
> abandons holding up his arms
> and requests a tall man
> for the fruit
>
> Lord whom
> the yogis contemplate!
>
> so a wise man

[179] mahājanaḥ smeramukhaḥ bhaviṣyati || *K* 5.70 ||

[180] mandaḥ kaviyaśaḥprārthī gamiṣyāmy upahāsyatām |
prāṃśulabhye phale lobhād udbāhuriva vāmanaḥ || *R* 1.3 ||

abandons all the arduous methods
placing you in their stead.[181]

In both verses, the dwarf image conjures an experience of striving where we are pushed to our limits and still we find we have come up short. But whereas Kalidasa shows us the dwarf prior to the point of exhaustion (which I imagine would occur in the “Or else…” [*athavā*…] of *R* 1.4), Vedantadesika shows him to us precisely at that moment, when he can no longer jump or even hold up his arms and requests the help of a tall passerby. Moreover, the kind of striving which the dwarf image intends in *Śaraṇāgatidīpikā* is religious: the dwarf’s admission of his own incapacity corresponds to that moment in the devotee’s life when she admits her utter helplessness and surrenders to god.

We find a similar repurposing of a Kalidasan expression in verse 5 of *Gopālaviṃśati* (“Twenty Verses on the Cowherd God”), which returns us to the moment Krishna is caught stealing butter:

He has stuck his hand in the pot
to steal the delicious butter

he sees his mother
trembling as she holds a leash
for she is angry—

may he protect us!—

his foot wavering
he neither moves away
nor stays put

suddenly he closes his eyes
cowherd impostor

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[181] udbāhubhāvam apahāya yathaiva kharvaḥ prāṃśuṃ phalārtham abhiyācati yogicintya |
evaṃ suduṣkaram upāyagaṇaṃ vihāya sthāne niveśayati tasya vicakṣaṇas tvām ||
Śaraṇāgatidīpikā 25 ||

protector of the universe.[182]

The phrase "neither moves away nor stays put" recalls Kalidasa's words in *Kumārasaṃbhava* 5.85, where Parvati discovers that the brahmin whom she has been scolding for insulting Shiva is none other than Shiva himself:

> Having seen him
> her thin beautiful body trembling
>
> raising her lifted foot
> to make a step
>
> like a river, turbid
> by the meeting of its own current
> with a mountain
>
> the daughter of the king of mountains
> neither went nor stayed put.[183]

Neither-going-nor-staying functions similarly in both verses: Krishna and Parvati both experience a sudden disorientation caused by some unforeseen circumstance, and we meet them before they have fully recovered from it. For Parvati, recognizing Shiva means many things at once, each accompanied by a different set of emotions. Here is one way of imagining the thoughts which dawn on her simultaneously, competing to be expressed in a course of action: (a) "My rage at the brahmin is no longer justified" (embarrassment, amusement); (b) "I'm face-to-face with the man I love" (excitement, bashfulness); (c) "I've been made the butt of a joke" (humiliation, anger;

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[182] hartuṃ kuṃbhe vinihitakaraḥ svādu haiyaṅgavīnaṃ dṛṣṭvā dāmagrahaṇacaṭulāṃ mātaraṃ jātaroṣām |
pāyād īṣatpracalitapado nāpagacchan na tiṣṭhan mithyāgopaḥ sapadi nayane mīlayan viśvagoptā || *Gopālaviṃśati* 5 ||

[183] taṃ vīkṣya vepathumatī sarasāṅgayaṣṭir nikṣepaṇāya padam uddhṛtam udvahantī |
mārgācalavyatikarākuliteva sindhuḥ śailādhirājatanayā na yayau na tasthau || *K* 5.85 ||
This connection was first pointed out to me by Dr. S. Padmanabhan of The University of Madras.

indicated by her trembling); (d) “Does this mean I can stop my ascetic practice?” (disappointment at the anticlimax, relief). The simile of turbid water gets precisely at this paralyzing jumble of thoughts which has made it almost impossible for Parvati to decide whether to go or stay. Krishna’s disorientation is similarly occasioned by the sudden appearance of Yashoda. But what paralyzes him isn’t so much confusion as the impossibility at this point of avoiding being seen: he wishes to escape somehow, but neither staying put nor making a dash for it will help his cause. And so he closes his eyes, in the way students avoid eye contact with their teachers thinking they have somehow made themselves less visible. If this seems a strange occasion to request Krishna for his protection, we might recall the other sense in which Krishna neither goes nor stays, the paradoxical sense of his constant but concealed divine presence which is accessible through devotional meditation.

In this second set of examples, what Vedantadesika has borrowed from Kalidasa aren’t statements or propositions but pre-propositional fragments (legs curved and tapering, laughing who knows why, loving flow of milk, neither going nor staying…), no less significant for being pre-propositional. For each carries with it a style of perceiving or feeling which Vedantadesika absorbs into his own poetry either through emulation or modification. In reproducing these fragments, Vedantadesika draws our attention to what Kuntaka also identified as the distinctive feature of Kalidasa’s delicate style, its registration of those aspects of things which “reveal the remarkable grandeur of [their] nature.”[184] Indeed, Vedantadesika doesn’t just inherit particular expressions from Kalidasa but a general practice of conjuring vivid sensations and states of mind. For even

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[184] kācid eva svabhāvamahattā vyaktim āsādayati | (Kuntaka, *Vakroktijīvita*, 17, commentary on 1.9.)

where the influence of Kalidasa barely shows itself in the words, we can often sense a Kalidasan manner of selecting details. To cite one last instance, when Vedantadesika imagines Lord Varadaraja "rising from his bed in the morning"

> wearing on his throat
> the imprint of a gold bangle
> made by Lakshmi's wild embraces

the sensations he conjures (the warmth and give of god's skin, the sudden passion in which Lakshmi must have pressed into it) presuppose a startling proximity to his objects of description, the kind of proximity we've come to expect from Kalidasa—which is to say, the almost embarrassing proximity that Dushyanta has to Shakuntala as he spies on her in Kanva's ashram.[185] (It is the same proximity that embarrassed certain readers of *Kumārasaṃbhava* Canto 8, where Kalidasa intimately describes the love-making of "Shiva and Parvati, parents of the world.") Kalidasa's most significant gift to Vedantadesika is the practice of vivid description.

Since Vedantadesika was first and foremost a religious writer, his investment in Kalidasa's poetic style should at first puzzle us; if it didn't, we might risk uncritically assuming that writing poetry was little more to him than a pastime, at best supplementary but inessential to his theological concerns. While poetry had long been central to Srivaishnava practice and thinking, most Srivaishnava poetry was composed in religious genres, such as hagiography or some variety of devotional lyric (whether *pācuram* or *stotra*). Why did Vedantadesika find it necessary to look beyond these poetic forms and write in genres and styles that weren't usually taken up for religious

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[185] anibhṛtaparirambhair āhitām indirāyāḥ kanakavalayamudrāṃ kaṇṭhadeśe dadhānaḥ |
phaṇipatiśayanīyād utthitas tvaṃ prabhāte [varada satatam antarmānasaṃ saṃnidheyāḥ] ||
Varadarājapañcāśat 47 ||
Vedantadesika here recalls Kalidasa's description of Kama, whose "throat bears the mark of Rati's bangle" <rativalayapadāṅke…kaṇṭhe || *K* 2.64 ||>.

expression? Several scholars of Vedantadesika have posed versions of this question, and their answers tend to follow one of two lines: (1) poetry afforded Vedantadesika a form enabling a freer exploration of theological ideas than prose; (2) poetry helped Vedantadesika make his theological ideas more digestible and even alluring.[186] These may be plausible as general speculations as to why Vedantadesika wrote poetry at all; however, they are less helpful in understanding why he wrote poetry the way he did, in accounting for certain specific choices he made, particularly for his choice to write like Kalidasa. What stretched Vedantadesika beyond the mainstays of Srivaishnava poetry (direct appeal to God, enumeration of his attributes, reportage of a devotional speaker's mental states, narration of wondrous events) and drew him to the descriptive language of sensation? To understand that, we need to understand something of Vedantadesika's religious thinking, starting with the theological tradition on which it builds.

2. On Devotional Meditation: Vivid Remembering in Ramanuja and Vedantadesika

Near the end of *Vedārthasaṅgraha* ("Summary of the Meaning of the Vedas"), the eleventh-century theologian Ramanuja identifies *bhakti*, or devotion to god, as the most powerful means to escape the inevitable suffering of ordinary life. Yet the transformative devotion Ramanuja has in mind isn't just a feeling of piety or religious fervor, which is typically opposed to thinking (or knowing, or understanding, or cognizing): "The word *bhakti* refers to a kind of delight, and delight is nothing other than a kind of cognition (*jñāna*)." In characterizing delight as

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[186] The first view is articulated in Friedhelm Hardy, "The Tamil Veda of a Śūdra Saint: The Srivaisnava Interpretation of Nammalvar," in *Contributions to South Asian Studies*, ed. Gopal Krishna (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1979); Hopkins, *Singing the Body of God*; Appayya Dikshita, Nilakantha Dikshita, and Vedanta Deshika, *"Self-Surrender," "Peace," "Compassion," & "Mission of the Goose": Poems and Prayers from South India*. The second in Hardy, "The Tamil Veda of a Śūdra Saint: The Srivaisnava Interpretation of Nammalvar"; Rao, *Re-Figuring the Ramayana as Theology*.

a kind of cognition, Ramanuja is in effect challenging "the common-sense view" that "pleasure is *achieved* by a special kind of cognition, and is thus a different thing entirely"; that is, he is challenging any view that excludes feelings and emotions from pure acts of cognition.[187] Here is how he puts the point:

> Cognitions of objects are of the same nature (lit. "have the same basis") as pleasure, pain, or indifference. … The cognition of a certain object, which is thought *to produce* pleasure—such a cognition of the object simply *is* pleasure. We don't discern a separate term beyond that, since by the cognition alone (*tenaiva*) it is possible to say whether one is happy.[188]

When we think, "There's my friend," the cognition itself has an affective tone—excitement, perhaps, or relief—which we don't experience independently of the thought. Every cognition records a state of affairs at the same time as it records a disposition towards that state of affairs. Accordingly, if *bhakti* refers to a disposition of the heart ("a kind of delight"), it is the disposition indissociable from a particular cognition—namely, that cognition whose content is the ground of being, or god. *Bhakti* is the affective tone of contemplating the ground. Ramanuja's point here is that if we took the larger view of things—if we were convinced to the core that all things participate in the unified whole that is god—we would find ourselves automatically overcome with devotion.[189]

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[187] bhaktiśabdaś ca prītiviśeṣe vartate | prītiś ca jñānaviśeṣa eva |…sukhaṃ ca jñānaviśeṣasādhyaṃ padārthāntaram iti hi laukikāḥ | (Rāmānuja, *Vedārthasaṅgraha (Rāmānuja's Vedārthasaṃgraha)*, ed. J. A. B. van Buitenen (Pune: Deccan Collage Postgraduate and Research Institute, 1956), 170, section 141.)

[188] [etad uktaṃ bhavati] – viṣayajñānāni sukhaduḥkhamadhyasthasādhāraṇāni … | yena ca viṣayaviśeṣeṇa viśeṣitaṃ jñānaṃ sukhasya janakam ityabhimataṃ tadviṣayaṃ jñānam eva sukhaṃ, tadatireki padārthāntaraṃ nopalabhyate | tenaiva sukhitvavyavahāropapatteś ca | (Ibid.)

[189] "The one who has brahman as the content of cognition is joyful" <brahma yasya jñānaviṣayo bhavati sa sukhī bhavati> (Ibid., 171, section 142.)

Cultivating *bhakti* is therefore less about forcefully inducing a mood or emotion in ourselves (we are powerless to do such a thing) than about holding in mind a certain state of affairs, about cultivating an abiding attention to god. That is why, in the ninth chapter of *Rahasyatrayasāra*, Ramanuja's intellectual heir Vedantadesika identifies cultivating *bhakti* with contemplation:

> The practice of *bhakti* (*bhakti-yoga*) amounts to a special kind of contemplation (*dhyāna*), which takes as its object the various forms of god…and which is attended by an unsurpassed delight. This contemplation (*atu tāṉ*) has the form of remembrance (*smṛti*) that is continuous like a flow of oil, and a vividness equal to that of direct perception…. It is a special continuity of cognition, culminating in the ultimate conviction.[190]

The attitude of devotion is brought about by contemplation, which Vedantadesika characterizes as an act of memory (*smṛti*). But memory here doesn't just refer to a power of retention—that faculty by which, for instance, we are at any moment capable of reciting the alphabet, even if most of the time we aren't thinking about it at all. More precisely, it refers to a power of conscious remembering, an abiding-with or holding-in-mind-of something in the present moment. The simile of oil gets at the requisite steadiness (*dhruvatva*) of such remembering: whereas our everyday thinking has the texture of water being poured, which sprays in different directions and is susceptible to the slightest influences, thinking in devotional remembrance has the ropelike viscosity of a stream of oil.[191] Moreover, for the remembrance of god to have such a consistency,

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[190] bhaktiyogamāvatu [ananyaniṣṭhaṉāy ananyādhīnaṉāy ananyaśeṣabhūtaṉāna] pakavāṉuṭaiya svarūpādikaḷai viṣayamākavuṭaittāy niratiśayaprītirūpamāṉa dhyānaviśeṣam. atu tāṉ tailadhāraiyaip pōle nirantaramāṉa smṛtirūpamāy sākṣātkāratulyamāna vaiśadyattaiyuṭaittāy [paramapatattukku prayāṇam paṇṇum divasam uṟutiyāka nāḷtōṟum anuṣṭikka vaḷarntu varuvatāy] antimapratyayāvadhiyāna jñānasantativiśeṣam (Vedāntadeśika, *Rahasyatrayasāra (Srimad Vedanta Desika's Srimad Rahasya Trayasara with Sara Vistara (Commentary) by Sri Uttamur T. Viraraghavacharya)*, 325, chapter 9.)

[191] The helpful counter-image of water being poured was given to me by Dr. S. Padmanabhan of The University of Madras.

it can't be vague or weak but must grip us, attaining a "vividness (*vaiśadya*) equal to that of direct perception."

How is it possible for remembering to approximate perceiving, let alone match it?[192] For doesn't memory by its very nature pale in comparison to what appears before the eyes? In making sense of this criterion of vividness, it is helpful to consult the passage in Ramanuja's *Śrībhāṣya* ("The Divine Commentary") from which Vedantadesika's comment on *bhakti* takes inspiration:

> Contemplation has the form of an uninterrupted continuity of remembrance like a flow of oil. For as scripture teaches us, steady remembrance is the means to spiritual release: "The remembrance is steady; when one finds [such] remembrance, it is the seer's release from all knots." And that remembrance has the same form as seeing. …And remembrance comes to have the form of seeing by a high intensity of the imagination (*bhāvanā-prakarṣāt*).[193]

Here Ramanuja similarly identifies meditative remembrance with perception. But attentive to the strangeness of what he is proposing, he immediately goes on to explain himself: *remembrance comes to have the form of seeing by a high intensity of the imagination*. Remembering becomes seeing through *bhāvanā*, or the mind's capacity to conjure a vivid mental reality, bringing faint impressions more clearly into view. Ramanuja is proposing that when this capacity is exercised to its utmost—to a degree rarely attested in everyday experience, though perhaps approximated in

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[192] For an illuminating exploration of this question, see Marcus Schmücker, "On Rāmānuja's Identification of 'Steady Remembrance' (Dhruvānusmṛti) with 'Direct Seeing' (Darśana)," in *Cracow Indological Studies, Vol. 8*, ed. Marzenna Czerniak-Droździowicz (Krakow: Księgarnia Akademicka, 2006), 201–17.

[193] dhyānaṃ ca tailadhārāvadavicchinnasmṛtisantānarūpam dhrūvā smṛtiḥ smṛtilambhe sarvagranthīnāṃ vipramokṣaḥ iti dhruvāyāḥ smṛter apavargopāyatvaśravaṇāt | sā ca smṛtir darśanasamānākārā | …bhavati ca smṛter bhāvanāprakarṣāt darśanarūpatā | (Vedāntadeśika, *Tattvaṭīkā* (Madras: Kabeer Printing Works, 1938), 159; ibid., 161.)

dreams and art—memory starts taking on a vividness akin to that of perception. In what remains of this section, I want to focus on how Vedantadesika develops Ramanuja's astonishing claim.

In some fine pages of *Tattvaṭīkā* ("Annotations on the Truth"), Vedantadesika glosses Ramanuja's key concept of *bhāvanā* with the following expression: "*saṃskāra*, which is born of experience."[194] The word *saṃskāra* often refers to a mark left by past experience on the soul, latent in it even if it is not always fully present to the mind (e.g. Dushyanta's presentiment of Shakuntala in *A* 5.2). Vedantadesika can't mean *saṃskāra* in quite this sense, since the word wouldn't then be an acceptable gloss for *bhāvanā*. We learn what he does mean by it from a significant passage of *Saṅkalpasūryodaya* ("The Dawn of Determination"). Act 7 of this allegorical play opens with a monologue spoken by a character called Samskara, who has been preparing the wise man's soul (*puruṣa*) for meditation:

> **Samskara**: I am the son of Experience, called Samskara. I am the artist of King Discrimination, and have studied the whole set of sciences. After defeating Visvakarma, artist of the gods, and Maya, artist of the asuras, I betook myself to rest and slept for a long time. And in that time, Passion and Languor, two great forces sent by Great Delusion, took advantage of the opportunity and sought to kill me, seeing that I was a friend to Clarity. Then was I suddenly awakened by Comparison and Association, servants sent by Queen Benevolence (*sumati*), who was herself goaded on by God's compassion. Now that the enemies have fled on all sides, being crowded out, I've been commanded by Will-Power, general of King Discrimination, to do what pleases the king, who for some reason wants to see a picture of the universe. And with my attention focused on painting the picture (*tat*), I executed it as commanded. Power abides with those who act at the right moment. And so,
>
>> Covering the wise man's mind—the painting-wall—by means of inspiration, I've painted the universe, characterized by both its holy and unholy parts. (1)

Saṃskāra is here represented not as a latent mark but as a latent potential of the mind, a faculty capable of lifting marks of past experience out of oblivion and into consciousness. This faculty is

[194] **bhāvanā** anubhavajanyaḥ saṃskāraḥ | (Vedāntadeśika, *Tattvaṭīkā*, 170.)

moreover the source of all kinds of artistic activity, and might therefore be translated as "imagination." For as Samskara tells us, he is an artist who has studied "the whole set of sciences," which apparently includes the arts of architecture, poetry, and painting: achitecture, because the imagination is superior to the immortal architects Visvakarma and Maya; poetry, because it is activated by the same associative instinct that generates the poet's similes; and painting, because it is entrusted with covering the mind's walls with vivid pictures of the universe (pictures so vivid that, as Will-Power will remark on seeing them, "things past, future, and present appear as though they were present before us").[195] In glossing Ramanuja's word *bhāvanā* with *saṃskāra*, then, Vedantadesika is suggesting that the faculty required for devotional meditation is the same one responsible for artistic creation. Meditation no less than art involves conjuring a vivid mental reality, so that the work of a devotee ends up looking very much like that of an artist.

While Vedantadesika's identification of the meditative faculty with the artistic faculty seems to aestheticize the practice of meditation, other parts of his analysis serve to naturalize it. After glossing *bhāvanā* with *saṃskāra*, Vedantadesika considers whether it is really possible (apart from the allegorical scenario staged in *Saṅkalpasūryodaya*) to achieve that "high intensity of the

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[195] saṃskāraḥ—ahaṃ khalv anubhavāmuṣyāyaṇaḥ saṃskāranāmā devasya vivekasya śikṣitasarvavidyākalāpaḥ śilpī devaśilpinaṃ viśvakarmāṇam asuraśilpinaṃ mayaṃ ca vijitya viśramābhilāṣī ciram asvāpsam | tāvac cedam antaram āsādya mahāmohaprayuktābhyāṃ madhukaiṭabhābhyāmiva mahābalābhyāṃ madhyamacaramaguṇābhyāṃ sattvamitram asāv iti jighāṃsitaḥ | nūnam aprabuddhataiva puruṣeṣu pratipakṣajanasya hastāvalambaḥ | tataś cāhaṃ prabodhitaḥ sahasaiva paramapuruṣadayācoditayā devyā sumatyā sahadṛṣṭisadṛśadṛṣṭisaṃjñābhyāṃ dāsībhyāṃ niravakāśatayā tatas tataḥ palāyite pratipakṣe kenāpi hetunā viśvacitraṃ didṛkṣaymāṇasya devasya mahārājavivekasya senāpatinā vyavasāyena svāmisaṃmatam ādiṣṭo'smi | yathādiṣṭaṃ ca tadāhitadṛṣṭir anvatiṣṭham | avasarānukūlavṛttīnāṃ khalv adhikāriṇām ādhipatyaṃ pratitiṣṭhati | tataś ca

viduṣaś cintanāṃ śaktyā citrabhittiṃ vitanvatā |

śuddhāśuddhavibhāgārhaṃ viśvaṃ vilikhitaṃ mayā || *S* 7.1 || (Vedāntadeśika, *Saṅkalpasūryodaya (Samkalpasuryodaya of Śrī Veṅkaṭanātha with the Commentaries of Prabhāvilāsa of Ahobala and Prabhāvalī of Nṛsiṁharāja)*, ed. V. Krishnamacharya, vol. 2 (Adyar, Madras: Vasanta Press, 1948), 608.)

imagination (*bhāvanā-prakarṣa*),” wherein what the mind visualizes on the basis of memory attains the clarity of perception. To be sure, such intense visualization is an exceptional state of mind; however, for Vedantadesika it isn’t as outlandish as one might think: “Here we should take as examples the imaginings of the fearful, lovers, and the like.”[196] In extreme mental states such as terror and lovesickness, the images conjured by memory can become so compelling that they are mistaken for reality. Vedantadesika recalls a passage from *Rāmāyaṇa* 3.36-37 where Maricha recounts two hair-breadth escapes from Rama’s fatal arrows. As Maricha tells Ravana, he has since become an ascetic in order to keep out of harm’s way;

> But now behind every tree I seem to see Rama clad in bark-cloth and black hides, wielding his bow like Death himself with noose in hand. Or rather, thousands of Ramas do I see in my fear; this whole wilderness, Ravana, has become nothing but Rama to me. It is Rama I see, lord of rakshasas, even when no one is near.[197]

Fear has so consumed Maricha that he can no longer distinguish what he remembers from what he sees. We might also recall here Macbeth’s “dagger of the mind,” a figment similar to Maricha’s imagined Ramas but conjured more in apprehension than in fear:

> Is this a dagger which I see before me,
> The handle toward my hand? …
> Or art thou but
> A dagger of the mind, a false creation
> Proceeding from the heat-oppressèd brain? (2.i.33-39)

Such examples of disturbed mental states show that the “high intensity of the imagination” desired by Ramanuja isn’t entirely foreign to ordinary (or at least conceivable) experience. Yet, as Vedantadesika notes, there is an important difference between the disturbed imagination and the

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[196] bhītakāmukādipratibhāś ca atra nidarśitavyāḥ | (Vedāntadeśika, *Tattvaṭīkā*, 170.)

[197] Vālmīki, *Rāmāyaṇa (Ramayana III: The Forest)*, trans. Sheldon Pollock (New York: NYU Press and the JCC Foundation, 2006), 224–25.

devotional imagination: “In instances such as the passage that starts ‘Behind every tree I see him,’ a perceptual error is involved owing to a defect of the mind. But in devotional meditation (*iha*) there is no such defect or obstacle, since such contemplation is in accordance with scripture.”[198] The vivid mental world conjured in devotional meditation isn’t simply a compelling fiction like the hallucinations of Maricha and Macbeth; it is a transcendent reality, screened from empirical perception but known through the revealed word.

The other example offered by Vedantadesika is the lover’s imagination (*kāmukapratibhā*): “As others too have remarked, ‘When one is overwhelmed by a feeling such as desire, something which once was seen, being contemplated (*dhyāyamāna*), attains the condition of being before one’s eyes, even though it is absent.’”[199] With the lover’s daydream, we are one step closer to the devotee’s meditation.[200]

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[198] vṛkṣe vṛkṣe ca paśyāmi ityādiṣu bhrāntimiśratvaṃ doṣāyattam; iha tu yathāśrutacintanān na doṣabādhāv [iti bhāvaḥ] | (Vedāntadeśika, *Tattvaṭīkā*, 171.)

[199] parair apy ucyate—“dṛṣṭaṃ parokṣam api dhyāyamānaṃ sākṣādbhāvam āpannaṃ kāmādyupaplave” iti | (Ibid., 170–71.) I haven’t been able to locate Vedantadesika’s source for this quotation.

[200] My preference for *imagination* as the English translation of *bhāvanā* here (instead of other possibilities such as *reproduction* or *re-experience*, which do a better job of emphasizing the degree to which memory is involved in *bhāvanā* but which I don’t feel natural using in a sentence) is due largely to the examples Vedantadesika uses to explain himself. It is as if I asked him “What do you mean by *bhāvanā*?” and, dissatisfied that the formal definition “*saṃskāra*, born of experience” was lacking in concreteness, he pointed to an artist painting, then to Maricha hallucinating, then to a lover daydreaming, so that I thought to myself, “Ah, he’s talking about the imagination.” I have yet to fully work out the specific relations among the Sanskrit words around memory, attention, and the imagination which Ramanuja and Vedantadesika wish to relate and sometimes even to identify, including *dhyāna*, *smṛti*, *bhāvanā*, *saṃskāra*, and *pratibhā*. Yet even philosophy done in English has found the boundaries between imagination and memory, memory and attention to be porous (Thomas Hobbes, for instance, claimed to find no essential difference between the imagination and memory).

3. On Daydreaming: Vivid Remembering in Kalidasa

When one is overwhelmed by a feeling such as desire, something which once was seen, being contemplated, attains the condition of being before one's eyes, even though it's absent. ... Centuries before Vedantadesika, Kalidasa had already explored this premise throughout his writing, in characters hosting a mental reality which is, at least momentarily, more compelling than the objective world they inhabit. In *Raghuvaṃśa* 12, after Hanuman tells Rama that he has found Sita, Rama is described contemplating her as follows:

> And [Hanuman] showed Rama the jewel
> of recognition, his task accomplished.
> It was like the heart of Sita
> taken shape and come there on its own.
> Setting the jewel on his heart,
> touching it and closing his eyes,
> he felt the thrill of clasping his beloved
> without touching her breasts.[201]

Sita's cool and hard jewel gives Rama the same delight he once felt touching her warm and soft body. In Rama's hands, the jewel thus becomes a powerful aid to the imagination, allowing it momentarily to conjure sensations in the absence of the stimuli which in normal circumstances could alone yield them.

We find another instance of daydreaming in Act 3 of *Vikramorvaśīya*, where Galava tells his fellow acting student Pallava how Urvashi messed up her lines in a play:

> Galava: Urvashi was playing the role of Lakshmi when Menaka, playing the role of Varuni, asked her, "Friend, assembled here are kings who are the most noble men in the three realms, and among them Keshava. On which of them has your heart fixed itself?"
> Pallava: And then? And then?

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[201] pratyabhijñānaratnaṃ ca rāmāyādarśayat kṛtī |
hṛdayaṃ svayam āyātaṃ vaidehyā iva mūrtimat ||
sa prāpa hṛdayanyastamaṇisparśanimīlitaḥ |
apayodharasaṃsargām priyāliṅgananirvṛtim || *R* 12.64-5 ||

> Galava: Then, when she should have spoken, "On Purushottama," instead she said, "On Pururavas."[202]

While such a slip of the tongue might be unsurprising in casual conversation, it is astonishing in the context of a live performance. For acting demands precisely that we make the effort to conceal our minds, passing out of (or at least suspending) our customary selves in order to make room for a new one. If in spite of that effort Urvashi has blurted out what is on her mind, it is because contemplating her beloved has saturated her awareness.

The capacity of daydreams to transport, disorient, and paralyze turns out to be a central theme in *Abhijñānaśākuntala*. Its centrality is suggested as early as the prologue, where the director begins by announcing the play about to be performed: "Today we are to present a new play called *The Recognition of Shakuntala*, whose plot has been set by Kalidasa. So let an effort be made by every actor."[203] Between this announcement and the actual performance, Kalidasa gives us the following exchange:

> Director: Just sing a song about the summer, only recently begun and most fit to be enjoyed. For now
>
> > are the days when it is soothing to bathe in waters,
> > when forest breezes are fragrant

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[202] dvitīyaḥ—lacchībhūmiāe vaṭṭamāṇā uvvasī vāruṇībhūmiāe meṇaāe pucchidā | sahi samāadā ede telokkasupurisā sakesavā a loavālā | kadam assiṃ de bhāvāhiṇivesotti |
prathamaḥ—tado tado |
dvitīyaḥ—tado tāe purisottametti bhaṇidavve purūravetti ṇiggadā vāṇī |
(*Skt. chāyā*: dvitīyaḥ—lakṣmībhūmikāyāṃ vartamānorvaśī vāruṇībhūmikāyāṃ vartamānayā menakayā pṛṣṭā | sakhi samāgatā ete trailokyasupuruṣāḥ sakeśavāś ca lokapālāḥ | katamasmiṃs te bhāvābhiniveśa iti |
prathamaḥ—tatas tataḥ |
dvitīyaḥ—tatas tayā puruṣottama iti bhaṇitavye purūravasīti nirgatā vāṇī |)
Kālidāsa, *Vikramorvaśīya (The Vikramorvaśīyam of Kālidāsa)*, ed. M. R. Kale (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1967), 136–38.)

[203] sūtradhāraḥ: adya khalu kālidāsagrathitavastunā navenābhijñānaśākuntalākhyena nāṭakenopasthātavyam asmābhiḥ | tatpratipātram ādhīyatāṃ yatnaḥ |

having touched the trumpet flowers,
when sleep comes most easily in shade
and it is loveliest when day turns to night.

Actress: Here you are (*she sings*)—

Women tender of heart
adorn themselves with
sirisha flowers
with delicate stamen-tips
kissed gently by bees.

Director: Well sung, lady! Ah, all around the audience appears as though it were painted in a picture (*ālikhita iva*), for the raga has tied up the movements of their minds. Now, then, what work shall we perform to honor them?
Actress: Noble sir, didn't you already announce that a new play called *The Recognition of Shakuntala* is to be performed?
Director: Lady, good thing you reminded me! I must have forgotten it just now. How?

I was forcefully stolen away
by your song's attractive raga—
Just like this king Dushyanta
by a swift antelope. …[204]

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[204] sūtradhāraḥ: tad imam eva tāvad acirapravṛttam upabhogakṣamaṃ grīṣmasamayam adhikṛtya gīyatām | saṃprati hi
subhagasalilāvagāhāḥ pāṭalasaṃsargasurabhivanavātāḥ |
pracchāyasulabhanidrā divasāḥ pariṇāmaramaṇīyāḥ || *A* 1.3 ||
naṭī: tahā (iti gāyati)
īsīsicumbiāhiṃ bhamarehiṃ suumārakesarasihāiṃ |
odaṃsaānti daamāṇā pamadāo sirīsakusumāiṃ || *A* 1.4 ||
(*Skt. chāyā*: tathā
īṣadīṣaccumbitāni bhramaraiḥ sukumārakesaraśikhāni |
avataṃsayanti dayamānāḥ pramādāḥ śirīṣakusumāni ||)
sūtradhāraḥ: ārye sādhu gītam | aho rāgabaddhacittavṛttir ālikhita iva sarvato raṅgaḥ | tad idānīṃ katamatprakaraṇam āśrityainam ārādhayāmaḥ |
naṭī: ṇaṃ ajjamissehiṃ paḍhamaṃ evva āṇattaṃ āhiṇṇāṇasaundalaṃ ṇāma apuvvaṃ ṇāḍaaṃ paoeṇa adhikariadutti |
(*Skt. chāyā*: nanv āryamiśraiḥ prathamam evājñaptam abhijñānaśākuntalaṃ nāmāpūrvaṃ nāṭakaṃ prayogeṇādhikriyatām iti |)
sūtradhāraḥ: ārye samyag anubodhito'smi | asmin kṣaṇe vismṛtaṃ khalu mayā | kutaḥ |
tavāsmi gītarageṇa hāriṇā prasabhaṃ hṛtaḥ |
eṣa rājeva duṣyantaḥ saraṅgeṇātiraṃhasā || *A* 1.5 ||

The director notes with delight the general stunning effect of the actress' song (which I therefore imagine to be tuned in a raga like Khamas or Nand), only to realize a few moments later that he too has been mildly stunned, having forgotten what he just said.

The director's lapse in attention in fact foreshadows several such episodes of lapsing that punctuate the play. Most consequential among these is Shakuntala's inopportune daydreaming at the start of Act 4, which Priyamvada describes to Anasuya as follows:

> Our friend, her face resting on her left hand, appears as though she were painted in a picture (Skt. *ālikhiteva*). Since her thoughts are on her husband, she doesn't even notice herself, let alone a visitor.[205]

Kalidasa here has Anasuya speak the same words that the director used to describe the stunned audience, thus analogizing the experiences of being lost in reverie and being carried away by music. In another description of Shakuntala's daydreaming, offered incidentally by sage Durvasa in the curse he casts on her, we find two more characterizations of her mental state:

> Contemplating him with undivided attention [1],
> you don't notice me [2], vessel of askesis, as I approach…[206]

While the second characterization reiterates the theme of attentional failure, the first (*vicintayantī yam ananyamānasā*, lit. "contemplating him with a mind that has no other object") is suggestive of successful concentration, drawing as it does on a vocabulary of spiritual practice (cf. Krishna's words in *Bhagavadgīta* 9.22: *ananyāś cintayanto mām*, "contemplating me with no other

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[205] vāmahatthovahidavaaṇā ālihidā via piasahī bhattugadāe cintāe attāṇaṃ pi ṇa esā vibhāvedi kiṃ uṇa āântuaṃ |
(*Skt. chāyā*: vāmahastopahitavadanālikhiteva sakhī bhartṛgatayā cintayātmānam api naiṣā vibhāvayati kiṃ punar āgantukam |) (Kālidāsa, *Abhijñānaśākuntala (The Abhijñānaśākuntalam of Kālidāsa)*, ed. M. R. Kale (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1969), 123.)

[206] vicintayantī yam ananyamānasā taponidhiṃ vetsi na māṃ upasthitam … || *A* 4.1 ||

object…”). Distraction is portrayed here not as the opposite of attention but as its conjoined twin, most visible from the perspective of those things which attention must neglect.

Reviewing the examples examined thus far, one could say the following: while Kalidasa’s depictions of Urvashi, the audience in *Śākuntala*, and Shakuntala show us what daydreaming looks like from the outside—to those who witness it without sharing in it—his depictions of Rama and *Śākuntala*’s director give us the “insider’s perspective,” as it were, reminding us what it feels like to be swept up in another version of reality. These two perspectives bleed into each other in Act 6 of *Śākuntala*, where Kalidasa tactfully unseams the customary solitude of daydreams by externalizing the daydreamer’s mind in art. When Dushyanta finally sees the ring of recognition, his remembrance of Shakuntala occurs in part as an intense visualization, a mental imaging of his earliest memories of her, which he is moved to set down on a canvas. We learn just how intense Dushyanta’s visualization is from how other characters react to his painting. Here is what Madhavya says about it:

> Oh my, the body sure has a natural grace. Well done, my friend, well done. What more is to be said? Suspecting her soul has entered it, I am filled with the urge to talk to her.[207]

Sanumati, observing the painting as an unseen witness, likewise praises it:

> Ah, [the king] has skill using a paint-brush! I think my friend is standing right in front of me.[208]

Both remarks express an astonishment at the lifelikeness of the king’s painting, recalling Will-Power’s comment in *Saṅkalpasūryodaya* on seeing one of Samskara’s paintings: “Things past and

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[207] he he bhōḥ | svabhāvamādhuryākṛtiḥ khalu | sādhu vayasya sādhu | kiṃ bahunā | svāntānupraveśaśaṅkayālāpanakutūhalaṃ mām janayati | (Kālidāsa, *Abhijñānaśākuntala (The Abhijñānaśākuntalam of Kālidāsa)*, 226.)

[208] aho vayasyasya vartikārekhāyā nipuṇatā | jāne sakhy agrato me tiṣṭhati | (Ibid.)

future appear as though they were present to us."[209] Dushyanta, for his part, is so gripped by his painting that he actually does address it, calling out to a bee in it that hovers near Shakuntala's lip. And since Sanumati and Madhavya don't immediately acknowledge that the king has lost touch with reality, for a few moments they too seem to have bizarrely fallen into his daydream. The first character to snap out of it is Madhavya, who drags the king out along with him:

> Madhavya: (*Laughing to himself*) He just went mad and, by hanging around him I've become just like him! (*Aloud*) But surely this is just a painting.
> King: How a painting?…Friend, why have you done me this cruelty?
>
> > With a heart filled with her alone
> > I was feeling the pleasure of seeing her
> > as though she were before my eyes,
> > when you aroused my memory (*smṛti*)
> > and turned my lover
> > once more into a painting.
>
> *He sheds tears.*[210]

Dushyanta's use of *smṛti* here highlights the same ambiguity in the concept of attention that we noted above. For another way of saying the second half of the verse—a way that to some people might come more naturally—would be, "you *interrupted* my remembrance (*smṛti*) and turned my lover once more into a painting." All such situations can be described just as well from the perspective of attention as that of distraction; in each case, what remains to be understood is

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[209] api bhūtāni bhāvīni bhavantīva bhavanti naḥ || *S* 7.5 ||

[210] mādhavya: (prahasya | ātmagatam) eso dāva ummatto | ahaṃ pi edassa saṅgeṇa īdisavaṇṇo via saṃvutto | (prakāśam) bho cittaṃ kkhu edaṃ |
(*Skt. chāyā*: eṣa tavad unmattaḥ | aham apy etasya saṅgenedṛśavarṇa iva saṃvṛttaḥ | bhoḥ citraṃ khalv etat |)
Rājā: kathaṃ citram |
…
rājā: vayasya kim idam anuṣṭhitaṃ paurobhāgyam |
darśanasukham anubhavataḥ sākṣādiva tanmayena hṛdayena |
smṛtikāriṇā tvayā me punar api citrīkṛtā kāntā || *A* 6.21 ||
(iti bāṣpaṃ virahati)

distracted from what, *attentive to what*, *with what intensity*? While the world we share with others makes demands on our attention almost unrelentingly, daydreamers have somehow found the means (the right mood, a conducive setting, time to spare, sufficient imaginative intensity) to tune it out and attend to their own mental creations. But the shared world always has the final say, and the higher the mind's flight, the more painful the fall. That is why when Dushyanta is told that what he's looking at is just a painting, he deems the reminder an act of cruelty.

One of the striking features of the *Meghadūta* is that it gives us the lover's daydream but witholds the crude and sore return to reality. To be sure, the yaksha is by no means spared the pain of that return; as we learn in 2.44 it has been a consistent feature of his exile:

> I see your body in the vines,
> your glance in the fearful look of the deer,
> the beauty of your face in the moon,
> your hair in the peacocks
> with their burden of feathers,
> your eyebrow-movements
> in the slender river-waves,
> but—you must be upset with me!—
> in no one place do I find
> the likeness of you.[211]

These words read like the daydreamer's counterpart to Maricha's "behind every tree I see him" speech, used by Vedantadesika to illustrate the power of the disturbed imagination. Like Maricha, the yaksha has experienced an enhancement of his imaginative powers thanks to an extreme state of mind. But whereas Maricha's imagination becomes too powerful, making absent entities seem present to him against his will, the yaksha's imagination hasn't become powerful enough. He in fact *desires* to imagine his beloved into presence with the help of various substitutes (much as

[211] śyāmāsv aṅgaṃ cakitahariṇotprekṣaṇe dṛṣṭipātaṃ
vaktracchāyāṃ śaśini śikhināṃ barhabhāreṣu keśān |
utpaśyāmi pratanuṣu nadīv īciṣu bhrūvilāsān
hantaikasmin kvacidapi na te caṇḍi sādṛśyam asti || *MD* 2.44 ||

Rama tried to do with Sita's jewel, Dushyanta with the painting of Shakuntala, and presumably Shakuntala with Dushyanta's ring) but only partially succeeds, since in the end his imagination proves too weak to shut out the overwhelming fact of his beloved's absence.

But when it comes to the most sustained imaginative flight of the poem—the yaksha's presumption that the cloud is his friend, capable of sending a message to his beloved—we find that the final say goes not to reality but to the daydreamer. It is true that the narrator gives the poem a voice of reality, undermining the yaksha's perspective most forcefully in the very lines that introduce it:

> How ill-suited is a cloud
> a jumble of vapor, light, water, and wind
>
> to the stuff of messages
> which only beings with life and minds should handle.
>
> In his passion the yaksha didn't understand this
> and so beseeched the cloud.
>
> Those whom love has ruined suffer to the core
> unable to tell thinking from unthinking.[212]

But unlike Madhavya, the narrator never shocks the daydreamer back into reality, falling silent as soon as the yaksha starts speaking. Both yaksha and audience are thus allowed to remain in thrall of the daydream at least until the end of the poem.

Enthrallment is only possible, of course, if the daydream itself is sufficiently gripping. I find that the success or failure of the *Meghadūta* hangs on how we have come to think of the cloud by the end of a given reading of the poem, on whether it remains to us as the narrator described it,

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[212] dhūmajyotiḥsalilamarutāṃ saṃnipātaḥ kva meghaḥ
saṃdeśārthāḥ kva paṭukaraṇaiḥ prāṇibhiḥ prāpaṇīyāḥ |
ityautsukyād aparigaṇayan guhyakas taṃ yayāce
kāmārtā hi prakṛtikṛpaṇāś cetanācetaneṣu || *MD* 1.5 ||

"a jumble of vapor, water, light, and wind," or whether instead we see the cloud as the yaksha sees him, as a friend and messenger. When the poem succeeds (when we succeed in reading it), its effect on us resembles that of Dushyanta's painting on Madhavya and Sanumati: the yaksha's description of the cloud's route so compels us that we start assenting to the daydream's premise, however outlandish it may have seemed to us at first. Lovesickness has brought the poet out in the yaksha in the same way that it brought out the painter in Dushyanta, but to a greater extent; for nowhere in Kalidasa are the limits of the imagination, in both duration and intensity, more thoroughly explored than in the character of the yaksha. That is why, I take it, Bronner and Shulman wish to call the *Meghadūta* Kalidasa's "strongest and most sustained metapoetic statement."[213] It is also why Vedantadesika's most significant engagement with Kalidasa comes as a response to this poem.

4. Daydreaming as Meditation: Imaginative Exercises in the Messenger Poems

I have been trying to understand why Vedantadesika, a writer who is first and foremost a religious thinker, would be as invested as he is in the poetry of Kalidasa, a poet who shows little interest in theology or religious sentiments. In section 1, I identified which aspects of Kalidasa's poetry were most often taken up by Vedantadesika: surveying the references to Kalidasa scattered throughout his oeuvre, I argued that Vedantadesika isn't primarily drawn to any viewpoint or "message" of Kalidasa but to pre-propositional fragments in Kalidasa's poetry—fragments on the order of expressions, images, and metaphors—and more generally to the capacity of Kalidasa's writing to conjure vivid sensations. However, it still wasn't clear *why* Vedantadesika should be

[213] Bronner and Shulman, "'A Cloud Turned Goose,'" 11. In a similar vein, Kaviraj has remarked that "the reality of the journey transcends the unlikelihood of its beginning," in Kaviraj, "The Theory in the Poem: Alienation Themes in Meghadūta," 39.

fascinated by this aspect of Kalidasa's poetry. In reading Vedantadesika's texts on devotional meditation (section 2) alongside Kalidasa's depictions of daydreaming (section 3), certain thematic connections between the two writers have begun to emerge, which might be summed up as follows: (1) both Kalidasa and Vedantadesika are interested in the imagination's potential to conjure a world whose reality rivals that of the everyday world; (2) both writers see the imagination reaching this potential in extreme states of mind, such as lovesickness; (3) both identify the imagination thus intensified as one of the sources of artistic creation. That these are facts born of our observation doesn't make them any less true; however, their use as data for understanding Vedantadesika's investment in Kalidasa would be more convincing if we could somehow confirm that Vedantadesika also saw them. We find such confirmation in the *Haṃsasandeśa* ("Message of the Goose"), where Vedantadesika's interest in Kalidasa most visibly intersects with his religious thinking. For in this poem, Vedantadesika casts his reflections on devotional meditation into depictions of daydreaming similar to the ones we find in the *Meghadūta*. In what follows, I will be interested in what these depictions can tell us about Vedantadesika's relation to Kalidasa.

In both the *Haṃsasandeśa* and the *Meghadūta*, as in so many works of messenger poetry, we meet characters who are engaged in various imaginative exercises intended to make absent beloveds seem present. Late in the *Meghādūta*, for example, in a speech occurring entirely within the yaksha's imagination, the cloud reports to the yaksha's beloved one of the techniques by which the yaksha has simulated reuniting with her:

> He enters (*viś*) your body with his:
> yours so thin and thin his,
> his too hot and hot yours,
> his welling with tears as you shed tears,
> yours ever longing just as his longs,
> yours releasing hot sighs and his even more sighs.

With these imaginings does your distant lover
enter your body, his path blocked by cruel fate.[214]

In the *Haṃsasandeśa*'s companion to this verse, Vedantadesika has Rama similarly "enter" (*nirviś*) Sita by a technique of the imagination:

Seeing that our bodies touch in the southern wind,
our gazes unite (*dṛṣṭi-saṃyoga*) in the moon,
we have one home in the world,
on the earth we are joined in a single bed,
we have the expanse of a beautiful canopy
in the sky decorated with stars,
O most beautiful one, I reach (or "delight in"; *nirviś*) you
who have become distant.[215]

In both verses, the physical sense of entering another's body is prohibited by the distance separating the two pairs, for just as the cloud refers to the yaksha as *dūravartin* ("one who is distant"), Sita is described as *dūrībhūtā* ("one who has become distant"). "Entering" must therefore take on another sense, which Rama and the yaksha arrive at in different ways. The yaksha enters his lover by supposing her body to host the same emotional responses as his, as though the two were connected in a mystical sympathy. For instance, when he cries, he supposes that his tears are an instinctive response to those shed by his distant beloved; or when he sighs, he supposes that each sigh is unconsciously repeated in her. Such mutual responsiveness is premised on the idea that to love someone is to take on her inner life, so that "entering" comes to mean something like

[214] aṅgenāṅgaṃ pratanu tanunā gāḍhataptena taptaṃ
sāsreṇāśrudrutam aviratotkaṇṭham utkaṇṭhitena |
uṣṇocchvāsaṃ samadhikatarocchvāsinā dūravartī
saṅkalpais tair viśati vidhinā vairiṇā ruddhamārgaḥ || *MD* 2.42 ||

[215] dehasparśam malayapavane drṣṭisaṃbhedam indau
dhāmaikatvam jagati bhuvi cābhinnaparyaṅkayogam |
tārācitre viyati vitatiṃ śrīvitānasya paśyan
dūribhūtām sutanu vidhinā tvām aham nirviśāmi || *H* 2.40 ||

"accessing another's mind." In Vedantadesika's poem, Rama still enters Sita in a way, but by means of a different movement of the imagination: he expands the meaning of the words "touch," "contact," "home," "bed," and "canopy" (*sparśa*, *saṃyoga*, *gṛha*, *talpa*, *vitāna*), allowing them through the power of metaphor to mean more than what they customarily signify. In doing so, the sentence "I enter (reach) you" ends up holding true, but only in a special sense.[216]

While the imaginative exercises recorded in these verses have presumably been performed sometime in the past—sometime before the yaksha spots the cloud and Rama the goose—the present of each poem is filled with the performance of yet another imaginative exercise; namely, the use of a messenger or intermediary as a substitute for oneself. The yaksha gives us his understanding of this exercise in *Meghadūta* 2.43, where he imagines the cloud introducing his message to his beloved as follows:

> 'Once he longed to say in your ear
> what could have been spoken aloud
> in front of your friends,
> for he desired to touch your face.
> Now, though he is beyond earshot
> and unviewable to your eyes,
> through my mouth
> he says to you the following words
> which have been composed with longing: …'[217]

In *Haṃsasandeśa* 2.32, Rama has the goose greet Sita in similar fashion:

> 'Once your ornaments and body lotions

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[216] I am inspired by Yigal Bronner and David Shulman's thought to read these verses together; however, my account of their differences slightly diverges from theirs. See "'A Cloud Turned Goose': Sanskrit in the Vernacular Millennium," *The Indian Economic & Social History Review* 43, no. 1 (March 1, 2006): 26–27.

[217] śabdākhyeyaṃ yad api kila te yaḥ sakhīnāṃ purastāt
karṇe lolaḥ kathayitum abhūd ānanasparśalobhāt |
so'tikrāntaḥ śravaṇaviṣayaṃ locanābhyām adṛśyas
tvām utkaṇṭhāviracitapadaṃ manmukhenedam āha || *M* 2.43 ||

were an obstacle to him;
now the power of fate
has led you to a distant island.
Having placed you in the path of his eyes,
as though he were very close,
he who is faring well speaks thus, my lady,
by the mouth of his friend: …'[218]

Both verses begin by juxtaposing a past moment, when even a negligible distance from the beloved seemed significant, with a present in which the beloved is beyond the range of sight and hearing; both conclude with the suggestion that a messenger is capable of dulling the pain of separation. But in Vedantadesika's version of the scenario, we are given an additional detail concerning the sender of the message: Rama has composed his words to Sita while visualizing her, "having placed Sita in the path of his eyes." I take this detail to indicate the crucial role that visualization plays in this imaginative exercise as Vedantadesika understands it. For if the use of an intermediary is to succeed in simulating direct communication, both addresser and addressee must be made to feel they are in each other's presence. For Sita, that feeling would arise by being addressed in the voice of Rama, as opposed to the mediating voice of indirect speech (as critics often point out, much lyric poetry derives its power from a first-person voicing which simulates the presence of a live speaker). For Rama, the feeling of presence is achieved by making Sita vivid to him through an act of visualization.

Vedantadesika makes a similar specification about visualization in his version of *Meghadūta* 2.22. There the yaksha describes his beloved to the cloud as follows:

One who is slender and dark,
who has pointed teeth,
whose lip is like a ripe red fruit,

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[218] yasyā yasmin vyavadhir abhavad bhūṣaṇālepanādiḥ
nītām enāṃ niyativibhavād antarīpaṃ davīyaḥ |
pratyāsīdanniva nayanayor vartmani sthāpayitvā
sa tvām evaṃ vadati kuśalī devi sakhyā mukhena || *H* 2.32 ||

who is emaciated,
who has the trembling eyes of a fawn
and a sunken navel,
who walks slowly due to her heavy hips,
who is slightly hunched over due to her breasts,
who seems she could have been
the very first woman that Brahma created…[219]

Here is how Vedantadesika rewrites Kalidasa's verse in *Haṃsasandeśa* 2.10:

She is my seeing:
her eyes are shaped like fish;
her brows are curved; her hair is beautiful;
she is thin; she bends over by the weight of her breasts;
she is radiant as burning gold; she is young;
her gait resembles yours;
her waist is thin as a Vedic altar;
her limbs are superlative;
having learned the ocean called love,
she seems the superior patron goddess for it.[220]

That the particular adjectives used to describe the women are different should be unsurprising, since Sita and the yakshini are different characters. The more significant difference concerns the strange way Vedantadesika has Rama begin his description of Sita: *sā me dṛṣṭiḥ*—"she is my vision," or even "she is my seeing." One way of getting around the strangeness of this expression would be to take it as a hyperbolic metaphor meaning something like "she is as precious to me as my vision." However, the emphasis placed throughout the poem on the actual sense of sight

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[219] tanvī śyāmā śikharidaśanā pakvabimbādharoṣṭhī
madhye kṣāmā cakitahariṇīprekṣaṇā nimnanābhiḥ |
śroṇībhārād alasagamanā stokanamnā stanābhyāṃ
yā tatra syād yuvativiṣaye sṛṣṭir ādyeva dhātuḥ || *M* 2.22 ||

[220] sā me dṛṣṭiḥ śapharanayanā sannatabhrūḥ sukeśī
tanvī tuṅgastanabharanatā taptajāmbūnadābhā |
bālā yuṣmatpratimagamanā vedimadhyā varāṅgī
śṛṅgārākhyaṃ nidhim adhigatā śreyasī devateva || *H* 2.10 ||

The idea here is that, since Sita is so beautiful, she seems a more suitable divinity of love than Kama himself.

discourages such an interpretation. If instead we took it to mean something like “she is all that I see,” the sentence would tell us something about how Rama speaks the words that follow. It would suggest that Rama’s description of Sita isn’t just a list of words that he has kept stored in memory but issues from a visualization of Sita in the present moment; a visualization so intense, moreover, that Rama is moved to describe it as seeing. Vedantadesika’s insistence on visualization in both of these rewritings seems less to undermine Kalidasa’s depictions of daydreaming (at least we need not take it that way) than to render explicit the mental processes already at work in those depictions, offering something like a gloss on them.

Perhaps the most complex explorations of the imagination in these poems appear in those verses where Rama and the yaksha imagine their beloveds imagining them. In *H* 2.61, for instance, Rama imagines that Sita has been using his ring as a substitute for himself:

> Again and again, by turns
> she puts my ring on her lotus-hand
> and her body thrills,
> hair standing on end;
> she keeps it on her head
> bereft of its jewel
> and enjoys it there;
> when her breasts
> grow burdened with pain
> from the grief inside, caringly
> she rests it upon them.[221]

This verse recalls at least two moments in Kalidasa’s poetry. The first of these appears in *Raghuvamsa* 12.65 (examined above in section 3), where Rama similarly uses Sita’s crest-jewel as a substitute for her. If we fancifully took Vedantadesika’s Rama as an extension of Kalidasa’s

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[221] bhūyo bhūyaḥ karasarasije nyasya romāñcitāṅgīṃ
maulau cūḍāmaṇivirahite nirviśantīṃ nidhāya
antastāpād adhigatarujor ādarād arpayantīṃ
paryāyeṇa stanakalaśayor aṅgulīyam madīyam || *H* 2.16 || (to be taken with *manye* from *H* 2.13)

character, we could say that Rama here is imagining Sita as his emotional mirror. The second moment appears in *Meghadūta* 2.27, where the yaksha imagines his beloved daydreaming about him in much the same way that he has been daydreaming about her:

> Or she marks on the ground
> the remaining months of the term
> which was set on the day of our separation,
> counting them with flowers
> laid in the doorway;
> *or she delights in our lovemaking*
> *keeping in her heart how it begins*;
> such are women's diversions
> when their lovers are away.[222]

In such verses, Vedantadesika and Kalidasa depict daydreaming on two levels, showing us the beloved's imaginative exercises while at the same time portraying imagining-one's-beloved-imagining-oneself as itself a kind of imaginative exercise.

Throughout this chapter I have been using a variety of words to write about the imaginative life of humans, some of which may at first seem to clash (such as *daydream* and *exercise*). This variety is a consequence not of imprecision but of the range of genuine experiences of the imagination recorded in the works I've been examining. For instance, while the imagination overwhelms consciousness in characters like Maricha, Shakuntala, and Urvashi, the situation is reversed in Vedantadesika's *Saṅkalpasūryodaya*, where Imagination answers to Will-Power (*vyavasāya*), obediently painting images on the mind's wall. Accordingly, while expressions like *daydream*, *reverie*, *hallucination*, and *being carried away* correspond to experiences where the imagination assails us against our will, words like *technique*, *exercise*, *contemplation*, and

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[222] śeṣān māsān virahadivasasthāpitasyāvadher vā
vinyasyantī bhuvi gaṇanayā dehalīdattapuṣpaiḥ |
saṃbhogaṃ vā hṛdayanihitārambham āsvādayantī
prāyeṇaite ramaṇaviraheṣv aṅganānāṃ vinodāḥ || *MD* 2.27 ||

meditation correspond to experiences where imaginative intensity is desired but must be effortfully sought out. Dushyanta's experience fluctuates between these two extremes: his painting of Shakuntala owes its lifelikeness to his imaginative mastery, but that painting comes to assert a mastery of its own over Dushyanta, so thoroughly absorbing him that he can't distinguish his mental creation from reality.

The experience of characters in the messenger poems is similarly variable. The most obvious examples here are the yaksha and Rama: for each lover, lovesickness has so intensely activated his imagination that he starts speaking to a nonhuman; however, in the course of his monologue, he comes to describe a number of imaginative techniques he uses to shut out the harshness of his solitude. Less obvious but more illuminating (more illuminating on what is distinct in *Haṃsasandeśa*) is the example of Vedantadesika's Sita. At times Sita seems completely passive to her imagination, as when she starts speaking to her ornaments (*H* 2.12); at other times, she seems to be semiconsciously using her imagination to dull the pain of her grief, as when she rests Rama's ring on different parts of her body (*H* 2.16). While such instances find precedents in the *Meghadūta* (specifically in verses where Kalidasa depicts the yakshini's pining), in *Haṃsasandeśa* 2.22 Vedantadesika records an experience of the imagination that is entirely absent in Kalidasa's poem:

> When the restraining of all mental states
> has quelled her stream of
> thoughts on the world outside,
> her mind shall be fixed on me alone,
> as per the writings on love:
> by a high intensity of her imagination
> which heeds none else,
> she shall be practicing unwavering meditation
> with a mind pliant from dissolving within.[223]

[223] cetovṛttiṃ śamayati bahiḥ śārvabhaume nirodhe
mayy ekasmin praṇihitadhiyaṃ mānmathenāgamena |

Again we find Sita substituting an inner reality for the external world that grieves her. But here that substitution results neither from a cognitive error owing to delirium nor from a temporary coping tactic used to drown out the harsh conditions of her kidnapping. Rather, it is achieved in tranquility by an advanced yogic technique: Sita clears her mind of all its representations of "the world outside" (*bahiḥ*), allowing it to turn "within" (*antaḥ*) and, more pliant than before, to concentrate fully and lovingly on Rama. The second half of the verse specifies the nature of this concentration: it amounts to an "unwavering meditation" on Rama, and is brought about not only through the negative labor of restraining habitual patterns of thought but also through a positive effort—as Vedantadesika writes, repeating almost verbatim an expression we encountered in Ramanuja's *Śrībhāṣya*, "by a high intensity of the imagination (*bhāvanāyāḥ prakarṣāt*)." That Vedantadesika reproduces Ramanuja's theological term in his description of Sita's pining is crucial. It suggests that what Vedantadesika gives us in *Haṃsasandeśa* 2.22 is an illustration not just of the lovesick imagination running on overdrive but indeed of devotional meditation; or, put differently, that Vedantadesika sees devotional meditation as continuous with the domain of imaginative experience that messenger poetry is in its very nature committed to exploring.[224]

Vedantadesika may even be suggesting that devotional meditation just is the lovesick imagination running on overdrive. Pursuing that line, we could venture the following shorthand notations: *To be a devotee is to be a lover-in-separation; to be a lover-in-separation is to be a*

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abhyasyantīm anitarajuṣo bhāvanāyāḥ prakarṣāt
svāntenāntarvilayamṛdunā nirvikalpaṃ samādhim || *H* 2.22 ||

[224] For a discussion of Vāmana Bhaṭṭa Bāṇa's treatment of the imagination in relation to those of Kalidasa and Vedantadesika, see Yigal Bronner, "Birds of a Feather: Vāmana Bhaṭṭa Bāṇa's *Haṃsasandeśa* and Its Intertexts," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 133, no. 3 (2013): 516–18.

daydreamer; and to be a daydreamer is to be a poet (that is, to be able to conjure a compelling inner reality by the power of one's imagination). And these formulations wouldn't be misleading either, so long as they were accompanied by two important qualifications. The first concerns the status of will: whereas lovers are assailed by daydreams against their will, devotees are to practice devotional meditation by a deliberate technique. Indeed, it is precisely because daydreams are so wayward that they often prove disastrous for Kalidasa's characters: both Urvashi and Shakuntala are cursed for succumbing to them, and while Kalidasa doesn't specify the negligence for which the yaksha has been doomed to solitary confinement, it is reasonable to surmise based on what we learn about the yaksha's temperament, and as many traditional readers have surmised, that his negligence too was the result of attentional failure.[225] By contrast, the kind of imaginative meditation that interests Vedantadesika is an ideal to be achieved.

The second qualification concerns the epistemological value of the imagination: while the imagination distorts reality for sufferers of daydreams, in devotional meditation it delivers the devotee to a higher reality, as Vedantadesika notes in his remark on Maricha's hallucinations. To me, this notion of a higher reality is key to understanding Vedantadesika's counterintuitive claim in *Haṃsasandeśa* 1.4 that "finding a messenger is greater fortune than embracing the beloved." While embracing the beloved is perhaps the highest form of intimacy possible in the world of everyday experience, for Vedantadesika the everyday world is to be distinguished from the ultimate reality of god. That reality is accessed not through our common ways of sensing and understanding but through a transcendental exercise of the imagination.

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[225] This is in fact how one dominant tradition of reading Kalidasa understood the yaksha's curse. For a survey of some of the ways the narrative situation of *Meghadūta* had traditionally been understood, see Kālidāsa, *Meghadūta (Meghasandeśa of Kālidāsa with the Commentaries Pradīpa of Dakṣiṇāvartanātha, Vidyullatā of Purṇasarasvati, Sumanoramaṇī of Parameśvara)*, ed. N. P. Unni (Trivandrum: Bharatiya Vidya Prakashan, 1987), 10–14.

5. Reading as Meditation: Vedantadesika's Performance of Devotion

If Vedantadesika is invested in Kalidasa's poetry, it isn't just because of a general interest he happens to have in poetry, or because he wants to render his theological ideas more attractive or palatable. Rather, for Vedantadesika, the kind of poetry that Kalidasa writes engages the same mental faculty as the one involved in devotional meditation. This link is what allows Vedantadesika to braid together in his poems Kalidasa's poetry of vivid sensation with his own practice of devotional meditation. I will conclude this chapter by indicating how specifically Vedantadesika conceives of this braiding-together, focusing on two instances in his writing where he explicitly reflects on his own poetic practice.

The first of these occurs in the conclusion of *Haṃsasandeśa*. In the final verse, Vedantadesika offers an understanding of his poem in the form of an elaborate conceit:

> This jewel, the *Message of the Goose*, was fashioned
> by Venkatesa, whose mind is excellent in the sciences and in art;
> it has been polished many times on the grindstone of the mind;
> it is a means of attaining those things which are best;
> it is a friend to Rama and Sita's union;
> may good people see it, reviving within them
> that ear which is a faultless eye.[226]

What may seem to be a single metaphor comparing the *Haṃsasandeśa* to a jewel is in fact a complex of several metaphors. When Vedantadesika writes that his poem "has been polished many times on the grindstone of the mind," he is suggesting that it is comparable to any jewel that might come under the tools of a lapidary. Here Vedantadesika appears to affiliate himself with poets

[226] vidyāśilpapraguṇamatinā veṅkaṭeśena klṛptaṃ
cintāśoṇollikhitam asakṛc chreyasāṃ prāptihetum |
sītārāmavyatikarasakhaṃ haṃsasaṃdeśaratnaṃ
paśyantv antaś śṛavaṇam anaghaṃ cakṣur ujjīvya santaḥ || *H* 2.50 ||

writing in the tradition of Sanskrit *kāvya*, where repetition and precision are central values of composition (we may recall that Kuntaka also used the lapidary metaphor in his account of the poetic process); in the same stroke, he appears to distinguish himself from devotional poets such as the Alvars, whose verses are imagined to flow from them as spontaneously as juice flows from pressed sugarcane (here I recall Vedantadesika's own description in *Dehalīśastuti* of the poetic process of the first three Alvars).[227] However, these inferences are complicated by the words that immediately follow. For when Vedantadesika writes that his jewel-poem "is a means of attaining those things which are best," he is comparing his poem not just to any jewel but specifically to the wish-fulfilling jewel known as the *cintāmaṇi*, suggesting that while the *Haṃsasandeśa* is a carefully crafted poem, it is nonetheless a kind of *stotra*—that is, the kind of poem whose recitation produces talismanic effects for devotees of god.

In my reading, the verse's second half offers an account of how exactly *Haṃsasandeśa* is simultaneously a work of *kāvya* (in being carefully crafted to generate aesthetic effects) and a devotional prayer (in promising to yield benefits for pious readers). Vedantadesika writes that his jewel-poem is a "friend to Rama and Sita's union." To what sort of jewel is Vedantadesika comparing his poem here? It can't be any jewel polished by the jeweler, since not every jewel is a

[227] Here is Kuntaka's account: "An idea first flashes before the poetic faculty like a jewel which is no better than a chunk taken from raw stone. When this idea meets the indirect speech of a skilled poet, it becomes a poem that delights sensitive readers, being as attractive as the jewel when it is polished on a grindstone." <prathamaṃ ca pratibhāpratibhāsamānam aghaṭitapāṣāṇaśakalakalpamaṇiprakhyam eva vastu vidagdhakaviviracitavakravākyoparūḍhaṃ śāṇollīḍhamaṇimanoharatayā tadvidāhlādakārikāvyatvam adhirohati |> (Kuntaka, *Vakroktijīvita*, 8–9, commentary on 1.7.)
Vedantadesika's account appears in a verse addressed to the deity at Tirukkoyilur: "You are sweet as the sugarcane on the Panna's banks; your nectar came out by the squeezing of those first poets with Poykai at their head." <kāsārapūrvakavimukhyavimardajanmā … paṇṇātateḳṣusubhagasya raso bahus te |> (*Dehalīśastuti* 7)

friend to Rama and Sita's union. Nor can it be the wish-fulfilling jewel, at least not for Rama or Sita, since we can't quite say that *Message of the Goose* (or even the goose's message) actually brings their union to pass. What the poem has rather done is to make Sita and Rama vivid to devotees reading the poem, assisting an imagined union between *readers* and the divine couple (i.e., it fosters "Sita and Rama's union" *with* devotees, as opposed to a union *between* Sita and Rama).[228] The poem assists devotees with this imagined union in the same way that Sita's crest-jewel helps Rama embrace Sita in his imagination (*R* 12.64), or that Rama's bejeweled ring allows Sita to stage her union with him (*H* 2.16). I take it that Vedantadesika is comparing *Haṃsasandeśa* to such jewels, suggesting that his poem functions as an aid to the devotional reader's imagination.

That suggestion is developed in the final line: "may good people see it, reviving within them that ear which is a faultless eye." In wishing that "good people" see his poem-jewel, Vedantadadesika implies that there is a special kind of seeing which is to be distinguished from mere seeing. Good seeing could belong to the eye of the lapidary, who is able to distinguish the genuine from the fraudulent article; alternatively, it could belong to the eye of a daydreamer like Rama, who takes Sita's jewel not merely for a jewel but as the basis of a vividly imagined scenario. The logic of the metaphor urges that there is likewise a special kind of reading, which is to be distinguished from mere reading. This special reading engages an inner ear, which is somehow also a kind of eye (if I am right in sensing the metaphor collapse at this point into a literal

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[228] While this interpretation may at first seem strained, its strength lies in making full sense of both sides of the metaphor. The plausibility of this reading is also acknowledged by U. Viraraghavacharya, in his commentary on the poem: "*It is a friend to Rama and Sita's union*; that is, it is an aid to an embrace of Sita and Rama by readers, in the mind" <**sītārāmayoḥ** adhyetṛṛṇām manasi **vyatikarasya** taiḥ saṃśliṣya vartanasya sahāyabhūtam>. (Vedāntadeśika, *Haṃsasandeśa (Hamsa Sandesa, One of Sri Vedanta Desika's Kavyas with Commentary "Sanjeevana" in Sanskrit & Tamil)*, ed. Uttamur T. Viraraghavacharya (Madras: Ubhaya Vedanta Grantha Mala, 1973), 128.)

identification between seeing and hearing). Vedantadesika seems to be suggesting that good readers will follow the words of his poem not only with their ears or lips or errant bodily eyes but also with a "faultless" inner eye, feeling the stress of words on the mind like weight on a muscle, allowing the poem to activate and expand their capacity to visualize. To read well is to create vivid mental images on the basis of what is heard (or seen as marks on the page), so that reading a poem like *Haṃsasandeśa* would amount to meditating on god.

The second instance of self-reflection I wish to examine centers on verse 2 of Vedantadesika's *Daśāvatārastotra* ("Praise for the Ten Incarnations"):

> Its glances devote all their moments
> to searching out the submerged Vedas,
> and it seems to conjure thickets of lotuses
> in the ocean waters; it is playful as it rises
> on the swing of water fighting water
> in the tossing of unimpeded waves,
> this fish-body of god. May it protect us.[229]

The final words indicate that the speaker is a devotee requesting the blessings of a deity; what precedes these words is a complex and vivid image of Vishnu in his incarnation as a fish. How are we to read this image? I want to outline two possibilities that suggest themselves before introducing Vedantadesika's own approach to it. (1) We could take the image in the mode of praise: in accompanying the prayer with a laudatory description, the speaker might be trying to render god more willing to offer his protection. (2) We could detach the image from the context of prayer (that is, from the intentions and mood of a devotee-speaker), regarding that context as little more than a loose frame for Vedantadesika to practice his art of image-making. We would then be

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[229] nirmagnaśrutijālamārgaṇadaśādattakṣaṇair vīkṣaṇair
antas tanvadivāravindagahanāny audanvatīnām apām |
niṣpratyūhataraṅgariṅgaṇamithaḥpratyūḍhapāthaśchaṭā-
ḍolārohasadohalaṃ bhagavato mātsyaṃ vapur pātu naḥ || *Daśāvatārastotra* 2 ||

free to attend to the fish-image as it presents itself to the mind—to attend, that is, to the aesthetic impression the image makes on us by itself. We might say that the description impresses on us first the deftness of the fish in its searching (for the eyes range so widely and quickly as to create the illusion of whole thickets of lotuses) and, second, the courage of the fish in the face of thrashing waves (for the customary response to being plunged into a stormy ocean is terror, or if not terror then at least strain or exhaustion; defying any such expectation, the fish appears "playful" and entirely at ease). Vedantadesika's verse would thus impart a sense of determined striving, or what some Sanskrit theorists would call a taste of the heroic.

In Act 7 of *Saṅkalpasūryodaya*, Vedantadesika proposes a way of reading the verse which, while resembling these approaches in certain aspects, should be distinguished from both of them. Shortly after Imagination's opening monologue (examined above in section 2), Will-Power, King Discrimination, and Queen Benevolence enter the gallery to view his paintings. At one point, Will-Power makes the following remark on seeing a painting of Vishnu's avatar as a fish:

> Will-Power: Just look, king and queen, at what we find here:
>
> > Its glances devote all their moments
> > to searching out the submerged Vedas,
> > and it seems to conjure thickets of lotuses
> > in the ocean waters; it is playful as it rises
> > on the swing of water fighting water
> > in the tossing of unimpeded waves,
> > this fish-body of god.[230]

Vedantadesika has essentially reproduced verse 2 of *Daśāvatārastotra* word for word (the only difference turning up in the final three syllables of the Sanskrit, where *dṛśyate* replaces *pātu naḥ*

[230] tāvad imam avalokayatu devo devī ca | idaṃ hi |
nirmagnaśrutijālamārgaṇadaśādattakṣaṇair vīkṣaṇair
antastanvadivāravindagahanānyaudanvatīnām apām |
niṣpratyūhataraṅgariṅgaṇamithaḥpratyūḍhapāthaśchaṭā-
ḍolārohasadohalaṃ bhagavato mātsyaṃ dṛśyate || *S* 7.17 ||

of *Daśāvatārastotra*). Yet his recontextualization of it tells us something crucial about how he understands his own verse. In its new environment in *Saṅkalpasūryodaya*, the verbal image is still both devotional and artistic; yet, strictly speaking, it issues neither from a devotee's attempt to praise god nor from an artist's intention to please a sensitive reader. Rather, it is Will-Power's astonished response to a picture of god that Imagination has painted on the mind's walls; or, to translate the allegory into literal terms, it is a devotee's reaction to her own imaginative visualization of god. *Daśavatārastotra* 2 is moreover only one of several images that Vedantadesika has lifted from his *stotra*s and reproduced in the gallery-viewing scene.[231] These recontextualizations prompt us to take the vivid descriptions of god scattered throughout Vedantadesika's poetry as his responses to his own mental paintings conjured in devotional meditation.

It is true that not all of Vedantadesika's vast and diverse literary oeuvre is premised on an understanding of poetry as meditation. For example, his poetry inspired by the Alvars is primarily committed to exploring the emotional states of devotional speakers (emotions of pain, wonder, gratitude, helplessness), and his poetry of polysemy and verbal pyrotechnics participates more in an unbridled play of signifiers than in the creation of vivid sensations. However, a significant strain of Vedantadesika's writing is premised on such an understanding of poetry, and it is this strain that the two instances examined above, as well as the conclusions of this chapter, serve to illuminate. While the concluding verse of *Hamsasandeśa* suggests that reading Vedantadesika's devotional poetry of sensation would ideally involve the reader in an act of meditation, Act 7 of *Saṅkalpasūryodaya* suggests that such poetry itself issues from the meditation of a poet-devotee.

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[231] Other examples include *Daśāvatārastotra* 4, reproduced in *S* 7.31; *Śrīstuti* 20, reproduced in *S* 7.25; and *Bhūstuti* 10, reproduced in *S* 7.33.

We might thus read many of Vedantadesika's poems as scripts that devotees might use for their meditations, or transcripts of his own devotional meditations. In other words, we might read them as Vedantadesika's performance of *bhakti*.

Chapter 4: Aurobindo's Kalidasa
Poet of the Earth

Around the turn of the twentieth century, Sri Aurobindo (or Aurobindo Ghose, as he was known at the time) wrote many pages' worth of translations and original poetry inspired by Kalidasa, as well as a number of essays (all written between 1898 and 1903) for a book-length study he provisionally titled "A Proposed Work on Kalidasa." Many of these texts are incomplete: all of the translations but one remain either unfinished or in fragments, and while the pages he wrote for his book number more than a hundred, by no standard do they constitute a finished work. Passages broken off mid-sentence, paragraphs squeezed into the margins, and stanzas in translation "devoured by white ants" (so Aurobindo's editors inform us) at times leave us guessing what thoughts had been interrupted mid-flight, or where floating texts should be reinserted. Nonetheless, what we do have provides ample material for investigating the nature of Aurobindo's early engagement with Kalidasa, and in what follows I will examine this fragmentary but significant body of writing to understand why Aurobindo turned to Kalidasa at the *fin de siècle*. In section 1, I examine the basic characterization of Kalidasa's poetry that Aurobindo offers in his essay on the *Ṛtusaṃhāra*. Aurobindo's assertion that Kalidasa is primarily a poet of the senses is neither unprecedented nor controversial; however, the significance of this fact for Aurobindo warrants investigation. In section 2, I relate a brief history of sensuousness as a literary critical concept in order to contextualize Aurobindo's remarks on Kalidasa's sensuous poetry. This history shows that sensuousness is not only an aesthetic category but also historical one, belonging to a theory of poetry which associates sensuousness with naiveté and primitivism. In writing on Kalidasa's sensuousness, then, Aurobindo is in part attempting to revise the European reception of Kalidasa and the Sanskrit literary tradition. However, Aurobindo's engagement with Kalidasa cannot be entirely subsumed under this revisionist project. In sections 3 and 4, I show how Aurobindo's

discussion of sensuousness is also connected to his thinking on ascetic life, especially as developed in his writing on Kalidasa's *Vikramorvaśīya*. While asceticism has often been understood as an apolitical withdrawal from life, Aurobindo finds in Kalidasa's play, as well as the myth that it dramatizes, the outlines of an ascetic practice that not only affirms life but transforms it. I will conclude by briefly suggesting what place Kalidasa might have had in Aurobindo's later thought.

1. "The Seasons" and Kalidasa's Poetry of the Senses

Scholars since at least the nineteenth century have questioned whether *Ṛtusaṃhāra* ("The Round of Seasons" or simply "The Seasons," as Aurobindo translates it) is the genuine work of Kalidasa, both for historical and literary critical reasons. Among the seven works most commonly attributed to Kalidasa, it is the only poem never mentioned in Sanskrit rhetorical treatises, and the only one of Kalidasa's four non-dramatic works on which the major fourteenth-century commentator Mallinatha didn't write a commentary. Moreover, many have considered the *Ṛtusaṃhāra* to be aesthetically inferior to the other six canonical works of Kalidasa.[232]

In his essay on "The Seasons," Aurobindo argues that the poem is indeed the genuine work of Kalidasa, albeit an immature work of Kalidasa's youth. Since "external evidence…is in itself of little value unless received from definite and contemporary or almost contemporary sources," sure evidence of the poem's authenticity must come from the text itself:

> We have to judge, first, by the presence or absence of the essential and indefinable self of Kalidasa which we find apparent in all his indubitable work, however various the form or subject, and after that on those nameable characteristics which are the grain and fibre of his genius and least imitable by others.[233]

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[232] For a summary of the debate over the *Ṛtusaṃhāra*'s authenticity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, see A. Berriedale Keith, "The Authenticity of the Rtusamhara," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, 1912, 1066–70.

[233] Sri Aurobindo, *Kalidasa: Essays and Translations*, 28.

Aurobindo here distinguishes between two tests: an intuitive "test of personality" and a concrete test of stylistics. While the test of personality is more decisive, its judgements depend on the "fineness of [one's] literary palate" and so can't be backed up with arguments (personality being "as fugitive to imitation as to analysis"). What can be put into language, however, are certain "nameable characteristics" of Kalidasa's definitive work, and it is in listing these that Aurobindo reveals what he regards as the essential features of Kalidasa's poetry:

> his force of vision, his architecture of style, his pervading sensuousness, the peculiar temperament of his similes, his characteristic strokes of thought and imagination, his individual and inimitable cast of description.[234]

These features form a basic list of criteria by which one can judge the authenticity of "The Seasons."

Aurobindo's list largely confirms what previous readers also noticed in Kalidasa's poetry. For instance, when Aurobindo speaks of Kalidasa's distinctive "cast of description" and "architecture of style," he is getting at those qualities of the delicate style which Kuntaka called "clarity" (*prasāda*) and "beauty" (*saundarya*).[235] Likewise, in remarking on the distinction of Kalidasa's similes, Aurobindo is in fact conscious of reiterating a widely held traditional view: "that characteristic of the poet…which most struck the ancient critics, *upamāsu kālidāsaḥ*, Kalidasa for similes, is everywhere present even in such early and immature work."[236] Yet for

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[234] Ibid., 29.

[235] See *VJ* 1.31 and 1.32.

[236] Sri Aurobindo, *Kalidasa: Essays and Translations*, 34. The view is registered, for instance, in this popular verse: "Kalidasa's simile, Bharavi's weight of meaning, Dandin's grace in diction—all three are found in Magha." <upamā kālidāsasya bhāraver arthagauravam | daṇḍinaḥ padalālityam māghe santi trayo guṇaḥ ||>

Aurobindo "the most fundamental and important" characteristic of Kalidasa's work is not the artistry of his similes but his "force of vision":

> In continuous gift of seizing an object and creating it to the eye [Kalidasa] has no rival in literature. A strong visualizing faculty such as the greatest poets have in their most inspired descriptive moments, was with Kalidasa an abiding and unfailing power.[237]

This "visualizing faculty" is evidenced in *Ṛtusaṃhāra* as the many "strokes of vivid description" which make "the seasons live before our eyes as we read." To illustrate what he means, Aurobindo takes several images from across *Ṛtusaṃhāra* and reproduces them in his own poetic prose:

> Summer is here with its sweltering heat…. Yonder lies the lion forgetting his impulse and his mighty leap; his tongue lolls and wearily from time to time he shakes his mane; the snake with lowered head panting and dragging his coil labours over the blazing dust of the road…But the rains come, and what may be yonder writhing lines we see on the slopes? It is the young water of the rains…. We watch the beauty of the mountains streaked everywhere with waterfalls, their high rocks kissed by the stooping clouds and their sides a gorgeous chaos of peacocks….[238]

Rather than directly translate a few exemplary verses from *Ṛtusaṃhāra* (as he will do later in the essay to make a different point), or paraphrase Kalidasa's images in the neutral voice of a critic, Aurobindo here assumes the voice of a reader experiencing the poem in real time. That this readerly voice could just as well belong to one present at the scenes described suggests the transportive capacity of Kalidasa's poetry, a feature which distinguishes Kalidasa from other descriptive poets in the Sanskrit literary tradition:

> These descriptions which remain perpetually with the eye, visible and concrete as an actual painting, belong in the force with which they are visualized and the magnificent architecture of phrase with which they are presented, to Kalidasa alone among Sanskrit poets. Other poets, such as Bana or even Bhavabhuti, overload their description with words and details; they have often lavish colouring but never an

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[237] Ibid., 15.

[238] Ibid., 34–35.

> equal power of form; their figures do not appear to stand out of the canvas and live.[239]

Here again Aurobindo confirms the insight of earlier readers of Kalidasa—in this case of Vedantadesika, who also connects the intense visualization characteristic of Kalidasa's poetry with the art of painting.

Kalidasa's vividness of description also sets him apart from the two other "chief poets" of the Sanskrit tradition, Valmiki and Vyasa: "His poetry has…never been, like the poetry of Valmiki and Vyasa, a great dynamic force for moulding heroic character or noble or profound temperament."[240] Since Kalidasa's poetry issues from a "rich sensuous temperament," it "troubles itself little with problems, issues & the rest"; that is, it doesn't dramatize the complex ethical and political problems that we find in the *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahābhārata*.[241] His poetry is thus of a fundamentally different type, a poetry not of moral and intellectual life but of sensuous life: "The delight of the eye, the delight of the ear, smell, palate, touch, the satisfaction of the imagination and taste are the texture of his poetical creation."[242]

The status of this "sensuousness" at first seems ambiguous in Aurobindo's writing. On one hand, sensuousness is precisely what makes Kalidasa "rank with the highest" world-poets: "Kalidasa is the great, the supreme poet of the senses, of aesthetic beauty, of sensuous emotion"; on the other hand, it is an aspect of Kalidasa's poetry which Aurobindo is at pains to defend or somehow qualify at several points, as in the following remark:

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[239] Ibid., 35.

[240] Ibid., 9; ibid., 14.

[241] Sri Aurobindo, *Kalidasa: Essays and Translations*, 29; ibid., 52.

[242] Sri Aurobindo, *Kalidasa: Essays and Translations*, 17.

> [Kalidasa's] sensuousness is not coupled with weak self-indulgence, but is rather a bold and royal spirit seizing the beauty and delight of earth to itself and compelling all the senses to minister to the enjoyment of the spirit rather than enslaving the spirit to do the will of the senses.[243]

Aurobindo here opposes a weak sensuousness to a sensuousness he associates with strength and self-control. Spirit in Kalidasa's poetry isn't enslaved by the senses (which are themselves servile to the passions) but rather masters them. Kalidasa's work is thus to be distinguished from that of the early Keats: "[Kalidasa] never relaxed into the cloying and effeminate languour of sensuous description which offends us in Keats' earlier work."[244] Here Aurobindo is in fact echoing a common nineteenth-century criticism of Keats; Victorian critic Matthew Arnold, for example, remarked that "Keats as a poet is abundantly and enchantingly sensuous; the question with some people will be, whether he is anything else."[245] Keats' example helps Aurobindo distinguish between two kinds of sensuousness: whereas Keats' sensuousness is cloying, languorous, and effeminate, Kalidasa's is "vigorous," "aspiring," and masculine, "[satisfying] the sensuous imagination without enervating the virile chords."[246] What must sensuousness mean, or represent, that it urges Aurobindo to make such fine and strange distinctions?

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[243] Ibid., 14; ibid., 31.

[244] Sri Aurobindo, *Kalidasa: Essays and Translations*, 31.

[245] Matthew Arnold, "John Keats," in *The English Poets: Wordsworth to Rossetti*, ed. Thomas Humphry Ward (Macmillan, 1894), 428.

[246] Sri Aurobindo, *Kalidasa: Essays and Translations*, 31.

2. Sensuousness and the History of Art

It was around a century prior to Aurobindo's essays that Kalidasa's poetry first encountered a European readership, with William Jones' translation of *Abhijñānaśākuntala* in 1789. Two years later, Georg Forster translated Jones' text into German, introducing Kalidasa to a number of intellectuals who were already deeply interested in questions of literature, culture, and antiquity, including J.W. Goethe (1749-1832), J.G. Herder (1744-1803), and Friedrich Schiller (1759-1805). While the early German reception of *Abhijñānaśākuntala* has been well documented in scholarship, my reconstruction of it in what follows will try to emphasize certain assumptions about art and history that help furnish an intellectual context for Aurobindo's remarks on Kalidasa.[247] In particular, I will focus on Schiller's influential essay "On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry" (1795), because it helps us understand the meaning of sensuousness as a literary critical concept.

In this text, Schiller distinguishes between two kinds of relationship that humans can have with nature. *Naïve* describes the condition of entities at one with nature, being more or less governed by necessity; these include "plants, minerals, animals, and landscapes," as well as "children, …country folk and the primitive world."[248] By contrast, *sentimental* specifically names the condition of entities endowed with reason and thus with the potential for freedom and morality (here Schiller unsurprisingly has in mind modern Europeans). While reason marks the

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[247] See Culp, "Searching for Shakuntala: Sanskrit Drama and Theatrical Modernity in Europe and India, 1789-Present"; Ratna Basu, "Śākuntala in Germany and Aftermath," in *Kālidāsa, Afresh*, ed. Satya Pal Narang (Nag Publishers, 1997), 261–73; Thapar, "Kalidasa in the Ninteenth Century in Europe and in India."

[248] Friedrich Schiller, "On Naive and Sentimental Poetry," in *Essays*, trans. Dahlstrom Daniel O. (New York: Continuum, 1993), 180.

advancement of moderns, it has also led to their expulsion from nature, as well as that peculiar shade of sadness one often feels in face of the naïve: "a humble flower, a brook, a mossy rock, the chirping of birds, the humming of bees, and the like…depict at once our lost childhood, something that remains ever dearest to us, and for this reason they fill us with a certain melancholy."[249] Schiller further characterizes this melancholy as a kind of homesickness, in an elaborate figure which reads like a variation on the parable of the prodigal son:

> We then see in nonrational nature only a more fortunate sister who remained at home with her mother, while we stormed out into an alien world, arrogantly confident of our freedom. With painful urgency we long to be back where we began as soon as we experience the misery of culture and hear our mother's tender voice in the distant, foreign country of art.[250]

Stumbling in the far-off land of culture and artifice, the sentimental son of nature hears (or thinks he hears) the faint voice of his mother, which fills him with desire for a lost unity. This desire can take two forms. We may long "to change places with nature"—to forsake reason and revert to a childlike "sensuous unity," in which "sense and reason, receptive and spontaneous faculties have not yet divided the tasks between them; still less do they contradict one another."[251] Yet while such a longing "[flatters] our sensuous character…, a continual penchant for this way of feeling must ultimately enervate a person's character, plunging it into a state of passivity from which no reality at all, neither the external life nor the inner life, can emerge."[252] Alternatively, we may pursue our longed-for unity not by reverting to childhood but by advancing to a yet unrealized harmony, or

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[249] Ibid.

[250] Ibid., 192.

[251] Ibid., 200.

[252] Ibid., 221–22.

what Schiller calls a "moral unity."[253] For if natural entities are endowed with a completeness we lack, it is because they lack the freedom we possess:

> We are free and what they are is necessary; we alter, they remain one. Yet only if both are combined with one another—only if the will freely adheres to the law of necessity and reason maintains its rule in the face of every change in the imagination, only then does the divine or the ideal emerge.[254]

Nature charges us with recovering a lost unity, but we must recover it by advancing rather than regressing, by becoming less like nature and more like gods.

Most important for Schiller, *naïve* and *sentimental* are categories under which all poetry may be usefully classified. Since the naïve individual deals frankly with nature, the naïve poet "merely follows simple nature and feeling, limiting himself solely to imitation of reality." By contrast, since the sentimental individual feels exiled from nature, mere seeing and transcribing cannot satisfy. The sentimental poet therefore "*reflects* on the impression the objects make upon him"; that is, he adds to the naïve poet's first-level description a second-level account of the thoughts and feelings induced in him by the objects described.[255] To illustrate the difference between these types, Schiller compares two passages drawn from the poetry of the naïve poet Homer and the sentimental poet Ariosto. Both *Iliad* and *Orlando Furioso* feature episodes where opponents in battle unexpectedly set aside their enmity in order to observe codes of conduct (whether these are dictated by *xenia* or chivalry). But whereas Homer narrates the triumph of civility "as though he were reporting something commonplace," Ariosto cannot help interrupting

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[253] Ibid., 201.

[254] Ibid., 181.

[255] Ibid., 204.

himself to express his admiration: "'O the noble courage of the ancient rites of knights!'"[256] Schiller would have us note that while poets like Homer appeal to us simply through the vividness of their description, poets like Ariosto appeal to us through the ideal content which they add; as Schiller elsewhere puts it, "if the former move us through nature, individuality, and a vivid *sensuality*, the latter demonstrate just as great a power over our minds, though not as widespread, by means of ideas and a lofty *spirituality*" (spirit being the seat of thought).[257]

It is true that in Schiller's essay, *naïve* and *sentimental* are still primarily determinations of temperament which do not bear a strict correspondence to history, since it is as possible for an ancient to be sentimental (e.g., Euripides) as it is for a modern to be naïve (e.g., Shakespeare). Nonetheless, the naïve-sentimental typology maps well enough onto an ancient-modern periodization that at times Schiller seems to welcome the correspondence—when he writes, for instance, that "the ancient poets touch us through nature, through sensuous truth, through living presence; the modern poets touch us through ideas."[258] At all events, by the time these concepts are taken up by Friedrich Schlegel and the Jena romantics, they have started being used unreservedly as historical concepts designating entire ages of poetry. As Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy write, "One should never forget, when the term *naïve* appears in these texts [of the *Athenaeum*] (especially in connection with the *naïve* poetry of the Ancients), that after Schiller this word refers to both naiveté (innocence) and nativity."[259] Child development thus

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[256] Ibid., 198.

[257] Ibid., 220.

[258] Ibid., 201.

[259] Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism* (SUNY Press, 1988), 49.

becomes a dominant model for understanding human history, so that to classify Homer as naïve amounts to taking his poetry as indexical for an earlier, childlike era of history.

For many of Schiller's German contemporaries, this is a history whose infancy took place in India. "All the peoples of Europe, where are they from?" asks Herder, and replies, "From Asia."[260] When Novalis writes that he is "homesick for the Indian motherland," he reminds us of Schiller's sentimental son who so longs to return to the bosom of nature.[261] Modern Europeans can now see in the artistic productions of Ancient India their own civilizational past, with an emotion not unlike what adults may feel flipping through childhood pictures—that is, with a mixture of amusement (*how cute we were!*), admiration (*how innocent, how good*), and melancholy (*how much simpler a time…*). When Schiller claims, then, that "in the whole of Greek antiquity there is no poetical representation of beautiful womanliness or beautiful love which approaches 'Śakuntalā' even from afar," and Herder that *Śākuntala* is "an Indian flower, an epic drama and a symbol of naïveté," they are specifically remarking on the perfection with which Kalidasa's play expresses a primitive world.[262] The sensuous poetry of Kalidasa represents a period closer to nature, a naïve phase of history when art didn't strain to be classical.

Aurobindo's remarks on sensuousness can be best understood as a critique of this view of Kalidasa. For Aurobindo, Kalidasa's poetry does indeed capture the "warm sensuous humanism" that predominates in a certain period of Indian history, a time when India was "attempting to find

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[260] Quoted in Wilhelm Halbfass, *India and Europe: An Essay in Understanding* (State University of New York Press, 1988), 70.

[261] Quoted in Friedrich Wilhelm, "The German Response to Indian Culture," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 81, no. 4 (1961): 398.

[262] Ibid.; Basu, "Śākuntala in Germany and Aftermath," 263.

out the utmost each sense could feel."[263] However, he doesn't understand that sensuousness as an indication of naïveté. The temptation to understand it this way may arise from a perception of superficial similarities between Kalidasa and a naïve poet of Greek antiquity like Homer: both poets belong to antiquity, both write sensuous poetry, both depict interactions between gods and mortals. But Aurobindo insists that Kalidasa's "sensuous humanism" has nothing to do with the naïve sensuousness that Schiller detected in Homer—"the humanism of which I speak is not the Homeric naturalism"—just as the gods in Kalidasa's poetry are radically different from Homer's gods who, apart from their powers and immortality, are largely indistinguishable from the human characters —"there is little of the sublime or romantic in the essence of the Homeric gods…."[264] Aurobindo is suggesting here that if Kalidasan gods are different from Homeric gods, it is because they more closely resemble the gods we find in the romantic poetry of the early nineteenth century:

> Kalidasa's divine & semidivine personages lose none of their godhead by living on the plane of humanity. Perhaps the most exquisite masterpiece in this kind is the Cloud Messenger. The actors in that beautiful love-elegy might have been chosen by Shelley himself; they are two lovers of Faeryland, a cloud, rivers, mountains, the gods & demigods of air & hill & sky…. Here are all the materials for one of those intangible harmonies of woven & luminous mist with which Shelley allures & baffles us.[265]

In order to clarify what exactly Aurobindo is getting at in such comments about Shelley, Homer, Kalidasa, and gods, I wish to make a few brief remarks here on romanticism, a term so equivocal, not just in general but even in Aurobindo's writing, that it isn't always easy to tell what is meant

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[263] Sri Aurobindo, *Kalidasa: Essays and Translations*, 66; ibid., 17.

[264] Sri Aurobindo, *Kalidasa: Essays and Translations*, 66. Schiller similarly claims of "all Greek divinities" that each is "a limited *human* object [made] out of an absolute object" (Schiller, "On Naive and Sentimental Poetry," 242).

[265] Sri Aurobindo, *Kalidasa: Essays and Translations*, 67.

by it. Here are some of the many diverse but often overlapping phenomena which the word has been taken to cover: an aesthetic sensibility privileging spontaneity and simplicity over technique and embellishment (the sense most current in South Asian literary studies); the revolt of emotion against reason; the rejection of traditional canons of art, as opposed to classicism's adherence to those canons; fantasies of the supernatural, as in Coleridge's "deep romantic chasm…haunted by woman wailing for her demon-lover" (a sense that Aurobindo occasionally seems to use); a certain way of idealizing the classical past; a certain way of responding to the historical and philosophical crises characteristic of modernity; nostalgia for a lost enchantment (a point of connection with Kalidasa's "Cloud-Messenger"); and an idealistic faith in society's perfectibility (a point of connection with Aurobindo's political radicalism and, in a different way, with the exacting perfectionism of his later thought).[266] Related in complex ways to the last four of these, the sense of romanticism I wish to highlight here is an attachment to the idea, already anticipated in Schiller, of what Paul de Man describes as "the ascent of a consciousness trapped within the contradictions of a half-earthly, half-heavenly nature."[267] Many romantic writers explored such a contradictory nature in poems featuring divine or in some way suprahuman beings which, to Aurobindo's mind, resemble the characters that populate Kalidasa's poems.[268] Insofar as Kalidasa too explores human

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[266] It is to avoid giving the sense that romanticism is an unambiguous concept that, following the practice of writers like de Man and Cavell, I refrain from capitalizing it. For a history of the term before the Jena romantics inherited it, see Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, *The Literary Absolute*, 3–5. For a history of the term in the British context, see Seamus Perry, "Romanticism: The Brief History of a Concept," in *A Companion to Romanticism*, ed. Duncan Wu (Wiley, 1998), 3–11.

[267] Paul de Man, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (Columbia University Press, 1984), 15.

[268] Byron's "Prometheus"; Keats' *Endymion*, *Hyperion*, and "La Belle Dame sans Merci"; and Shelley's *Witch of Atlas*, *Queen Mab*, and *Prometheus Unbound* are just a few of many examples within the British tradition alone.

perfectibility in "divine & semidivine personages," he turns out to be romantic *avant la lettre*. What distinguishes Kalidasa from Shelley and Keats is his success in depicting such characters: "Shelley's Witch of Atlas & Keats' Cynthia are certainly lovely creations, but they do not live." In their attempts to imagine ideal possibilities for human existence by depicting gods, Shelley and Keats have risked "transforming human nature completely," as Schiller would put it, and "giving [themselves] up to the reverie of impossible dreams."[269] By contrast, Kalidasa "insists on translating the ideal into the terms of the familiar, sensuous & earthy":

> While we read, we feel ourselves kin to & one with a more beautiful world than our own. These creatures of fancy hardly seem to be an imaginary race but rather ourselves removed from the sordidness & the coarse pains of our world into a more gracious existence.[270]

Far from enervating readers, feeding their longing to return to what Schiller calls a "sensuous unity," Kalidasa's sensuousness renders the romantic ideal concrete and livable.

For Aurobindo, Kalidasa's kinship with the romantics is especially pronounced in *Vikramōrvaśīya*, specifically in his characterizations of Pururavas, a mortal king, and Urvashi, the goddess with whom he falls in love. After devoting several pages to the "mythopoeic" significances of the figure of Urvashi (to which I shall return in section 3), Aurobindo remarks, in what seems a sudden trivialization of his preceding analysis, that none of these significances are prominent in Kalidasa's portrayal of her: "Of these outward brilliances Kalidasa's conception of Urvasie is entirely void.…I see nothing of the heavenly courtesan which some over-precise commentators insist on finding in her."[271] Unlike the Urvashi of mythology, Kalidasa's Urvashi is

[269] Schiller, "On Naive and Sentimental Poetry," 240.

[270] Sri Aurobindo, *Kalidasa: Essays and Translations*, 67.

[271] Ibid., 74; ibid., 76.

"sweet and noble," possessing a "childlike petulance" and "sincerity in passion and affection"; moreover, she lacks the "grandeur of feeling" and "pomp of poetic ornament" with which Kalidasa invests Pururavas. Aurobindo understands this discrepancy in characterization not as flawed but indicative of Kalidasa's dramatic skill:

> In rigidly excluding the grandiose or the coloured Kalidasa has shown, I think, his usual unerring dramatic and psychological tact….The first period of a literary race when its mind is yet virgin & has to create beauty is invariably simple and classical, the last period when its mind is saturated and full of past beauty is always romantic and aesthetic. The relations of Urvasie & Pururavus are true to this psychological principle. She herself is mere beauty and charm sufficient to itself and commanding delight and worship because she is herself, not because of any graces of expression, imagination or intellectual profundity. But the mind of Pururavus receiving her pure and perfect image steeps her in its own fire and colour, surrounding her with a halo of pomp and glory, which reveals himself while seeking to interpret her.[272]

Aurobindo here describes Pururavas as the very type of the sentimental poet, who cannot resist adding to the bare impression which the naïve object has imprinted on his mind. In Aurobindo's reading, then, Kalidasa's poetry isn't just more romantic than classical; Kalidasa has intuitively grasped the romantic interpretation of history, since his unique rendering of the fable of Pururavas and Urvashi has turned it into an allegory for the historical relationship between sentimental and naïve ages of poetry.

Whereas such texts of Aurobindo present a critique of the German romantic reception of Kalidasa, elsewhere in his Kalidasa writings Aurobindo appears to be working out a more general critique of the Hegelian account of Indian art. Hegel too saw Europe's nativity reflected in ancient India's cultural products, but conceived of that nativity as a kind of primeval moment in which rampant sensuousness (evidenced, for example, in depictions of Hindu gods and goddesses with many heads and limbs) existed alongside an understanding of spirit lacking in concreteness (such

[272] Sri Aurobindo, *Kalidasa: Essays and Translations*, 77–78.

as the contentless notion of the absolute as *brahman*): “the primitive artistic pantheism of the East” either “becomes bizarre, grotesque, and tasteless, or turns the infinite but abstract freedom of the substantive Idea disdainfully against all phenomenal being as null and evanescent.”[273] In Hegel’s “East,” the sensuous and the spiritual haven’t effectively interacted in a way that could initiate the world-process, and “such constant oscillation between the ‘supersensuous’ and ‘wildest sensuality,’” as Wilhelm Halbfass puts it, “finds its most visible and striking expression in Indian art.”[274]

Aurobindo likewise notes such an “oscillation” lying at the heart of the Sanskrit literary tradition; however, for him the two poles don’t simply coexist in unbudging stasis but participate in a dynamic interplay:

> It is this double aspect of [the] Hindu temperament, extreme spirituality successfully attempting to work in harmony with extreme materialism, which is the secret of our religion, our life & our literature, our civilization. On the one side we spiritualise the material out of all but a phenomenal & illusory existence, on the other we materialise the spiritual in the most definite & realistic forms; this is the secret of the high philosophic idealism which to the less capable European mind seems so impossible an intellectual atmosphere and of the prolific idolatry which to the dogmatic & formalising Christian reason seems so gross.[275]

Aurobindo sees this “double aspect” in much Sanskrit poetry, but especially in the poetry of Kalidasa: “of all our great poets Kalidasa best exemplifies this twynatured Hindu temperament under the conditions of supreme artistic beauty & harmony.” He sees it at the level of Kalidasa’s style: “under his touch the grotesque becomes strange, wild & romantic…; the sublime yields to

[273] G.W.F. Hegel, *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics* (Penguin Books Limited, 1993), 83.

[274] Halbfass, *India and Europe*, 90.

[275] Sri Aurobindo, *Kalidasa: Essays and Translations*, 64.

the law of romance, acquires a mighty grace, a strong sweetness."[276] He also sees it reflected in the narratives Kalidasa takes up for poetic treatment, for instance in the *Kumārasaṃbhava*: "The central idea of this great unfinished poem, the marriage of Siva and Parvati, typified in its original idea the union of Purusha and Prakriti, the supreme Soul and dynamic Nature by which the world is created…."[277] Here as before, we see that Aurobindo is in fact attempting to formulate a more adequate understanding of Indian literature, critiquing the European reception of it while accepting some of its key presuppositions.

By presenting passages from Aurobindo's writings on Kalidasa as responses to the arguments of Schiller and Hegel (as opposed to those of British Indologists whose work would have been more familiar to Aurobindo, but whose critical judgments tend to rest on less explicit theoretical assumptions), I have sought to highlight as clearly as possible the stakes of Aurobindo's revisionist account of Sanskrit literature.[278] Aurobindo isn't just arguing that Sanskrit poetry still

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[276] Ibid., 65–66.

[277] Ibid., 18.

[278] While it is clear that Aurobindo was familiar with the arguments of Schiller's essay and Hegel's *Lectures*, he probably wouldn't have known them by reading these texts. Aurobindo once remarked that he "read, not Hegel, but a small book on Hegel, but it left no impression" (Heehs, *The Lives of Sri Aurobindo*, 24). And while he certainly knew Schiller's literary works, it is unclear whether he was familiar with Schiller's theoretical writings. Concerning the British reception of Kalidasa in the mid to late nineteenth century, Thapar notes that "the image created by the [German] Romantics with all its ambiguities remained an undertone, nurtured on the memories of an earlier reception" (Thapar, "Kalidasa in the Ninteenth Century in Europe and in India," 16). M. H. Abrams offers a useful account of how and when German romantic ideas traveled to England (where Aurobindo would have encountered them): "This complex of related antitheses—subjective and objective, naive and sentimental, classical and romantic, style and manner, and the rest—migrated over into the vocabulary of English and American criticism mainly during and after the second decade of the nineteenth century. Some Englishmen—notably Coleridge, H. C. Robinson, Lockhart, De Quincey, and Carlyle—discovered these terms by reading Schiller, or the brothers Schlegel, or Goethe, in the original. Many more, like Hazlitt, depended primarily on Madame de Stael's rendering of German theory in her *L'Allemagne*, or on English versions of such documents as A. W. Schlegel's *Lectures on Dramatic Art and*

makes for good reading, that it was consequential in its contexts of production, or that we should learn to appreciate it how its original readers did. Rather, his arguments issue from an influential assumption about art, already at work in Schiller's essay and explicitly formulated in Hegel's *Lectures* as follows: "It is in works of art that nations have deposited the profoundest intuitions and ideas of their hearts; and fine art is frequently the key—with many nations there is no other—to the understanding of their wisdom and of their religion."[279] Aurobindo's writings on Kalidasa and Sanskrit literature are thus inseparable from a broader defense he is trying to make of Indian culture. Indeed, a little more than two decades after his writings on Kalidasa, Aurobindo would compose a treatise called *A Defence of Hindu Culture*, published serially between 1919 and 1921. At one point in this text, Aurobindo expresses his irritation at the European reception of Indian literature by satirizing it, improvising an equally misguided take on the European literary tradition:

> The fit parallel to this motive and style of criticism would be if an Indian critic who had read European literature only in bad or ineffective Indian translations, were to pass it under a hostile and disparaging review, dismiss the Iliad as a crude and empty semi-savage and primitive epos, Dante's great work as the nightmare of a cruel and superstitious religious fantasy, Shakespeare as a drunken barbarian of considerable genius with an epileptic imagination, the whole drama of Greece and Spain and England as a mass of bad ethics and violent horrors, French poetry as a succession of bald or tawdry rhetorical exercises and French fiction as a tainted and immoral thing, a long sacrifice on the altar of the goddess Lubricity, admit here and there a minor merit, but make no attempt at all to understand the central spirit or aesthetic quality or principle of structure…. No criticism would be worth making on such a mass of absurdities, and in this equally ridiculous philippic only a stray

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Literature (translated in 1815). And in England these terms preserved the varied applications, the ambiguities, and the sliding usages they had had in Germany" (M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (Oxford University Press, 1958), 242).

[279] Hegel, *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics*, 9.

> observation or two less inconsequent and opaque than the others perhaps demands a passing notice.[280]

Though not always so passionate in tone, much of Aurobindo's early engagement with Kalidasa shares the polemical force of this passage, aiming more or less explicitly to set the record straight on Sanskrit literature.

At the same time, Aurobindo isn't just motivated by a polemical desire to correct the European account of Indian literary history. In distinguishing himself from other readers of the Sanskrit tradition, he is also attempting to work out his own reading of it. The remaining sections of this chapter will attend to this constructive aspect of Aurobindo's writing on Kalidasa.

3. Beyond Sensuousness: Two Ascetic Ideals

When Aurobindo characterizes the Indian temperament as "twynatured"—"extreme spirituality attempting to work in harmony with extreme materialism"—he is arguing broadly against two common views. The first, outlined above, is that the sensuousness of Indian art marks India's proximity to the infancy of history. The second view is that the spirituality of Indian philosophy is essentially nihilistic. This view appears, for example, throughout the third essay of *On the Genealogy of Morals*, "The Ascetic Ideal," where Nietzsche characterizes Indian philosophy (along with the entire tradition of Western metaphysics) as issuing from a hatred of life and the senses:

> As long as there are philosophers on earth, and wherever there have been philosophers (from India to England, to take the antithetical poles of philosophical endowment), there unquestionably exists a peculiar philosophers' irritation at and rancor against sensuality.…

[280] Sri Aurobindo, *Early Cultural Writings* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Publication Department, 2003), 316.

> [The ascetic ideal] will, for example, like the ascetics of the Vedanta philosophy, downgrade physicality to an illusion.…
>
> But it is not easy for us to take seriously the high valuation placed on *deep sleep* by these people [Indians], so weary of life that they are too weary even to dream—deep sleep, that is, as an entry into Brahma, as an *achieved unio mystica* with God.[281]

As early as his writings on Kalidasa, Aurobindo takes issue with this conception of Indian thought:

> The Hindu has been always decried as a dreamer & mystic. There is truth in the charge but also a singular inaccuracy. The Hindu mind is in one sense the most concrete in the world; it seeks after abstractions, but is not satisfied with them so long as they remain abstractions.[282]

It is true that the ascetic withdrawal from sensuous life forms a large part of the history of Indian ideas. For Aurobindo, however, a nihilistic asceticism that denies the world and its claims on us can't be taken to be its essence. In some fine pages on Kalidasa's *Vikramorvaśīya*, Aurobindo distinguishes between two conceptions of asceticism. The first is a partial conception, the askesis practiced by "sages & hermits who would make phenomena dissolve prematurely into the One who is above Phenomena."[283] Like Nietzsche, Aurobindo identifies Shankara as the main proponent of this conception, the philosopher whose mistrust of the phenomenal world earned him the nickname *pracchanna-bauddha* or "a Buddhist in disguise."[284] For Aurobindo, Shankara cannot be taken as the main representative of Indian thinking because he wasn't accepted as such by society at large:

> It is told that the great Shankaracharya in the midst of his triumphant religious

[281] Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2010), 106; ibid., 118; ibid., 133.

[282] Sri Aurobindo, *Kalidasa: Essays and Translations*, 64.

[283] Ibid., 70.

[284] See Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, 133.

> activity had to turn aside and learn by personal experience the delights of sensuous life and the love of women, because the defect of this experience left him maimed for his philosophic task.[285]

Aurobindo here refers to a popular legend of Shankara's debate with a philosophical rival, finding in it an implicit critique of his philosophy. The story goes that when Shankara faced Mandanamishra in heated contest, he was taught that dialectical skill alone would not suffice, that in order to win he needed to set aside his monkish asceticism and gain worldly experience by entering the body of a king. Aurobindo sees the very popularity of this story as evidence that, however convinced Shankara and his followers were of their illusionism, their hostile attitude to sensuous life did not meet universal approval.

The second conception of asceticism, which Aurobindo calls "the highest Indian conception of asceticism," is an askesis motivated not by disillusionment with life and the consequent will to deny it but rather by a complete affirmation of the world and its possibilities.[286] Aurobindo finds a model for this second conception in the figure of Narayana, Vishnu's incarnation as the sage who gave birth to the apsara Urvashi.[287] The tale of Urvashi's birth relates asceticism and sensuousness in an astonishing, almost incredible way. In Kalidasa's play, Pururavas expresses his astonishment in a remark that Aurobindo translates as follows:

> And yet I cannot think of her
> Created by a withered hermit cold.
> How could an aged anchoret dull & stale
> With poring over Scripture & oblivious
> To all this rapture of the senses build
> A thing so lovely?[288]

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[285] Sri Aurobindo, *Kalidasa: Essays and Translations*, 73–74.

[286] Ibid., 73.

[287] An apsara (Skt. *apsaras*) is one of a class of celestial women.

[288] Sri Aurobindo, *Kalidasa: Essays and Translations*, 60.

In his essay on *Vikramorvaśīya*, Aurobindo fleshes out the myth that Kalidasa references here only in passing, and proposes a different understanding of Narayana than the one implied in Pururavas' image of the "dull anchoret":

> When Naraian, the primeval and dateless sage of old, entered upon austerities in the most secret & desolate recesses of the Snowy Mountains, Indra, prince of the air, always hostile to asceticism,…was alarmed for the balance of the world and the security of his own rule. He therefore sent the Opsaras to disturb the meditations of Naraian. Then…the Opsaras came to Naraian; they were the loveliest of all the sisterhood who came…; but Naraian, who is Vishnu the World Saviour when he comes in the guise of the ascetic, moved neither by the passion of love nor by the passion of anger, smiled in the large & indulgent mood of his world embracing nature and opening his thigh took from it a radiant and marvellous creature of whose beauty the loveliest Opsaras seemed but pale & broken reflections. …Naraian called this daughter of his creation Urvasie (she who lies in the thigh of the Supreme, the thigh being the seat of sensuousness).[289]

The philosopher-sage Narayana dwells far from the world, "in the most secret and desolate recesses of the Snowy Mountains." However, unlike the partial ascetic, Narayana possesses a "world embracing nature" and therefore isn't practicing austerities in the Himalayas to flee the world: "the philosopher must be superior to sensuousness not because he is incapable of experiencing passion & delight, but because he has fathomed their utmost depth and measured their utmost reach…." Accordingly, Narayana responds to the beautiful apsaras not by recoiling from them but by producing from his own thigh the more beautiful Urvashi, "by producing out of the sensuous in himself a lovelier sensuousness than any that can be brought to tempt him." For "the sensuous world becomes fuller of beauty, richer in colours, shades and suggestions, more profound and attractive with each widening of the human ideal"; the fruit of Narayana's higher

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vedābhyāsajaḍaḥ kathaṃ nu viṣayavyāvṛttakautūhalo
nirmātuṃ prabhaven manoharam idaṃ rūpaṃ purāṇo muniḥ || *VŪ* 1.8 ||

[289] Ibid., 72–73.

asceticism is bizarrely not the world's dissolution but its transformation.[290] That is why Indra, king of the gods, fears what might come of Narayana's meditations: "like all active & conservative forces he distrusts the contemplative spirit of philosophy because it is disruptive and tends to cast thought & therefore life into solution towards the creation of fresh forms."

For Aurobindo, the broad significance of the Urvashi myth is reiterated in the origin-story of another group of apsaras. Arisen from the milk-ocean when the "luminous Gods" and "gigantic titans" met to churn it, they too were born of cooperation of the spiritual with the sensuous: "good must mingle with evil, the ideal take sides with the real, the soul work in harmony with the senses…before [their object] can be accomplished; for this object was no less than to evolve all that is beautiful & sweet & incredible in life…." Like Urvashi, the other apsaras too have an essentially enriching effect on the world: "From the moment that they arose out of the waters of the milky Ocean…the beauty and light of them has transformed the world."[291] Humans feel their transformative capacity as the attractive force urging them on to their creative endeavors:

> They dwell too in the life of the soul; for they are the ideal pursued by the poet through his lines, by the artist shaping his soul on his canvas, by the sculptor seeking a form in his marble; for the joy of their embrace the hero flings his life into the rushing torrent of battle; the sage, musing upon God, sees the shining of their limbs & falls from his white ideal. The delight of life, the beauty of things, the attraction of sensuous beauty, this is what the mystic & romantic side of the Hindu temperament strove to express in the Opsara.[292]

The "beauty of things" leads the artist (whether poet, painter, or sculptor) to perceive potentials within the world that aren't readily apparent; as Aurobindo elsewhere writes, "those who make

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[290] Ibid., 74.

[291] Ibid., 62.

[292] Ibid., 68–69.

use of the sixth sense, the poet, the painter, the Yogin,…gather much that is hidden from the ordinary observer."[293] Aurobindo thus finds another model for the higher conception of asceticism in the artist, who in her own way renders the world "richer in colours, shades, and suggestions." The artist's enrichment of the world is to be distinguished from the askesis of "the sage musing upon God," who is drawn to a pure "white ideal" and whose efforts are frustrated rather than furthered by beauty. Here too, then, Aurobindo is careful to distinguish between two asceticisms, one that denies the world and one that affirms it, one that fears the world and one that enriches it, one that collapses the world's differences into an undifferentiated monotone and one that discovers in the world more differences of color, shade, and suggestion. We are given a more in-depth exploration of this second, artistic form of askesis in Aurobindo's analysis of Pururavas, to which I now turn.

4. The Poet-King: Aurobindo's Character Sketch of Pururavas

For Aurobindo, the myth of Pururavas' love for Urvashi originally symbolized the human seeker's pursuit of the divine ideal. Yet while Kalidasa's Urvashi mostly departs from that symbolism (for reasons outlined in section 2), his depiction of Pururavas deepens it, exploring one way that such a seeker might exist in the world. One prominent indicator of Pururavas' nature in *Vikramorvaśīya* is his manner of speech, which is more poetic than that of any other king in dramatic literature: "surely no king before or after, not even Richard II, had such a royal gift of language as this grandson of the Sun & Moon."[294] Like Kalidasa, Pururavas almost compulsively expresses himself in images. When he sees Urvashi recover from her swoon in Act 1, for example,

[293] Sri Aurobindo, *Early Cultural Writings*, 405.

[294] Sri Aurobindo, *Kalidasa: Essays and Translations*, 54.

he breaks out with two images before mentioning Urvashi herself, then concludes with a third image that seems to leap from his mouth of its own accord:

> Like a night set free by darkness
> when the moon appears,
> like a tongue of fire at night
> breaking through billowing smoke
> does this beautiful woman appear,
> almost released from her inner swoon—
> like the Ganges, once turbulent
> from thrashing her banks,
> regaining calm.[295]

Likewise, when Urvashi takes off for the heavens, Pururavas expresses his experience of separation as an image:

> As she mounts up to the sky—
> her father's middle step—
> the divine woman draws
> my heart from my body by force,
> like a royal swan plucks
> a thread from the lotus fiber
> bruising its tip.[296]

For Aurobindo, the richness of Pururavas' language in such verses is specifically occasioned by his encounter with Urvashi, who is the "touchstone of his nature": "Now he sees Urvasie and all the force of his nature pours itself into his love for her like a river which has at last found its natural sea. The rich poetry of his temperament, the sights & images with which his memory is stored…are now diverted over this final passion of his life."[297] What is the source of the king's images, and

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[295] āvirbhūte śaśini tamasā mucyamāneva rātrir
naiśasyārcir hutabhuja iva cchinnabhūyiṣṭhadhūmā |
mohenāntarvaratanur iyam lakṣyate muktakalpā
gaṅgā rodhaḥpatanakaluṣā gṛhṇatīva prasādam || *VŪ* 1.7 || (64)

[296] eṣā mano me prasabhaṃ śarīrāt pituḥ padaṃ madhyamam utpatantī |
surāṅganā karṣati khaṇḍitāgrāt sūtraṃ mṛṇālād iva rājahaṃsī || *VŪ* 1.18 || (80)

[297] Sri Aurobindo, *Kalidasa: Essays and Translations*, 56.

what compels him to express himself in them?

In Aurobindo's reading, Pururavas' images recall scenes that the king has witnessed in the past, even if he did not consciously register them:

> Little things he has seen in Nature, a portion of the bank of a river collapsing into the current, the rapid brightening of a dark night by the moon, fire at night breaking its way through a volume of smoke, a lotus reddening in early sunlight, a wild swan flying through the sky with a lotus fibre in his beak, remain with his inner eye and at a touch burst out in poetry.[298]

Aurobindo here gathers several of Pururavas' images scattered throughout the play in a single sentence, which amounts to no less than a brief sketch for a theory of the poetic image. Pururavas' tendency to express himself in images points to a domain of thinking that precedes the mind's reflection. As the king passes through the world, he collects little perceptions of things and stores them as images in his "inner eye." It may not be till much later that these stored images become accessible to the reflective mind, since it does not answer to the summons of the will but releases its contents when we least expect it—for example, in face of the beautiful. Pururavas' images thus issue from a passive region of the mind that for the most part lies concealed.

This habit of storing images is not peculiar to poets like Pururavas but common to absolutely everyone. The account of the poetic image outlined above in fact rests on a more general theory of memory, which Aurobindo elsewhere elaborates in greater detail:

> The reservoir of past mental impressions, the *citta* or storehouse of memory, which must be distinguished from the specific act of memory, is the foundation on which all the other layers stand. All experience lies within us as passive or potential memory; active memory selects and takes what it requires from that storehouse.[299]

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[298] Ibid., 55.

[299] Sri Aurobindo, *Early Cultural Writings*, 386.

All specific acts of memory are themselves only possible because of a more profound passive memory, a retentive faculty that underlies and thus isn't easily controlled by the wilfulness of recollection. "The active memory is" therefore "like a man searching among a great mass of locked-up material."[300] More radically, however, and more relevant to Aurobindo's analysis of Pururavas, the passive memory is the basis not only of recollection but of "*all* the other layers" of the mind, among which Aurobindo includes perception: "we have a habitual way of looking at things and the conservative inertia in our nature disposes us to give every new experience the shape and semblance of those to which we are accustomed."[301] Our everyday access to the world is thus mediated in the first instance, constituted by the influx of images from past experience which permit the recognition of objects and circumstances and guide our disposition towards them.

Kalidasa illustrates the mediated nature of perception in Act 2 of *Vikramorvaśīya*, where four characters perceive in quick succession a love letter that Urvashi has dropped in the garden for Pururavas to read. Manavaka and the king are the first characters to perceive it:

> Manavaka: (*Seeing it*) Help! Help! What's this falling right in front of us, like the skin sloughed off by a snake?
> King: (*Seeing it distinctly*) These are just characters written on a birch leaf.[302]

The third and fourth perceptions of the object belong to the queen Aushinari, who suspects that her husband loves another woman, and her maidservant Nipunika. Their speech on seeing the

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[300] Ibid.

[301] Ibid., 399–400.

[302] vidūṣakaḥ—avihā avihā | bho kiṃ ṇu khu edaṃ bhuaṅgaṇimmoaṃ via saṃmuhe ṇo ṇivaḍidaṃ |
(*Skt. chāyā*: vidūṣakaḥ—(dṛṣṭvā) avihā avihā | bhoḥ kiṃ nu khalvetad bhujaṅganirmoka iva saṃmukhe 'smākaṃ nipatitaṃ |)
rājā—(vibhāvya) bhūrjapatragato 'yam akṣaravinyāsaḥ | (Kālidāsa, *Vikramorvaśīya (The Vikramorvaśīyam of Kālidāsa)*, 112.)

object recalls in its language and structure the exchange between Pururavas and the jester:

> Queen: (*Walking*) Nipunika, what does the south wind bring in our direction? It looks like a worn-out rag.
> Nipunika: (*Seeing it distinctly*) My lady, it's actually a birch leaf, and as it whirls around I see some characters written on it.[303]

In none of these four perceptions is the object experienced as a mere crowding of visual sensations gathered by the eye. Rather, in each exchange, the first person to perceive the object sees it in the first instance as an image drawn from memory by its resemblance with the present (as a snake's skin for the jester, as a rag for the queen). The imagistic nature of everyday perception is highlighted for a final time in Act 2 when Manavaka sets out in search of the letter and, unaware that Nipunika has already snatched it from the air, believes he has spotted it:

> Manavaka: Friend! What's this I see tossing in the wind, near the hill by the pleasure-garden? … Ah, I was fooled. It's just a peacock feather, and the sheen on its threads is fading.
> King: I am devastated![304]

The activity of searching has so conditioned the perception of the jester—has so predisposed his seeing with images from memory—that the feather flying in the wind first enters his ken as the missing letter.

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[303] devī—(parikramya) hañje ṇiuṇie kiṃ edaṃ jiṇṇacīvaraṃ viaṃ idomuhaṃ dakkhiṇamārudeṇa āṇīadi |
nipuṇikā—(vibhāvya) bhaṭṭiṇi paḍivattaṇavibhāvidakkharaṃ bhujjavattaṃ khu edaṃ |
(*Skt. chāyā*: devī—hañje nipuṇike kim etaj jīrṇacīvaram ivetomukhaṃ dakṣiṇamārutenānīyate |
nipuṇika—bhaṭṭini parivartanavibhāvitākṣaraṃ bhūrjapatraṃ khalvetat |) (Ibid., 126.)

[304] vidūṣakaḥ—bho vaassa kiṃ edaṃ pavaṇavasagāmi
pamadavaṇasamīvagadakilāpavvadapajjatte dīsadi | …
bho milāamāṇakeśaracchaviṇā mīrapiccheṇa vippaladdho mhi |
(*Skt. chāyā*: vidūṣakaḥ-—bhoḥ vayasya kim etat pavanavaśagāmi
pramadavanasamīpagatakrīḍāparvataparyante dṛśyate | …
bhoḥ mlāyamānakesaracchavinā mayūrapicchena vipralabdho ‘smi |)
rājā—sarvathā hato ‘smi | (Ibid., 126–28.)

What distinguishes the poet, then, is not the mere possession of a passive memory, which is included in all perception, but the manner in which it releases its images into perception. As Aurobindo writes of Pururavas,

> Not only is his mind stored with pictures which break out in the most splendid tropes and similes, but he cannot see any natural object or feel any simplest emotion without bathing it in the brilliant tones of his imagination & expressing it in regal poetry.[305]

The poet, here figured as Pururavas, does not speak poetically just for some special affinity he happens to have for rhetorical flourishes but because he sees the world with an eye more attentive to the particularity of each perception, feels with a heart more attuned to the particularity of each experience, and so is less susceptible to the generalized interpretation of the world that his immediate context dictates. Or to put it in the language of Aurobindo's later text on memory, the poet is liberated from "the interference of previous associations formed or ingrained in the…passive memory" and can therefore "receive first impressions without an unconscious bias against the novelty of novel experience."[306] That is why the poet has the "inveterate…habit of seizing on every situation & emotion and turning it into a poem."[307] Whereas in our everyday experience the mind's image-memory cuts out and measures objects of perception to the requirements of the familiar, the poetic image arises when an experience frustrates the memory's search for precedents, calling for a distinctive kind of measuring that maintains the object in its unfamiliarity. This search for precedents is illustrated in the following passage of Aurobindo's *Urvasie*, taken from Pururavus' first speech on seeing his beloved:

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[305] Sri Aurobindo, *Kalidasa: Essays and Translations*, 54–55.

[306] Sri Aurobindo, *Early Cultural Writings*, 399–400.

[307] Sri Aurobindo, *Kalidasa: Essays and Translations*, 55.

Wast thou not a part
Of soft auspicious evenings I have loved?
Have I not seen thy beauty on the clouds?
In moonlight and in starlight and in fire?
Some flower whose brightness was a trouble? a face
Whose memory like a picture lived with me?
A thought I had, but lost?[308]

These lines lay bare the structure of poetic perception the moment it is faced with something inassimilable to past experience: Pururavas' mind reels for a precedent, but unable to rest satisfied at any one image, it searches for another as we witness his memory come unhinged. For Aurobindo, having a poetic temperament amounts to being endowed with such heightened powers of attention, which allow the poet to see the world anew and thus withdraw from common interpretations of it.

However, what Kalidasa gives us in Pururavas is not quite the portrait of a poet but that of a *poet-king*. Kingship changes things considerably, since while the mere poet can rest satisfied with reinterpreting the world, the poet who is also a king will wish to actualize his reinterpretations. Aurobindo usefully compares the poet-king's situation to that of a playwright:

> [The poet-king's] rage when a word of his life-drama is mispronounced or a part ill-studied or a conception not complied with is a magnified reflection of the vexation felt by a dramatist at a similar contretemps in the performance of his darling piece; and unfortunately unlike the playwright he has the power to vent his indignation on the luckless offenders in a fashion only too effective.[309]

Whereas the mere poet creating a world on paper is free from all but mental constraints, the dramatist is tasked with creating a world on stage and therefore must work with other players—actors, musicians, costume designers, set designers—who have their own competing visions for

[308] Sri Aurobindo, *Collected Poems* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Trust, 1971), 191.

[309] Sri Aurobindo, *Kalidasa: Essays and Translations*, 49.

the production. Here Aurobindo may well have in mind the opening of Act 3 of *Vikramorvaśīya*, where we learn that Bharata, "the mighty dramatist of heaven" (as Aurobindo calls him in his poem *Urvasie*), has exiled Urvashi to earth for mistaking her lines in his own "darling piece." Like the dramatist, the poet-king cannot avoid contending with other interpretations of the world, which in a way constitute the basic material from which he must work, and when that material proves resistant he grows frustrated: "he [attempts] to weave his own imaginations into life; he will not see facts; he will not recognize the inexorable logic of events."[310] Thus predisposed to ineffectual rule, the poet-king is a potentially regrettable phenomenon.

For Aurobindo, a number of examples from literature and history—including Shakespeare's Richard II, Renan's Nero, and Kalhana's Sriharsha—seem to suggest precisely this, that "the meeting of poet & king in one man wears always the appearance of an anomaly, a misplacement," and that "the very qualities which have fitted him to be a poet unfit him to rule." It is thus noteworthy that Kalidasa's depiction of Pururavas departs from this bleak conception:

> To our surprise we find that the Hindu poet does not associate incompetence, failure & tragedy with his image of the poet-king; on the contrary Pururavus is a Great Emperor, well-loved of his people, an unconquered hero, the valued ally of the gods, successful in empire, successful in war, successful in love.[311]

If Kalidasa has chosen to depict a successful poet-king, it is not because he is "at fault in his knowledge of the world and of human nature"; rather, he "simply gives us the other side of the shield," showing us another possible manifestation of the poet-king. Not only is it inaccurate to say that poet-kings are invariably "incompetents and weaklings"; they can even prove historically consequential:

[310] Ibid., 48–49.

[311] Ibid., 50.

> There are times when Nature gifts the poetic temperament with a peculiar grasp of the conditions of action and an irresistible tendency to create their poems not in ink & on paper, but in living characters & on the great canvas of the world; such men become portents & wonders, whom posterity admires or hates but can only imperfectly understand. Like Joan of Arc or Mazzini & Garibaldi they save a dying nation, or like Napoleon & Alexander they dominate a world.[312]

By including Joan of Arc, Mazzini, and Garibaldi in his list, Aurobindo shows us that he isn't just interested in kings but more broadly in political leaders, so that his analysis of Pururavas is perhaps more aptly characterized as a study of the "poet-leader." Moreover, if we recall that Aurobindo is writing his essay on *Vikramorvaśīya* on the eve of his own immersion in anticolonial politics, it will not seem so great a leap to read his character sketch of Pururavas as a meditation on the temperament of a political revolutionary.

Does Kalidasa's Pururavas provide a template for the successful revolutionary? It is true that Pururavas doesn't succumb to the poet-leader's predictable faults of being ineffectual or tyrannical. However, even superficial consideration of the *Vikramorvaśīya*'s plot shows that he is by no means successful. Pururavas may initially succeed in bringing Urvashi to earth (or to spell out the implied allegory, in manifesting ideal life among humans), but that first union is short-lived. And while his heavenly reunion with Urvashi in the play's final act is a triumph, it is also costly, requiring the abandonment of his earthly duties as king. Kalidasa himself doesn't judge Pururavas one way or the other, or at least not explicitly, since his presentation of him is simply "a study of the poetic temperament in a heroic & royal figure for no issue beyond the study itself."[313] In distinction, Aurobindo expresses serious reservations about Pururavas' conduct. In his analysis of Kalidasa's play, for example, he seizes on a few barely perceptible moments when

[312] Ibid., 50–51.

[313] Ibid., 52.

Pururavas experiences a brief "paralysis of activity" of a kind which "often overtakes the poetic temperament in action even in its most capable possessors."[314] Yet Aurobindo's criticisms of Pururavas are most clearly articulated in his original narrative poem *Urvasie*, composed around the same time as his critical writings on *Vikramorvaśīya*.

Plotwise, *Urvasie* and *Vikramorvaśīya* share the same broad outline: (1) Pururavas falls in love with Urvashi at first sight; (2) Urvashi lives with him on earth for a brief period; (3) the pair is separated, leaving Pururavas dejected; (4) Pururavas eventually becomes an inhabitant of heaven to dwell forever with Urvashi. Among the many differences that Aurobindo introduces in his rendering of this bare-bones frame, two stand out to me as particularly significant. The first concerns how he imagines the unions of Pururavas and Urvashi. In *Vikramorvaśīya*, both of their unions come about through luck (the first when Urvashi herself comes to the king's palace as he pines for her, the second when Pururavas chances upon the magic stone that will return Urvashi to her original form). By contrast, the unions staged in *Urvasie* result from Pururavus' ascetic force. In giving Pururavus more responsibility in his dealings with Urvasie, Aurobindo foregrounds the potential ethical implications of the story, and makes ethics about the choice between assenting to the world and abandoning it. The second major difference concerns the emphasis Aurobindo puts on the story's symbolic meanings. Such meanings are not entirely absent from Kalidasa's play; earlier we saw, for instance, how Pururavus' remark in *VŪ* 1.8 associates Urvashi with sensuous life. That association is also suggested by Kalidasa's account of the separation of Urvashi from Pururavas. In the original version of the story recounted in the *Śatapathabrāhmaṇa*, their separation is a consequence of heaven's jealousy: Urvashi leaves Pururavas when two gandharvas intent on winning her back steal her cherished rams. By contrast, in *Vikramorvaśīya* the two are

[314] Ibid., 59.

separated when Urvashi accidentally trespasses on Kartikeya's forbidden grove—or as Aurobindo calls it, "the fatal grove of the Virgin War-God where ethereal beauty & delight are not suffered to tread"—and turns into a vine.[315] Here too Kalidasa implicitly associates Urvashi with sensuousness, since her separation from Pururavas is due to her incompatibility with a certain conception of asceticism. However, whereas such symbolism is only occasionally hinted at in Kalidasa's text, Aurobindo repeatedly draws our attention to it, making *Urvasie* as much a commentary on Kalidasa's work as it is a poem in its own right. In what follows, I will therefore read Aurobindo's poem as continuous with his literary critical remarks, examining how *Urvasie* dramatizes the ethical problems and significances that Aurobindo sees implied in Kalidasa's play.

Above I noted that when Pururavas first beholds Urvashi in *Vikramorvaśīya*, he marvels at her beauty and at the fact that so sensuous a being could have emerged from the thigh of an ascetic (section 3). In *Urvasie* too Pururavus marvels at the goddess' sensuous beauty; however, he is less astonished by this quality in itself than by the effect it has on him. Here is how Aurobindo imagines Pururavus' first thoughts on seeing her from a distance:

> O thou strong god,
> Who art thou graspest me with hands of fire,
> Making my soul all colour? Surely I thought
> The hills would move and the eternal stars
> Deviate from their rounds immutable,
> Never Pururavus; yet lo! I fall.
> My soul whirls alien and I hear amazed
> The galloping of uncontrollable steeds.
> Men said of me: 'The King Pururavus
> Grows more than man; he lifts to azure heaven
> In vast equality his spirit sublime';
> Why sink I now towards attractive earth?
> …All beauty of earthliness is in thee, all
> Luxurious experience of the soul.
> O comest thou because I left thy charm
> Aiming at purity, oh comest thou,

[315] Ibid., 56.

Goddess, to avenge thyself with beauty? Come![316]

Before meeting Urvasie, Pururavus believed (along with those around him) that he was unerringly steadfast in his kingly duties, even more so than the hills and stars. While he acted within the world, he did so without letting it touch him, "aiming at purity" and possessing what Aurobindo elsewhere calls "ascetic self-denial & keen swordlike practical will."[317] He therefore resembled the partial ascetic described in section 3, whose withdrawal from sensuousness is motivated by an aversion to it. Meeting Urvasie completely upends this self-conception: Pururavus grows strange to himself—his "soul whirls alien"—as he "[hears] amazed/The galloping of uncontrollable steeds." At one level, what Pururavus hears is bizarrely the imminent sound of his own chariot horses: resigned to the power of his attraction to Urvasie, he has a vivid presentiment of the galloping which will take him to her as soon as he completes his thought (as the narrator tells us soon after Pururavus finishes his speech, "joyous he cried aloud and lashed his steeds").[318] At another level, the galloping belongs to horses within him—to those horses which, in both Sanskrit and Greek traditions of philosophy, are figurative for certain components of the self. In the *Kaṭhopaniṣad*, Yama speaks of the five senses as horses that must be controlled by the charioteer of reason:

> Know the self as a rider in a chariot,
> and the body, as simply the chariot.
> Know the intellect as the charioteer,
> and the mind, as simply the reigns.
>
> The senses, they say, are the horses,

[316] Sri Aurobindo, *Collected Poems*, 190–91.

[317] Sri Aurobindo, *Kalidasa: Essays and Translations*, 56.

[318] Sri Aurobindo, *Collected Poems*, 192.

> and sense objects are the paths around them;
> He who is linked to the body, senses, and mind,
> The wise proclaim as the one who enjoys.[319]

In Plato's *Phaedrus*, the dialogue in which love is characterized as a divine madness, the self is pictured in similar terms as a two-horsed chariot led by "intelligence, the soul's steersman," where one horse represents the appetitive part of the soul and the other represents the spiritual part.[320] As Socrates explains in the following passage, which corresponds almost exactly to Pururavus' situation, both horses are in one way or another driven wild in face of the beautiful:

> When the charioteer looks in the eye of love, his entire soul is suffused with a sense of warmth and starts to fill with tingles and the goading of desire. As for the horses, the one who is obedient to the charioteer is still controlled, then as always, by its sense of shame, and so prevents itself from jumping.... The other one, however, no longer responds to the whip or the goad of the charioteer; it leaps violently forward and does everything to aggravate its yokemate and its charioteer....[321]

Whatever line we take—whether we follow Yama's image or that of Socrates—Urvasie's beauty has also unbridled steeds of the soul, which just a moment earlier were subdued, and Pururavus experiences this unbridling as the revelation of color. For if Urvasie has made Pururavus' "soul all colour," it is because previously it was either white ("O thou who wast so white," Tilottama once calls out to Pururavus) or colorless (describing Urvasie to Pururavus, Menaca says she "is other than thy marble caryatids/And austere doors, purity colourless").[322] Once holding himself above

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[319] Patrick Olivelle, trans., *Upaniṣads* (OUP Oxford, 2008), 238–39.

[320] Plato, *Phaedrus*, trans. Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff (Hackett Publishing, 1995), 33.

[321] Ibid., 44. The connection to *Phaedrus* appears to run deep; for instance, in describing Pururavus as "the hero nympholept," diagnosing him with a madness for the divine, Aurobindo uses the same word that Socrates uses for himself (*numpholeptos*) when, astonished by his own uncharacteristically poetic speech, he attributes it to alien powers inhabiting the woods surrounding Athens (Ibid., xii; ibid., 18).

[322] Sri Aurobindo, *Collected Poems*, 204; ibid., 195.

earthly experience, reducing its colorful variety to a monotone, Pururavus now finds himself sinking towards it and indeed welcoming the fall.

When he goes on to perform austerities in the mountains in order to win Urvasie, then, Pururavus resembles the world-affirming ascetic Narayana, since he attempts through this second askesis to bring to the world a richer sensuousness. At first he succeeds, and for the brief period that Urvasie lives on earth her presence enriches it:

> The sacred city felt a finer life
> Within it; burning inspirations breathed
> From hallowed poets; and architects to grace
> And fancy their immense conceptions toned….
> Seven years the earth rejoiced in Urvasie.[323]

Aurobindo's description of Urvasie's transformative effect on earthly life echoes the account offered in his critical writings of the mythopoeic significance of the apsaras: "they are the ideal pursued by the poet through his lines, by the artist shaping his soul on his canvas, by the sculptor seeking a form in his marble." Pururavus is like these artists in that he too has devoted his life to the pursuit of an apsara. But whereas poets, painters, and architects breathe out their "burning inspirations" in language, paint, and marble, Pururavus is inspired by Urvasie to transform the very life of his city. He thus appears, at least at this point in the poem, as the model of a successful poet-king.

Urvasie's time on earth is brief, however, and when at the end of seven years the heavens reclaim her by a trick, Pururavus is left dejected and stunned, as much by Urvasie's departure as by the fact that it should touch him:

> I was not wont so quickly to despair.
> O hast thou left me and art lost in light,

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[323] Sri Aurobindo, *Collected Poems*, 211.

> Cruel, between the shining hemispheres?
> Yet even there I will pursue my joy.
> Though all the great immortals jealously
> Encompass round with shields thy golden limbs,
> I may clash through them yet, or my strong patience
> Will pluck my love down from her distant stars.
> Still am I Ila's son, Pururavus,
> That passionless pure strenth though lost, though fallen
> From the armed splendid soul which once I was.[324]

Here again Pururavus registers how much his encounter with Urvasie has changed him. He used to be an "armed splendid soul," free of passionate attachments to the world and therefore "not wont so quickly to despair"; now that Urvasie has infiltrated the armor which protected him from such attachments, Pururavus realizes he cannot live without her. Eventually he does win her back, but not in either of the ways he envisions—neither by taking up arms against the gods nor by "plucking" her "down from the distant stars." Pururavus once again repairs to the mountains to perform austerities (for if despite all his changes he feels he is the same person—if he nonetheless remains "Ila's son, Pururavus"—it is precisely because he still has the "strong patience" required for ascetic practice):

> Long he, in meditation deep immersed,
> Strove to dissolve his soul among the hills
> Into the thought of Urvasie. …
> The storm-blast…woke him not…
> For he lived only with his passionate heart.[325]

This time, however, rather than bring Urvasie to earth, Pururavus' askesis serves to make him worthy of the gods' company (somewhat like Uma's askesis in *Kumārasaṃbhava*), so that he may

[324] Ibid., 216.

[325] Ibid., 221.

dwell with her forever in heaven. He has thus succeeded in reuniting with his beloved, but the reunion has come at great cost:

> Then love in his sweet heavens was satisfied.
> But far below through silent mighty space
> The green and strenuous earth abandoned rolled.[326]

That the poem ends on these foreboding lines suggests that Pururavus' final victory is hollow, that it has been achieved by sacrificing something which should not have been sacrificed.

What Aurobindo shows us in *Urvasie* is in fact a picture of three types of asceticism. The first is what Pururavus had been practicing before the start of the poem, a dispassionate askesis which aims at purity by holding the world at a distance. The second askesis is what he practices soon after falling in love with Urvasie in order to bring her to earth, an artistic askesis that succeeds for a brief time in transforming life. The third askesis, performed after Urvasie's return to heaven, resembles the first two while being essentially different from them. Like the second, it is performed with a "passionate heart" and in pursuit of beauty; like the first, it ultimately amounts to a denial of life, since pursuing beauty to the heavens requires abandoning earth. However, the nihilism of the third askesis issues from the artist's and not the philosopher's recoil from life: Pururavus has grown disappointed by the earth's inability to sustain the divine ideal he glimpsed (as Aurobindo will later put it in the poetic cosmology that opens *Savitri*, "The excess of beauty natural to god-kind/Could not uphold its claim on time-born eyes"), and he settles for a compromised reunion with beauty in an unearthly cocoon.[327] I take Aurobindo's presentation of these three variants as exploring the relationship between askesis and life. Askesis is often regarded as a withdrawal from

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[326] Ibid., 228.

[327] Sri Aurobindo, *Savitri: A Legend and a Symbol* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Publication Department, 1997), 5.

life and thus as an indifference to the political. Aurobindo certainly recognizes the existence of such an apolitical askesis (as we saw in section 3); however, not all asceticism is thus grounded in a hostility to life. The figure of Narayana, the ascetic who paradoxically fathered Urvashi, is important to Aurobindo precisely for modeling an alternative ascetic disposition, one that urges the withdrawal not from life itself but from conventional life, in order to generate for it new possibilities. Not only is such a life-affirming askesis compatible with the political but, as Aurobindo suggests in his character sketch of Pururavas, it may even be necessary for any radical reinterpretation of the world, and so necessary for casting "life into solution towards the creation of fresh forms." But the person who undertakes such an askesis walks on a razor's edge, always in danger of withdrawing from earth to the point of disengagement. This to me seems the implied warning of *Urvasie*'s conclusion, that even a strong commitment to the transformation of life can mutate into disillusionment.

5. Conclusion: Kalidasa and the Future Poetry

Aurobindo's engagement with Kalidasa at the *fin de siécle* reflects a deepening investment in anticolonial politics as well as a desire to formulate a nationalist account of Indian history. Since Kalidasa was regarded as a major cultural figure and a quintessentially Indian poet by many of Aurobindo's contemporaries (both Indians and European Indologists), he was an ideal candidate for being the subject of such a project. Several of Aurobindo's essays on him are thus devoted to situating his poetry within the Sanskrit literary tradition and providing a revised account of that tradition, in order to formulate a defense of Indian art and culture. At the same time, reading Kalidasa led Aurobindo to formulate a rich set of reflections on the nature of the political revolutionary and on the relationship between askesis and politics. Aurobindo discontinued "A

Proposed Work on Kalidasa" soon after entering the fray of politics, and if we judge by the concerns of his later writing, it seems that Kalidasa's poetry would never again fascinate him to the same degree. Nonetheless, brief references and allusions to Kalidasa turn up often enough throughout his oeuvre that we can at least guess what significance the poet continued to have for him. I will conclude by suggesting a connection among three such references, beginning with a passage that appears near the end of *Urvasie*.

On his way to heaven—that is, after performing his third askesis but before regaining Urvasie—Pururavus meets the goddess Ila, who is his mother. Although Ila warns him about the consequences of abandoning earth, she is not at all surprised by Pururavus' unrelenting pursuit of Urvasie, since in being attracted to sensuous beauty, he takes after her:

> From me,
> O son, thou hadst the impulse beautiful
> That made thy soul all colour. For I strive
> Towards the insufferable heights and flash
> With haloes of that sacred light intense.
> But lo! the spring and all its flowers, and lo!
> How bright the Soma juice. What golden joys,
> What living passions, what immortal tears!
> I lift the veil that hides the Immortal—Ah!
> My lids faint. Ah! the veil was lovelier.
> My flowers wither in that height, my swan
> Spreads not his wings felicitous so far.
> O one day I shall turn from the great verses
> And marble aspiration to sing sweetly
> Of lovers and the pomps of wealth and wine
> And warm delights and warm desires and earth.[328]

Ila bears witness here to the challenge faced by the partial ascetic: she strives "toward the insufferable heights" but falls whenever she glimpses the earth, in a way suffering from the impossible desire voiced by the speaker of Keats' "Bright Star." She is thus caught in the crosshairs

[328] Sri Aurobindo, *Collected Poems*, 224–25.

of two experiences that generate two distinct kinds of poetry: on one hand, the "great verses/And marble aspiration" one finds, for instance, in those texts in "the Upanishads which declare the world to be unreal";[329] on the other, the sensuous poetry of "warm delights and warm desires and earth" written by a poet like Kalidasa. On Ila's understanding of the aspiring ascetic's situation, Narayana's "highest conception of asceticism," which honors the claims of both spirit and earth, is simply impossible.

Years later, Aurobindo would come to be "disgusted" with his poem, once responding to a library's request for it as follows: "I don't think I have the *Urvasie*, neither am I very anxious to have this poem saved from oblivion."[330] One reason for Aurobindo's dissatisfaction with it (apart from his vague sense that "as a whole it lacks in originality") might have been its failure to envision the synthesis he desired.[331] For in his book *The Future Poetry*, published serially between 1917 and 1920, Aurobindo claimed that the unification of the spiritual with the sensuous that Ila had deemed impossible would in fact be the task of a future poet, a writer who hadn't yet appeared (though anticipated by the likes of Whitman, Yeats, and Tagore) and whose work would somehow resolve precisely what Ila had left unresolved: "If it wings to the heights, it will not leave earth unseen below it."[332] What this poet sees, in other words,

> will not be as in the old times something hieratically remote, mystic, inward, shielded from the profane, but rather a sight which will endeavour to draw these godheads again to close and familiar intimacy with our earth and embody them not

[329] Sri Aurobindo, *Kalidasa: Essays and Translations*, 65.

[330] Sri Aurobindo, *Letters on Poetry and Art* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Trust, 2004), 223.

[331] Ibid., 224.

[332] Sri Aurobindo, *The Future Poetry* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Publication Department, 1997), 226.

> only in the heart of religion and philosophy, nor only in the higher flights of thought and art, but also, as far as may be, in the common life and action of man.[333]

Aurobindo's prophetic announcement uncannily resembles the call for unifying philosophy and poetry "that Novalis and the Schlegel brothers had assigned to the poetry of the future as its task."[334] Moreover, while Aurobindo doesn't explicitly name Kalidasa, his emphasis here on what is "close," "familiar," and "common" recalls his observation from nearly two decades earlier that Kalidasa's poetry "insists on translating the ideal into the terms of the familiar, sensuous & earthy."[335] His own attempt at this "translation" or "unification" is documented in *Savitri*, a massive epic poem which, together with his life, was under constant revision until his death. Once in 1931 he described his poem as follows:

> *Savitri*…is blank verse without enjambment (except rarely)—each line a thing by itself and arranged in paragraphs of one, two, three, four, five lines (rarely a longer series), in an attempt to catch something of the Upanishadic and Kalidasian movement, so far as that is a possibility in English.[336]

The remark pertains to matters of versification and seems to tell us nothing substantive about what Aurobindo was hoping to achieve with his poem. Nonetheless, the juxtaposition of texts as different as the Upanishads and Kalidasa's poetry is striking—so striking that, in light of the

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[333] Ibid., 220. Emphasis added.

[334] Jacques Rancière, *Mute Speech: Literature, Critical Theory, and Politics* (Columbia University Press, 2011), 81. Aurobindo thus appears to be trying to restart the program of romanticism more than a century after its German and British variants. I take the question of how we should interpret this gesture as an open one, though Srinivas Aravamudan has provided one list of possible answers: "an echo? a copy? a supplement? a displacement? a fantasized influence? a catachresis?" (Srinivas Aravamudan, *Guru English: South Asian Religion in a Cosmopolitan Language* (Princeton University Press, 2011), 63.)

[335] Sri Aurobindo, *Kalidasa: Essays and Translations*, 67.

[336] Sri Aurobindo, *Savitri: A Legend and a Symbol*, 727.

conclusions of this chapter, one wonders whether Kalidasa had become for Aurobindo a metonym for the sensuous.

Chapter 5: Conclusion
Sanskrit Literature and the Present

In the previous chapters, I have tried to describe closely how three different thinkers read Kalidasa. In chapter 2, I examined Kuntaka's reading of Kalidasa as reflected in his book *Vakroktijīvita*. When Kuntaka writes that Kalidasa's poetry is written in the "delicate style," he means that it reveals the world to us in its most stunning aspects. Kuntaka attends to many of the ways that it does this, but he is especially interested in Kalidasa's depictions of courtly situations, since they have the power to teach courtly audiences how best to conduct themselves. In chapter 3, I examined Vedantadesika's reading of Kalidasa, reflected not in any explicit remarks but in his own poetic and philosophical writings. While Vedantadesika is also fascinated by Kalidasa's manner of vivid description, he is interested in it because the reading and writing of such poetry activates the kind of imagination involved in devotional meditation. In chapter 4, I examined Sri Aurobindo's reading of Kalidasa, which is reflected mostly in fragmentary critical essays and original poetry inspired by Kalidasa. Aurobindo's reading is partly motivated by the need to revise the account of Indian literary history proposed by nineteenth-century European Indologists. But he also finds in the sensuousness of Kalidasa's poetry an affirmation of the world which runs counter to world-denying strains in Indian thought, and which comes to be central in his own conceptions of revolutionary and spiritual work.

The readers examined in this dissertation have each somehow related Kalidasa's poetry to his own context, whether this context is a royal court, a religious or spiritual practice, or anticolonial politics. They can thus be said to have engaged in *presentist reading*—an expression which throughout this chapter I will use to designate any reading premised on the idea that a text might have implications for one's present circumstances. There are good reasons to avoid this term. For one thing, the very word "presentist" could misleadingly suggest an absolute

incompatibility with historically attuned approaches to reading, as though presentist reading invariably suppressed or overlooked historical considerations. The expression has also come to carry negative connotations, being associated with uncritical ahistoricism (i.e., the anachronistic imposition of present ideas onto the past) or even textual manipulation (i.e., the deliberate misappropriation of past texts to suit present agendas). Nonetheless, I find the term useful for distinguishing the approach I will advocate here from approaches whose ultimate goal is to understand another historical moment than our own, typically either a text's orginal moment of production or a later moment in the history of its reception. In what follows, I will try to outline the possibility of a critical presentism, one that sees texts as potentially meaningful for the present precisely by affirming their historical difference. I will begin by comparing my dissertation to other studies that have similarly focused on the reception of Sanskrit literature (section 1). While in certain ways my dissertation follows the argumentative pattern of these studies, it also features significant differences, both in the kind of conclusions it makes about a text's later readers and in the picture of reading that emerges from the particular cases examined. I will then try to show what implications these differences might have for a general account of reading, and ultimately for the practice of literary criticism (section 2).

1. The Trouble with Presentist Reading

My dissertation is one among a number of studies in textual reception—that is, studies which examine how a particular text or body of writing has been received in history. These include Romila Thapar's study of retellings of the Shakuntala narrative; Ajay Rao's study of the Srivaishnava religious tradition's reception of the *Rāmāyaṇa*; Deven Patel's study of the reception of Sriharsha's *Naiṣadhīyacarita*; and Richard Davis' survey of readings of the *Bhagavadgītā* over

two millennia.[337] The examples of reading which these scholars have chosen to study, and the way they have written about them, tend to highlight the reader's role in the situation of encountering a text. Rao, for instance, shows how Srivaishnava readers of the *Rāmāyaṇa* used specific strategies to invest the text with theological meanings, just as Thapar shows how different tellings of the Shakuntala narrative reflect shifting attitudes towards women. In the preceding chapters, I too have been interested in the role that readers play in making meaning of texts: how Kuntaka's interest in the didactic function of literature predisposes him to read scenes in Kalidasa's poetry for their ethical content; how in his *Haṃsasandeśa* Vedantadesika uses the basic frame of Kalidasa's poem to explore his own theological concerns; and how many of Aurobindo's remarks on Kalidasa are motivated by his desire to revise the European account of Indian literary history.

Yet I have been equally interested in taking the text itself as a focus of concern. That is, I have been attentive in each case to the following two possibilities: (1) that an instance of situated reading might tell us something about the text at least as much as about the reader (e.g., the way Vedantadesika's poems draw our attention to Kalidasa's obsession with daydreaming); and (2) that a text might have genuine effects on a reader's thinking (e.g., the particular way Kalidasa's poetry urges Aurobindo to reflect on the relationship between askesis and politics). In the course of this dissertation, then, a slightly different picture of the situation of reading has emerged, one that counterbalances the emphasis usually placed on readers by pointing up the role that texts themselves—not just their aura or social capital—can play in constituting the reading process. This picture of reading challenges the more or less implicit assumption that presentist readings are

[337] Romila Thapar, *Sakuntala: Texts, Readings, Histories* (Columbia University Press, 2011); Velcheru Narayana Rao and David Shulman, *Srinatha: The Poet Who Made Gods and Kings* (Oxford University Press, USA, 2012); Deven Patel, *Text to Tradition: The Naisadhiyacarita and Literary Community in South Asia* (Columbia University Press, 2014); Richard H. Davis, *The Bhagavad Gita: A Biography* (Princeton University Press, 2014).

generally naïve misreadings, strategic repurposings, or (less charitably) outright distortions. Furthermore, it raises questions which deserve more substantive answers than "the magic of the text"—not only "Why is it that we can feel solicited, buttonholed, stirred up, by words that were drafted eons ago?" but also "How can texts that are inert in one historical moment become newly revealing, eye-opening, even life-transforming in another?"[338] In the next section, I will try to find some answers to these questions. Before that, however, I would like to examine more closely the current bias against presentist reading in Sanskrit literary studies, and more broadly in premodern South Asian literary studies.

This bias shows itself first in the scarcity of projects of original interpretation, and in the relative abundance of the history-of-reading studies mentioned above. When we consider the thrust of these studies, such a state of affairs is unsurprising: who would wish to fall victim to anachronism, overinterpretation, and naïveté when they have been exposed as mistakes in the work of past presentists? The project of working out a text's implications for the present instead falls to religious readers, artists, activists, and popular writers.[339] When on occasion scholars do venture original readings, these are usually presented as brief or informal reflections, whether in the pages of translators' introductions, magazine articles, blog posts, or even spontaneous remarks at a conference.

The bias against presentist reading in scholarly practice assumes the status of a critique in

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[338] Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (University of Chicago Press, 2015), 155.

[339] See for example Gurcharan Das, *The Difficulty of Being Good: On the Subtle Art of Dharma* (Oxford University Press, 2010); Kalidasa, *Kalidasa for the 21st Century Reader: Selected Poetry and Drama*, trans. Mani Rao (Rupa Publications, 2014); and the dramatizations of *Śākuntala* examined in Culp, "Searching for Shakuntala: Sanskrit Drama and Theatrical Modernity in Europe and India, 1789-Present."

the work of some Sanskritists who have explicitly reflected on method. Yigal Bronner describes how, in negatively judging works of *śleṣa* poetry (i.e., the poetry of paranomasia), Indologists were in fact unconsciously adopting aesthetic criteria that emerged in nineteenth-century Europe and perpetuating orientalist narratives about Indian literature and culture. In order to redress this orientalist legacy, Bronner argues, the study of *śleṣa* must begin by suspending personal judgments and asking why it was cherished by the people who wrote and read it.[340] Likewise, in his introduction to the massive edited volume *Literary Cultures in History*, Sheldon Pollock outlines a "historical-anthropological" approach that attends not to what texts mean and do for us but what they meant and did for past readers, since "we cannot orient ourselves to a text without first grasping how its readers oriented themselves—unless we want to read it in a way that no South Asian reader ever did and abandon the attempt to know what literary culture meant in history."[341] Pollock distinguishes his historical-anthropological approach from two others; first, from

> standard literary historiography—the situating of literary discourse in relation to other kinds of discourse at given historical moments; the elucidation of stylistic change; the contextual interpretation of literary works in service of an "appreciation of literature."[342]

Pollock's gloss of literary historiography offers one way of characterizing the approach to literary study exemplified throughout the recent edited volume *Innovations and Turning Points: Towards a History of Kāvya Literature*, where many of the essays "segregate literature from the rest of

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[340] Yigal Bronner, *Extreme Poetry: The South Asian Movement of Simultaneous Narration* (Columbia University Press, 2010), 9–13.

[341] Sheldon Pollock, *Literary Cultures in History: Reconstructions from South Asia* (University of California Press, 2003), 14.

[342] Sheldon Pollock, *Literary Cultures in History: Reconstructions from South Asia* (University of California Press, 2003), 13.

culture, society, and polity" in precisely the way Pollock wishes to avoid.[343] Second, and more relevant in the present context, Pollock distinguishes his approach from "literary criticism as normally practiced in South Asian scholarship, as well as the naive subjectivism to which it so often falls victim"—that is, the kind of criticism Edward Freeman would have called "mere chatter about Shelley."[344] The alternatives in literary scholarship thus appear to be either less urgent or less rigorous than the historical reconstruction of reading practices.

Of late, the field seems to be showing some signs of openness to projects of original interpretation. For example, in his more recent work tracing the outlines of a new critical philology, Pollock proposes a "philological practice that orients itself simultaneously along the three planes of a text's existence: its moment of genesis; its reception over time; and its presence to my own subjectivity," arguing that a hard-line historicism cannot simply ignore presentist readings (whether of our own time or of the past) but must reckon with their very existence. More generally, scholars have increasingly felt compelled to denounce fantasies of pure objectivity, remark on their own investments and limitations, and acknowledge an elusive quality of all texts that renders their interpretation inexhaustible. To give one example, here is how Richard Davis concludes his book on the *Bhagavadgīta*'s reception:

> In reviewing some of the ways that the *Gita* has lived over the centuries, we have seen how the work has spoken in multiple new ways to new audiences. As Bakhtin writes, "There is neither a first word nor a last work. ... Even meanings born in dialogues of the remotest past will never be grasped once and for all, for they will always be renewed in later dialogue." We may be certain that this text will continue to reincarnate itself in new ways. Or as Vishnu puts it in the *Gita Mahatmya*, these

[343] Yigal Bronner, David Dean Shulman, and Gary Alan Tubb, *Innovations and Turning Points: Toward a History of Kāvya Literature* (Oxford University Press, 2014).

[344] Pollock, *Literary Cultures in History*, 14; Edward Freeman, "Literature and Language," *The Contemporary Review* 52 (1887): 564.

will all be part of his "highest home" in great time.[345]

Yet, while the openness to interpretation evidenced in such remarks is certainly promising, it is hard to see what difference it has made in scholarly practice. As Rita Felski notes, "context has often been queried in literary studies, whether we think of the Russian formalist case for the autonomy of literary form or Gadamer's insistence that the work of art is never just a historical artifact.…And yet these arguments have had little success in halting the tsunami of context-based criticism."[346] This is certainly true of Sanskrit literary studies, where passing acknowledgments of the literary work's tendency to transcend the moment, or of our inability to do so, haven't had much of an impact on the actual shape of scholarship. I share David Shulman and V. Narayana Rao's sense that "the very notion that one might be able to characterize a poet's oeuvre stylistically and thematically…seems exotic to the field."[347] Rather than offer original readings of literary works, scholars report those of others, much as I have done in this dissertation. We study past readers' presentist interpretations while maintaining for ourselves an ironic distance from the messy business of reading. Is there not a way of writing about literature that would depart from this model of academic irony, but that wouldn't at the same time fall into the traps of text-twisting and anachronism, or of "naïve reading, sentimental effusion, impressionistic judgment, fuzzy-headed amateurism, and mere 'chatter about Shelley'"?[348]

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345 Richard H. Davis, *The Bhagavad Gita: A Biography* (Princeton University Press, 2014), 210.

346 Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (University of Chicago Press, 2015), 152.

347 Velcheru Narayana Rao and David Shulman, *Srinatha: The Poet Who Made Gods and Kings* (Oxford University Press, USA, 2012), ix.

348 Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, 151.

2. Poetry's Afterthought: A Practice of Literary Criticism

Despite the various and complex arguments which have been made against presentist reading, many of them seem to be grounded in one or two of the following assumptions:

1) *Presentist reading serves agendas*; that is, it generally takes the form of repurposing or "using" texts.
2) *Presentist reading is naïve*; that is, its obliviousness to historical context results in anachronism or some regrettable form of miscontextualism.

It is true that agenda-driven and anachronistic readings aren't just possible but common, as many of the history-of-reading studies listed above have convincingly shown. What I am less certain about, however, is whether all instances of presentist reading are reducible to these scenarios. I am reminded here of the remarkable moment in *Abhijñānaśākuntala* which for Kuntaka "shines out as a cause of delight to sensitive readers" (as we saw earlier), and which Abhinavagupta also remembers when formulating his phenomenology of reading.[349] Recall that Act 5 of Kalidasa's play opens with Dushyanta encountering a poem sung by Hamsapadika, a woman of his palace with whom he has been amorously involved:

Bee! After kissing the mango-blossom
like that, panting for its fresh honey,
how could you now have forgotten it,
resting at ease inside a mere lotus?[350]

Here is how Dushyanta experiences the song:

Dushyanta: (*To himself*) Hearing a song with such a meaning, though not far from anyone I love, why am I suddenly filled with sorrow?

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[349] See Sheldon Pollock, *A Rasa Reader: Classical Indian Aesthetics* (Columbia University Press, 2016), 195.

[350] ahiṇavamahuloluvo tumaṃ taha paricumbia cūamaṅjarīm |
kamalavasaimettaṇivvudo mahuara vimhario si ṇaṃ kahaṃ || *A* 5.1 ||
(*Skt. chāyā*: abhinavamadhulolupas tvam tathā paricumbya cūtamañjarīm |
kamalavasatimātranirvṛto madhukara vismṛto 'sy enām katham ||)

> When even a happy man is disturbed
> on seeing visions beautiful, and hearing sweet words,
> perhaps then he remembers with his soul,
> though not his wakeful mind, affections
> of another birth rooted in the heart.[351]

What Kalidasa shows us here is a mind confronting its powerlessness to fully know itself. Hamsapadika's song affects Dushyanta viscerally, as a disturbance that he must suffer without being able to know directly. To account for this disturbance, he therefore infers the presence of latent memories from a past life, of "affections" or attachments that have stuck to his soul like residues. It is possible to read Dushyanta's line of thought here as an exercise in deductive reasoning: *(1) in order to be moved by this poem about a bee, one needs to have had a relatable experience; (2) I can't remember any such experience in my life; (3) therefore, I must have had one in a past life*. However, if we consider the events leading up to this moment, it seems more likely that the urgency driving Dushyanta's thoughts is greater than the mere perplexity of a logical problem. Dushyanta has abandoned Shakuntala, whom he married and impregnated on a recent hunting expedition, and while his conscious mind has forgotten her thanks to sage Durvasa's curse, the sorrow he feels points to a kind of unconscious remembering—a purely affective remembering, perhaps, devoid of any notional content. However we wish to understand the complex workings of Dushyanta's memory, it is at least clear that he feels that this song about flowers and a bee somehow pertains to him personally ("why am *I* suddenly filled with sorrow?"), that it somehow implicates him, and he is deeply unsettled by this feeling. I thus read Dushyanta's theory of past

[351] Rājā (ātmagatam): kiṃ nu khalu gītam evaṃvidhārtham ākarṇyeṣṭajanavirahād ṛte'pi balād utkaṇṭhito'smi | athavā |
ramyāṇi vīkṣya madhurāṁśca niśamya śabdān
paryutsuko bhavati yatsukhito'pi jantuḥ |
taccetasā smarati nūnam abodhapūrvaṃ
bhāvasthirāṇi jananāntarasauhṛdāni || 5.2 ||

lives as prompted not by the philosopher's compulsion to explain but by an accused man's instinct to clear his conscience: the poem seems to call him guilty—of what, he does not know—and he tries to soothe himself by explaining away the guilt with a wild speculation (which, whatever its general interest, will turn out to be false in Dushyanta's case).

Dushyanta's example reveals that when we encounter a text, we bring to it not only our conscious mind—the part of us that wills, makes decisions, draws up plans for the future, etc.—but also latent parts of ourselves, such as memories we haven't thought about for years, or desires that are too embarrassing or inconvenient to face directly. Because a text has the potential to access these latent parts of me, I cannot assume that I will be able to *use* it in the same way I use a tool—that is, as a temporary extension of myself that will leave me fundamentally unaltered. For just as readers are capable of using texts to suit their agendas, texts are capable of influencing readers (and indeed of changing their agendas, as we will find in a later example). Or to put it in Pollock's language, any text that is present "to my own subjectivity" has the potential to alter that subjectivity in unforeseeable ways. Even so, while Dushyanta can't be said to have used Hamsapadika's poem in any way, it is possible that he hasn't understood it properly. Dushyanta may *feel* addressed by the poem, but couldn't that feeling be misguided? And more generally, while any text we encounter by chance—that we overhear in a palace, receive as a gift, find on a class syllabus—may have significant consequences for our thinking, might these consequences not be accidental?

The concern here is that once a poem falls on unintended ears, or under unintended eyes, it no longer speaks the way it originally did, and to understand it how it *seems* to speak could lead to error. Concerning Hamsapadika's song, Kalidasa tells us close to nothing about the circumstances of its composition. It is possible Hamsapadika didn't compose the poem with Dushyanta in mind (if she composed it at all), even possible that she wasn't aware Dushyanta was

listening in as she practiced her music. In that case, any effect that the poem has had on Dushyanta would be unintended. Let us suppose, then, that Hamsapadika very much intended for the poem to fall on Dushyanta's ears and communicate a veiled reproach. Dushyanta would then be right in speculating as he does with Madhavya, right before his private experience of inexplicable sorrow:

> Madhavya: You understood, then, the meaning of the song's words?
> Dushyanta: (*Putting on a smile*) This is someone I once made love to, and so she is harshly reproaching me for what I did with Queen Vasumati. My friend, Madhavya, let Hamsapadika be answered with this word from me, that she has reproached me well.[352]

However, even supposing that Dushyanta is right about Hamsapadika's intention here, we are left wondering about the pang of sorrow that archives, in however garbled a manner, his abandonment of Shakuntala. Hamsapadika couldn't possibly have meant for the song to provoke that response, since at this point in the play the only person in the palace who has even heard of Shakuntala is Madhavya. And Dushyanta lied to him earlier about how much he loves Shakuntala in order to ensure that he wouldn't blab: "How could I be interested in someone who knows nothing about love, who grew up with deer! My friend, don't take seriously the words I spoke in jest."[353] All this suggests that the effect of Hamsapadika's song on Dushyanta is completely unintended. What are we to make of this kind of unintended effect?

Let us consider a situation where the circumstances of composition are better known. Suppose you received a love letter addressed to someone else and, failing to read the envelope,

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[352] vidūṣakaḥ—kiṃ dāva gīdāe avagao akkharattho |
(*Skt. chāyā*: vidūṣakaḥ—kiṃ tāvad gītyā avagato'kṣarārthaḥ |)
rājā—(smitaṃ kṛtvā |) sakṛtkṛtapraṇayo'yaṃ janaḥ | tad asyā devīṃ vasumatīm antareṇa mahadupālambhanaṃ gato'smi | sakhe mādhavya madvacanād ucyatāṃ haṃsapadikā | nipuṇam upālabdhāḥ sma iti | (Kālidāsa, *Abhijñānaśākuntala (The Abhijñānaśākuntalam of Kālidāsa)*, 160.)

[353] kva vayaṃ kva parokṣamanmatho mṛgaśāvaiḥ samam edhito janaḥ |
parihāsavijalpitaṃ sakhe paramārthena na gṛhyatāṃ vacaḥ || *A* 2.18 ||

took it to pertain to yourself. While reading the letter this way would certainly have major consequences for your thinking, your failure to grasp its original context would involve a serious error that may well lead to embarrassment and even heartbreak. Kalidasa imagines a comparable scenario in Act 2 of *Vikramorvaśīya*, where Urvashi authors the following love poem intended solely for the eyes of Pururavas:

> *Lord, you do not know my mind;*
> *but if I really felt about you who love me*
> *the way you think I feel,*
>
> *then why do even breezes from heaven's grove*
> *scorch my body as it lies*
> *on a bed of crushed coral flowers?*[354]

Soon after Pururavas reads the poem, the wind blows it into the hands of his queen Aushinari and her servant Nipunika. But when Nipunika reads it, her first instinct is not to understand the poem as though it were addressed to her personally (it is particularly difficult to do that here, since the title "lord" doesn't suit her in either gender or rank) but rather to return the letter to its original circuit of communication: "I suspect this is a poetic composition of Urvashi addressed to our lord, and that it fell into our hands through the carelessness of noble Manavaka."[355] Nipunika's instinct

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[354] sāmia saṃbhāviā jaha ahaṃ tue amuṇiā |
taha aṇurattassa jai ṇāma tuha uvari || *VŪ* 12 ||
ṇaṃ me luliapārijāasaaṇijjayammi honti |
ṇandaṇavaṇavādāi accuṇhaā sarīrae || *VŪ* 13 |
(*Skt. chāyā*: svāmin saṃbhāvitā yathāhaṃ tvayā'jñātā |
tathānuraktasya yadi nāma tavopari ||
nanu mama lulitapārijātaśayanīye bhavanti |
nandanavanavātā apy atyuṣṇakāḥ śarīrake ||)

[355] bhaṭṭāraṃ uddisia uvvasīe kavvabandhotti takkemi | ajjamāṇavaappamādeṇa amhāṇaṃ hatthaṃ gadotti |
(*Skt. chāyā*: bhartāram uddiśyorvaśyāḥ kāvyabandha iti tarkayāmi | āryamāṇavakapramādenāvayor hastaṃ gata iti |) Kālidāsa, *Vikramorvaśīya (The Vikramorvaśīyam of Kālidāsa)*, 126.)

to contextualize the poem serves her well, yielding the upsetting but crucial knowledge that Pururavas has been unfaithful to Aushinari. But let us say that just now, as I read this particular poem of Urvashi, I *do* feel addressed by it. I obviously don't mean that I believe I am on the receiving end of a speech act; I am aware that the author is Urvashi, who is professing her love to Pururavas and not to me. I nonetheless find that the poem pertains directly to my experience of the world, not only giving language to earlier thoughts in me that have gone unregistered but also urging me to ask unprecedented questions of myself. Now, for instance, it reminds me how difficult it is to know another's mind, and how acutely this difficulty is felt when we most desire that knowledge; I also find myself asking "What is it to feel cool wind as fire?", a question that may stay with me and thus alter my attunement to the world. How do such ways of feeling addressed by the poem relate to the original circumstances in which Urvashi composed it?

In considering these poems of Hamsapadika and Urvashi, two distinct ways of meaning have come into view: a poem might be read as a coded statement intended to convey a message, and whose codedness may be attributed to any number of causes (playfulness, bashfulness, propriety, irony, convention, discretion, protection…); alternatively, a poem might be read, quite apart from any message-like content, as a provocation, where what is provoked in us could be any number of things (an untouched memory, an untapped desire, a strange thought, an uneasy sensation, an unprecedented question, a new style of narrating one's life, a new way of imagining another's mind…). In distinguishing a poem's coding capacity from its provocative power, I am riffing on a similar distinction that Abhinavagupta makes, following Anandavardhana, between *content-suggestion* and *affect-suggestion*, or *laukikadhvani* (lit. "ordinary suggestion") and

rasadhvani, concepts for two different ways that words can indirectly yield meaning.[356] The distinguishing feature of content-suggestion, and what urges me to translate *laukikadhvani* this way, is that "it always replaces the direct expression of a meaning; a meaning, moreover, which has the form of a command, a prohibition, or a number of other such forms, and so is called *content*."[357] In other words, content-suggestion points to that aspect of poems or utterances that may be decoded, paraphrased, or translated into plainer language (the way Dushyanta paraphrases the bee-poem simply as "Hamsapadika is reproaching me," or how we may translate Urvashi's poem as "I love you too"). In distinction, "an affect (*rasa*)…is something that even in one's dreams couldn't be expressed directly and doesn't involve ordinary speech."[358] If an affect doesn't lend itself to direct expression, it isn't because it is an ineffable content, something for which one tries to find the right word-representations but somehow always comes up short. Rather, the very idea of *expressing* affects is misguided—inconceivable "even in one's dreams"—because affects have little to do with content, representation, coding, or messaging. The temptation to speak of expressing affects, even to ask whether affects might be expressed, understandably comes from the fact that an affect is generated by words (and in this sense alone constitutes an *artha* or "meaning"). But only that which counts as content may be expressed. An affect cannot be expressed by words; it can only be *provoked*, or *induced*, or *suggested* by them, through "the

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[356] Abhinavagupta's category of "ordinary suggestion" subsumes the more familiar categories of "ornament suggestion" (*alaṅkāradhvani*) and "content-suggestion" (*vastudhvani*) (or more precisely "mere content-suggestion," *vastumātradhvani*).

[357] laukiko yaḥ svaśabdavācyatām kadācid adhiśete | sa ca vidhiniṣedhādyanekaprakāro vastuśabdena ucyate | (Ānandavardhana and Abhinavagupta, *Dhvanyālokalocana: Kerala Commentaries*, 1:200, commentary on 1.4.)

[358] yas tu svapne'pi na svaśabdavācyo na laukikavyavahārapatitaḥ … rasaḥ | (Ibid., 1:200–201.)

kindling of previously deposited memory-traces (latent desire, for instance) that correspond with the stimulant factors and indicators" gathered in a poem—stimulant factors such as the breeze and flowers, and indicators of mental states such as tossing and turning.[359]

Like *affect-suggestion*, *provocative power* also refers to a poem's ability to provoke instinctive responses in the mind that receives it. What distinguishes the concept I am proposing is that it accommodates a broader range of experiences of being provoked, not just that specific variety of literary sympathy known as *rasa*. Thus, for instance, when Stanley Cavell witnesses Lear's perplexing rage at his daughter's refusal to profess her love for him publicly—perplexing because at first it strikes Cavell as disproportionate to its cause—he is prompted to consider the power of shame, which often lies at the root of apparently inexplicable behavior, kicking up distractions when what we are ashamed of is in danger of being exposed. What Lear is ashamed of, and what Cordelia's silence threatens to expose, is his terror of genuine love—that is, the kind of love that needs no public protestations: "for some spirits, to be loved knowing you cannot return that love, is the most radical of psychic tortures."[360] *King Lear* shows Cavell how our understanding of love is shaped by the ways we've learned to accept it or hide from it, and how the tension between the acceptance and avoidance of love can grow to be intolerable:

> Our lives begin by having to accept under the name of love whatever closeness is offered, and by then having to forgo its object. And the avoidance of a particular love, or the acceptance of it, will spread to every other; every love, in acceptance or rejection, is mirrored in every other. It is part of the miracle of the vision in *King Lear* to bring this before us, so that we do not care whether the *kind* of love between [Lear and Cordelia] is forbidden according to man's lights. We care whether love is or is not altogether forbidden to man, whether we may not altogether be incapable of it, of admitting it into our world. We wonder whether we may always go mad

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[359] -vibhāvānubhāvasamucitaprāgviniviṣṭaratyādivāsanānurāga- | (Ibid., 1:200–201.)

[360] Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?: A Book of Essays* (Cambridge University Press, 2015), 266.

> between the equal efforts and terrors at once of rejecting and of accepting love. The soul torn between them, the body feels torn…, and the solution to this insoluble condition is to wish for the tearing apart of the world.[361]

In a very different approach to *King Lear*, James Shapiro situates the play in England of the early seventeenth century, when "no domestic or foreign issue would more deeply preoccupy James and his subjects…than the Union of Scotland and England."[362] Understood in this context, Shakespeare's play, which begins with Lear's division of the kingdom among his three daughters and ends disastrously, appears to convey a political message (however challenging this may be to work out clearly), since "for Jacobeans inundated by pageantry, polemic, and gossip about the proposed Union, any play that turned to Britain's distant past to explore the consequences of a divided kingdom would have been seen as part of [the Union debate]."[363] What Kalidasa so clearly shows us in *Abhijñānaśākuntala* is that the approaches adopted by Cavell and Shapiro do not exclude one another, even from the same mind. For when Dushyanta tries to return Hamsapadika's poem to its original context in his comment to Madhavya, he does so in order to apprehend its message correctly; however, that contextualization doesn't stop him from being confronted immediately afterwards by the poem's provocative power, from being shocked into inexplicable sorrow. The crucial difference between these approaches lies in the kind of knowledge each one yields. I take it that the stakes of contextualist reading require little clarification, given its prevalence as an approach; in what follows, I will therefore try to specify, with the help of writers from a range of traditions, the kind of knowledge yielded by attending to a work's provocative

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[361] Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?*, 276.

[362] James Shapiro, *1606: Shakespeare and the Year of Lear* (Faber & Faber, 2016), 41.

[363] Ibid., 46.

power.[364]

Even to see that such attention yields knowledge, not just a sensation of delight or shock which we wouldn't be wrong but vague to call aesthetic pleasure, demands that we take seriously the experience of being provoked by a text. It asks that we momentarily suspend the image of reading as clue-finding, the idea that a text is a code and the reader a detective; it asks, as Marielle Macé puts it, that we withdraw "from semiotic analyses (which arose following Umberto Eco's *Lector in fabula*) and from the narratological vision of reading," since "both of these describe the reader's task as a deciphering process, …as a question of filling in blanks and omissions in the text, a performance staged inside a communication structure."[365] We should temporarily weaken this powerful image of reading not because it is objectionable in itself—indeed, we found admirable examples of it in parts of Aurobindo's reading of Kalidasa—but lest, on account of it, we pass over (or at best acknowledge while failing to understand fully) the range of experiences of reading that don't occur as the reflective act of decoding. In his improvised theory of aesthetic experience, Dushyanta offers one explanation for why such experiences are particularly difficult to grasp: "perhaps [the reader] remembers with his soul (*cetas*), though not his wakeful mind, affections of another birth rooted in the heart." I wish to take this speculation as my starting-point for trying to understand what it is to encounter a work's provocative power.

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[364] The reason I feel justified in adopting Kalidasa as my theorist here is that Dushyanta, Nipunika, and Shapiro all share the instinct to contextualize. It is true that Shapiro does not boil *King Lear* down to an unambiguous message like the other two readers; if that difference appears significant, the scene I examine below from Bhavabhuti's *Uttararāmacarita* may offer a more satisfying example to think with.

[365] Marielle Macé, "Ways of Reading, Modes of Being," trans. Marlon Jones, *New Literary History* 44, no. 2 (August 8, 2013): 224. For an in-depth analysis of the gripping image of critic-as-detective, see chapter 3, "An Inspector Calls," in Felski, *The Limits of Critique*.

On Dushyanta's account, aesthetic experience is inherently stubborn to analysis because it involves an unconscious domain of thinking called *cetas* (very loosely translated above as "soul"), whose workings are by definition opaque to reflection and which for Abhinavagupta is populated by memory-traces (*vāsanā*s). As we saw in the previous chapter, Aurobindo is also interested in this unconscious region of the mind, calling it by the cognate word *citta*:

> The reservoir of past mental impressions, the *citta* or storehouse of memory, which must be distinguished from the specific act of memory, is the foundation on which all the other layers stand. All experience lies within us as passive or potential memory; active memory selects and takes what it requires from that storehouse. But the active memory is like a man searching among a great mass of locked-up material: sometimes he cannot find what he wants; often in his rapid search he stumbles across many things for which he has no immediate need; often too he blunders and thinks he has found the real thing when it is something else, irrelevant if not valueless, on which he has laid his hand.[366]

I am inclined to read this passage as a kind of unintended gloss on Dushyanta's words, and to identify Dushyanta—or more precisely his conscious or "wakeful" self—with the man who searches in vain. We could then redescribe his situation in terms of the passage as follows: Dushyanta has been alerted by the poem to an unfamiliar presence in his passive memory, but when he searches for it (perhaps asking himself, *did I ever abandon someone I loved?*), he ends up fumbling around in a storehouse of memories, most of which are locked away. This disorienting experience leads him to surmise (at this point going beyond Aurobindo's text) that these locked-away memories must have gotten there in a past life, and that while he cannot fully know them, he can sometimes feel their presence when they vibrate at the prompting of artworks like Hamsapadika's poem.

I find that the link which Dushyanta draws between literature and the unconscious is

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[366] Sri Aurobindo, *Early Cultural Writings*, 386.

usefully developed in Macé's essay "Ways of Reading, Modes of Being." While Macé doesn't write of past lives, she does share Dushyanta's general presumption of a complex unconscious, conceiving of it broadly as an assemblage of latent elements that silently structure daily life:

> Our mental and social life is indeed made up of the "traces" and "intentions" of form, of effective memories and desires, which exert their plastic force (modifying its object without breaking it) on the situations and apparatuses of daily life, modulating our living configurations, our forms of perception and attention, or our entire vision of the world.[367]

Each person's unique style of entering everyday situations—the way one's mind immediately picks out certain elements in a perceptual field while allowing others to fall away, responds well or poorly to a particular kind of humor, determines its threshold of fear for striking up conversation with a stranger, and so on—is conditioned prior to any willful decision-making by an underlying field of memories and desires, which are "effective" because, once activated, they have the potential to alter that style (imagine, for instance, how being reminded for the first time of a pleasant encounter that took place several years ago might suddenly boost one's courage in a social situation today). All this rich subterranean life may come alive as we encounter various styles of perceiving, feeling, and acting recorded in a literary work. For Macé, "reading thus represents an opportunity to test out ways of being, attitudes, rhythms through which books affect, affirm, or disorient readers along with their gestures and tendencies, their ways of perceiving and paying attention."[368] It may comfort or upset me to identify with a speaker who feels the sadness I remember feeling last year, or a sadness I don't remember feeling but somehow find myself taking on; a narrator's mode of perception in describing a mountain may stun me as it makes available a

[367] Macé, "Ways of Reading, Modes of Being," 217.

[368] Ibid., 224.

new style of noticing the world; faced with a character's cruelty I may feel disturbed, struggling to distinguish myself from what I see. These are among the many possible ways of being provoked by a work; "the crucial point to understand is the way that readers from different points of origin come to take texts as samples of existence, using them as real lines of movement in life."[369] We see here how Macé shares Dushyanta's intuition about a special rapport that literature has with the unconscious; however, whereas Dushyanta merely stumbles upon this intuition in a chance encounter, Macé is interested in how readers use it to their advantage, reading texts in order to access parts of themselves that are not directly available.

It is precisely this capacity of texts to serve as "real lines of movement" that Ralph Waldo Emerson seizes on for its radical disruptive potential, valuing literature for the resources it offers for recomposing the present: "The use of literature is to afford us a platform whence we may command a view of our present life, a purchase by which we may move it." For Emerson, moving life is an immensely difficult task because our everyday existence is trapped in a prison of habits, whose grip on us is strongest when we most think we are free. Even when we consciously try, we feel powerless to bring about any real transformation of life from within it:

> In my daily work I incline to repeat my old steps, and do not believe in remedial force, in the power of change and reform. But some Petrarch or Ariosto, filled with the new wine of his imagination, writes me an ode or a brisk romance, full of daring thought and action. He smites and arouses me with his shrill tones, breaks up my whole chain of habits, and I open my eye on my own possibilities.[370]

In this passage, poems are characterized neither as vessels containing universal truths that must be experienced to be fully understood nor as aesthetic pieces to be consumed for restful pleasure.

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[369] Ibid., 217.

[370] Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Circles," in *Essays and Lectures* (Library of America, 1983), 409.

Rather, they present series of "arousing" provocations which can destroy the reader's current habits of mind at the same time as they create a new sense of what is possible. In Bhavabhuti's *Mālatīmādhava* ("Malati and Madhava"), the Buddhist nun Kamandaki (who is perhaps another reader of Kalidasa) seems to share this view of literature as she works behind the scenes to alter the lives of her dear ones. When Lavangika asks for help on behalf of her friend Malati, who has been betrothed by her father to the king's minister instead of the man she loves, here is how Kamandaki responds:

> Simple girl, what do you suppose I can do about it? Fathers and fate are all-powerful in the lives of young women. And what the storytellers say, that Vishvamitra's daughter Shakuntala loved Dushyanta, just as the nymph Urvashi loved Pururavas, and that Vasavadatta, who had been betrothed by her father to King Sanjaya, gave herself to Udayana—I could go on—all that seems terribly rash, and I certainly don't endorse doing what they did.[371]

In the soliloquy that concludes Act 2, Kamandaki reveals her intention behind listing these famous stories of rebellious love: "by spewing out those tales of old, I have indicated the path she must take."[372] Kamandaki shows here an intuitive grasp of the provocative potential of stories, even believing it will remain unblunted by her feigned disapproval of the ones she mentions. I nonetheless imagine Kamandaki to wait a few seconds before saying "all that seems terribly rash," allowing a pause for Malati's contemplation of the "daring thought and action" of Vasavadatta to start taking effect and transforming her sense of the possible.

This idea of literature's provocative power, which I have so far been trying to develop

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[371] ayi sarale kim atra mayā bhagavatyā śakyam | prabhavati prāyaḥ kumārīṇāṃ janayitā daivaṃ ca | yac ca kila kauśikī śakuntalā duṣyantam apsarā urvaśī purūravasam cakama ityākhyānavida ācakṣate vāsavadattā ca saṃjayāya rājñe pitrā dattam ātmānam udayanāya prāyacchad ityādi tad api sāhasābhāsam ity anupadeṣṭavya evāyam arthaḥ | (Bhavabhūti, *Mālatīmādhava (Bhavabhūti's Mālatīmādhava with the Commentary of Jagaddhara)*, ed. M. R. Kale (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1967), 56–57.)

[372] purāvṛttodgārair [api ca] kathitā kāryapadavī || *MM* 2.13 ||

along different lines through the writings of Kalidasa, Abhinavagupta, Macé, Emerson, and Bhavabhuti, has in fact already turned up in the experiences of reading examined in this dissertation. I have at no point wanted to suggest that Kalidasa was the greatest influence in the thinking of Kuntaka, Vedantadesika, or Aurobindo, nor that these readers were free of any agendas; indeed, in each reader's time, the very name of Kalidasa had a cultural prominence that could have made using his works somehow advantageous, whether for establishing a theory of poetry, popularizing a religious view, or consolidating a national identity. What I have rather been arguing is that the more common arguments encountered in reception studies—that later readers of texts read meanings into them, or strategically used their charisma in the service of some cause—have only a limited explanatory power in the cases of reading I have examined. This limitation is particularly evident when we consider how each reader responds to Kalidasa's descriptive style, encountering it as a provocation that opens up a new way of perceiving. Kuntaka remarks on it directly, comparing Kalidasa's fine-grained and delighted attention to things to that of honey-crazed bees hovering close to flowers; we gather its influence on Vedantadesika from the Kalidasan images and expressions scattered throughout his poetry, which I argued should be understood as part of Vedantadesika's cultivation of a practice of intense visualization; and Aurobindo is explicit about its effect on readers: "[Kalidasa's] creations in fact live in a peculiar light…. Our vision is affected by the recognition of something concealed by the sunbeams & yet the cause of the sunbeams; but it is plain human sunlight we see always."[373] (The mode of perception that generates Kalidasa's style also strikes Thoreau, whose recollection of pollen dropping from the pitch-pines on Walden Pond in early May mingles in the passive memory with

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[373] Sri Aurobindo, *Kalidasa: Essays and Translations*, 66.

a Kalidasan image: “Even in Calidas’ drama of Sacontala, we read of ‘rills dyed yellow with the golden dust of the lotus.’”[374])

How each reader encounters Kalidasa’s characters is slightly more challenging to understand, but also more illuminating on the difference that a concept like provocative power could make in our understanding of a text’s reception. When Kuntaka reads of a king who gives more of his wealth than was requested, he finds a model for ideal conduct; when Vedantadesika reads of a man imagining his distant beloved in vivid detail, he sees an exercise of the imagination which closely resembles what is involved in devotional meditation; when Aurobindo reads of a mortal trying to bring to earth the goddess with whom he has fallen in love, he finds a figure for the political revolutionary. There is a temptation to regard such instances of reading (especially the last two) with skepticism, as examples of readers finding in texts the meanings they want to see, even meanings which aren’t already there. For if Kalidasa showed little interest in devotional meditation, and couldn’t possibly have known about revolutionary politics, how could his poetry have anything to say on those topics? Such a line of thinking seems to presume that meaning inheres in a text like content in a container, or like treasure in a locked-up chest. On this understanding, a multiplicity of meanings will always be met somewhat uneasily, at worst considered an outcome to be avoided, at best a result to be tolerated if only for its empirical inevitability. However, if we understand the phenomenon of meaning in view of a work’s provocative power—that is, if we attend to the meaning which isn’t located *in* a text but born of a text’s encounter with the mind—unintended and multiple meanings would no longer signal a lack of rigor or interpretive foul play. As Martin Heidegger usefully puts it in a different context,

[374] Henry David Thoreau, *A Week, Walden, The Maine Woods, Cape Cod* (Library of America, 1985), 576.

> A dialogue of Plato…can be interpreted in totally different spheres and respects, according to totally different implications and problematics. This multiplicity of possible interpretations does not discredit the strictness of the thought content. …A dialogue of Plato is inexhaustible—not only for posterity and the changing forms of comprehension to which posterity gives rise; it is inexhaustible of itself, by its nature.[375]

A local question or set of questions (e.g., "How should one act?" "How shall I meditate on god?" "What is it to be a revolutionary?" or "Why can words written centuries ago still be meaningful today?") may hollow out the specific receptivity of a reader's mind, the narrow groove along which any work will be constrained to enter it; but a poem by Kalidasa will fill that groove in its own surprising way, yielding an answering thought that it alone could have provoked. The potential of a text to generate multiple meanings should thus be attributed not only to the shifting empirical circumstances in which it is read but also to its very nature.

Even when a work of literature is understood this way—as a provocation rather than as a univocal bearer of content—it is still possible to speak of intended meanings, which would no longer refer to messages restored to their original circuits of communication but to intended effects. We saw how Kamandaki intends for the stories of Shakuntala, Urvashi, and Vasavadatta to have a specific influence on Malati's sense of the possible, just as Kuntaka wishes that Kalidasa's depictions of ideal conduct will help shape the moral impulses of princes and courtiers. Bhavabhuti imagines a more elaborate instance of this kind of intention in Act 7 of *Uttararāmacarita* ("Rama's Last Act"), where he shows us a play by Valmiki being performed for Rama. When Rama learns from it what has happened to Sita after he banished her, he is so overwhelmed by guilt and grief that he faints, prompting Lakshmana to call out, "Lord Valmiki, help! Help! Is this the meaning

[375] Martin Heidegger, *What Is Called Thinking?* (Harper Collins, 1976), 71–72.

(*artha*) of your poem?"[376] It is possible to read this line as though it were spoken by Bhavabhuti through the mouth of Lakshmana. Reading it this way, Pollock sees it as one of several instances in the play where Bhavabhuti interrupts the audience's suspension of disbelief, directing their attention away from the lives of characters and towards his own activity as a poet (which in this case consists in rewriting the ending of the real Valmiki's *Rāmāyaṇa*).[377] While I acknowledge the level of meaning to which such a reading is attuned, for now I would like simply to read the line in its immediate fictional context, taking it as the genuine expression of Lakshmana's mind. The question "Is this the meaning of your poem?" would then be addressed to Valmiki in panic over Rama's fainting, and would mean as much as "Is this the intention (*artha*) of your poem?" or more explicitly "Is fainting the effect you intended your poem to have on Rama?" In place of an answer, Valmiki initiates a sequence of events culminating in the revival of Rama by Sita's touch, which I read as his implicit response to Lakshmana: *No; what I ultimately intended to bring about with my poem was their reunion*. Here Bhavabhuti would seem to suggest that Valmiki's play does have a specific intended meaning, which could be recovered by interviewing the author or paying close attention to the original performance context.

But since, as we learn from Lakshmana, Valmiki has invited all beings in the universe to the event, it is possible to imagine another member in the audience, perhaps one of the citizens of

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[376] bhagavan vālmīke, paritrāyasva, paritrāyasva | eṣa kiṃ te kāvyārthaḥ | (Bhavabhūti, *Uttararāmacarita (The Uttararāmacarita of Bhavabhūti)*, ed. M. R. Kale (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1934), 173.)

[377] Bhavabhūti, *Uttararāmacarita (Rama's Last Act)*, trans. Sheldon Pollock (NYU Press and the JCC Foundation, 2007), 41.

Ayodhya who was involved in spreading rumors about Sita's unfaithfulness.[378] Let us say that on seeing depicted the consequences of Rama's cruelty, this citizen doesn't just feel compunction for his own role in her banishment but starts seeing Rama, once spotless in his eyes, as a coward. What could we conclude about his experience of the play? Most likely Valmiki didn't intend this effect, at least not in the way he intended for the play to incline Rama to take Sita back. At the same time, supposing that this citizen of Ayodhya has heard the same words of the play that Rama has heard, and seen the same gestures and expressions, we couldn't quite say that his response is grounded in error. For what Valmiki's play has imparted more than true or false information is a sense of life; or more accurately, it has provoked in the unintended viewer an altered sense of life. It is always a potential of a literary work to provoke the mind that receives it; even for the same reader, how a work does this will vary depending on when it is taken up. That is one reason why the meaning of a literary work is inexhaustible: it makes at least as many provocations as the number of times it is read. (As an instance of aesthetic experience, Rama's witnessing the dramatization of his own story may seem more exceptional than exemplary, since identifying with oneself isn't as drastic a movement of the imagination as identifying with a genuinely fictional character. However, I take Bhavabhuti to be showing us an extreme version of the experience of identification. For when Dushyanta hears of the treacherous bee, as perhaps when Claudius sees Lucianus in *The Murder of Gonzago*, he is overwhelmed by the same suspicion that occurs to Rama: *Is that really how I behaved?*)

Poets themselves often anticipate, or in any case desire, that unintended readers will encounter their works. This seems true of Bhavabhuti, whom the director in *Mālatīmādhava*

[378] Opening of Act 7: "By his power, Valmiki has assembled the whole group of beings." <vālmikinā…bhūtagrāmaḥ svaprabhāveṇa sannidhāpitaḥ |> Bhavabhūti, *Uttararāmacarita (The Uttararāmacarita of Bhavabhūti)*, 162.

famously quotes as saying the following:

> Those who give my work a bad reputation
> know something, I am sure. This labor is not for them.
> There will be born, or already exists, one who shares my nature;
> for time is endless and the earth is wide.[379]

In such statements, of which one could find numerous examples, writers show an awareness that their words may provoke minds they couldn't possibly have known or even imagined. The experience of feeling addressed by the words of an earlier poet would be one way to arrive at this intuition. Emerson goes so far as to suggest that the farther a work travels from its context, the greater its power to denaturalize the present:

> Literature is a point outside of our hodiernal circle through which a new one may be described.…We fill ourselves with ancient learning, install ourselves the best we can in Greek, in Punic, in Roman houses, only that we may wiselier see French, English and American houses and modes of living.[380]

Here again Emerson characterizes literature not as a theorist or critic but from the perspective of someone trying to think differently. The point of reading is not to produce more writing about literature—not to theorize the system of literature, write instructions for appreciating famous works, or get involved in debates on how best to understand this or that poem—but to be shocked into a different way of living. For Emerson, in other words, the prime result of reading will have been, not a new interpretation of a work, but a new interpretation of life.

And yet, perhaps counterintuitively, Emerson's remark suggests one idea of what a contemporary practice of literary criticism could be; namely, the articulation of how it is one has

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[379] ye nāma kecid iha naḥ prathayanty avajñāṃ
jānanti te kimapi tān prati naiṣa yatnaḥ |
utpatsyate'sti mama kopi samānadharmā
kālo hy ayaṃ niravadhir vipulā ca pṛthvī || *MM* 1.6 ||

[380] Emerson, "Circles," in *Essays and Lectures*, 408–9.

been shocked—or to put it in Emerson's language, a transcription of the "view of our present life" from the platform afforded by literature—in the hope that this articulation releases new possibilities into thinking and thus new ways of composing the present. Such a criticism would not take the form of judgment on a work; that is, it wouldn't primarily be interested in determining by whatever standard how well a work has been constructed, whether it succeeds in delivering aesthetic pleasure, or whether it once succeeded in delivering such pleasure to an original audience. Nor would it see literature as merely providing vivid illustrations of philosophical ideas, though it might put literary writers in conversation with philosophers (Cavell, for instance, wishes to deny the idea that the two essays on literature in his book *Must We Mean What We Say?*, those on *King Lear* and Samuel Beckett's *Endgame*, are "at best applications of philosophy, while the remainder are [at least closer to being] straight philosophy").[381] What this kind of criticism would instead seek to do is highlight the aspects of literary works which today are most thought-provoking, and elaborate the specific ways that these aspects call our attention to life and challenge habitual patterns of thinking.[382]

In describing the theoretical basis and practice of an alternative model for writing about Sanskrit literature, what I have in effect tried to do is outline an approach to criticism that would regard Sanskrit literary texts not just as aesthetic objects or cultural artifacts but as forms of thinking. I am not arguing, however, that formal and historical considerations have no place in

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[381] Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?*, xxx.

[382] This in fact seems to be an idea which more or less explicitly guides the work of many modern practitioners of literary criticism, including Walter Benjamin, Stanley Cavell, and Barbara Cassin, to name just three. However different these readers of literature are from each other (different in style, in the traditions and periods of writing they work on, in the questions that generate their philosophies), their approaches to criticism all take literary works primarily as provocations to thought. See Benjamin, *Walter Benjamin*; Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?*; Barbara Cassin, *Nostalgia: When Are We Ever at Home?* (Fordham University Press, 2016).

such an approach, since often it is with the help of such considerations that the provocative power of a work can be fully grasped. For example, the severity of Durvasa's rage in *Abhijñānaśākuntala* can be gauged only by understanding the codes of hospitality in the world of the poem, just as it is only through understanding the genre conventions and history of messenger-poetry that we can take in the full measure of Vedantadesika's thinking in *Haṃsasandeśa*. Nor do I wish to argue that attending to a work's provocative power is more important than understanding how a work operates at a formal level, or reconstructing how it once was read; indeed, the chapters of this dissertation were attempts at reconstructing how Kalidasa was read at different moments in history. A work of literature can tell us many things, and I have tried to bring one of these to light. My sense is that if we try reading Kalidasa a little differently than we are accustomed, we may find that he is addressing us as eloquently as he did readers of the past.

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