

# JOURNAL OF THE ORIENTAL INSTITUTE

M. S. UNIVERSITY OF BARODA, BARODA



Ekamukhalinga Śāmalāji  
( Gupta Period )

Photo courtesy : Dept. of Arch. & Ancient History, Baroda

*Edited by*  
S. G. Kantawala  
DIRECTOR,  
ORIENTAL INSTITUTE



Oriental Institute  
BARODA

Vol. XXXIII ]

March-June 1984

[ Nos. 3-4

ĀTMĀNAṂ MĀNUṢAṂ MANYE : DHARMĀKŪTAM ON THE  
DIVINITY OF RĀMA

By

SHELDON POLLOCK\*

Near the climax of the *Vālmiki Rāmāyaṇa*, when, after being freed from captivity, Sītā is forced to undergo the ordeal by fire in order to demonstrate her chastity, Brahmā and Śiva along with the *lokapālas* come before Rāma to remonstrate with him. "How can you watch indifferently while Sītā commits herself to the flames?" they ask incredulously. "Can you not know that you are the foremost among the hosts of gods? (VI.105.5). In point of narrative logic, the thrust of the question is not altogether clear. Presumably, as God Rāma would be omniscient, and thus have no need to ascertain the truth of his wife's protestations of fidelity; instead he is behaving "like the commonest of men" (VI.105.8). Be that as it may, the principal purpose, and effect, of the question is to lead into the climactic revelation of Rāma's divinity. First, however, the hero responds, thoroughly mystified: "I think of myself as a man, as Rāma, the son of Daśaratha. Blessed Brahmā, tell me who I really am, whose son, and where I come from" (VI.105.10)<sup>1</sup>.

Like so many other passages touching on the divinity of the hero of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the revelation scene has, in the West, been unequivocally and universally regarded as a late interpolation.<sup>2</sup> I do not intend here to take up again in detail the question of the authenticity of this deific representation. I have elsewhere attempted to show that it is not only not adventitious but constitutive of the monumental poem of Vālmiki (an attempt which the following pages may be taken to supplement in a modest way).<sup>3</sup> Nor do I want to address systematically the related issue of the text-critical validation of this and similar episodes. Besides the desultory comments in the body of this paper, I would for the moment

---

Journal of the Oriental Institute, Vol. 33, Nos. 3-4, pp. 231 to 243.

\* Department of Asian Languages and Literature, 314 Gilmore Hall, The University of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa-52242 (U.S.A.).

1 My translation, as are all the rest in this essay. The particular editions of Sanskrit texts (unless otherwise noted), and the abbreviations used to refer to them are those of the *Encyclopaedic Dictionary of Sanskrit* (Poona, 1976).

2 From at least as early as Muir ("..... this chapter, as it now stands, could not have formed part of the original Rāmāyaṇa" [ *Original Sanskrit Texts*, (London, 1874)], Vol. IV, p. 178), to, most recently, van Daalen (" (1) n 6.105 the gods call Rāma the foremost of the gods..... Rāma's divinity is obviously inconsistent with the concept of Rāma as a truly human hero; we can safely assume that Rāma was utterly human in the original Rāmāyaṇa" ( *Vālmiki's Sanskrit* (Leiden, 1980)), p. 139; cf. p. 190).

3 See my "The Divine King in the Indian Epic" *JAOS* 104.3, (1984).

simply note that here, as so often, the critical edition of the epic suggests a text-historical problem of considerably greater complexity than previously supposed, and a closer, virtually inextricable bond between a good number of the suspect passages and the “authentic” text.

What I wish instead to examine here is the traditional interpretation of this episode. In part, I view this as an exercise, interesting and valuable in its own right, in understanding the dynamics of literary response in medieval India. But more important, I believe this interpretation may reflect some trans-historically authentic attitudes, may address a set of concerns shared by the author of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, which can aid us in attaining a deeper appreciation of the poem. As anyone can attest who has worked extensively with the commentaries on the *Rāmāyaṇa* (or, for that matter, with those on any other culturally significant Sanskrit literary text), scholiasts will often show a stubborn, almost perverse predilection for the utterly improbable or impossible exegesis, and can seem thoroughly disingenuous in the process. And yet, with equal frequency they can explain the text in ways that elicit our immediate assent, which we are prepered to grant both for reasons of common sense and because we can recognize that their explanation often accounts for more, and is falsified by less, of the narrative than other interpretations.

By far the most elaborate commentary on Rāma’s confession of self-ignorance, and one which touches on the greater part of the issues traditionally discussed, is that of the recently published *Dharmākūṭam*<sup>4</sup>. The whole argument is of considerable interest, and before examining its specific points of value, I think it will prove helpful to translate the section in full<sup>5</sup>.

It might be objected that the surface meaning of this verse [VI.105.10]—namely, that Rāma is ignorant of his true nature and believes himself to be a man—makes no real sense. For Rāma is elsewhere shown to possess the knowledge that he is Viṣṇu. Compare the words of Brahmā [VI. 105.25]: “Sītā is Lakṣmī and you are the god Viṣṇu, Kṛṣṇa, Prajāpati; you took on a human body in order to slay Rāvaṇa”; similarly Durvāsa’s statement in explaining the curse of Bhṛṅgu: “In a towering rage he cursed the mighty Viṣṇu, saying, ‘Since in anger you slew my wife, who was inviolable, Janārdana, you shall be born

4 This is in fact a series of veritable treatises on *dharma* and related matters in the *Rāmāyaṇa*. It was written by one Tryambaka Makhin, minister at the court of the Tanjore king Serfoji I (1711-1728), and a very well-read man indeed, from whom I have learned a great deal. The volume on the *Yuddhakāṇḍa* was edited by K. Vasudeva Sastri (Srirangam, 1964; Tanjore Saraswathi Mahal Series, No. 111).

5 Pp. 339-345. All references are here keyed to the critical edition of the poem. Brackets alone (and not parentheses) enclose material not in the text (with the obvious exception of Sanskrit words). Later references to the vulgate are made to the Venkatesvara Press edition of the *Rāmāyaṇa* (Bombay, 1935), unless otherwise noted.

into the world of men” [VII. App. I No. 7-9] : and finally the statements in Book I, where the gods first implore Viṣṇu, “We would lay a charge upon you, Viṣṇu, with the best interests of the world at heart” [I. 14.17], and the Supreme God then is said to “chose as his father Daśaratha” [I. 15.7]. In view of this fact it is unreasonable to hold that the omniscient Lord, who himself rules over the power of nescience [*māyā*], could be subject to ignorance regarding his true nature [read *svarūpāvāra-kājñāna*]. Moreover, he is elsewhere informed that in his true nature he is the Supreme Self, by Paraśurāma, for example, in I [75.17] (“I know, by your stringing this bow, that you are the supreme god among gods, the imperishable slayer of Madhu. Hail, slayer of foes”), and by Lakṣmaṇa when comforting him in his grief over the loss of the magical figure of Sītā (“Do you not understand who you are, great brother, the Great One himself?” [VI. 1585\*]).<sup>6</sup> Finally, since Lakṣmaṇa, who is a portion of Him, is shown to know his own true nature (“Saumitri, wounded in the chest by the Brahma missile, remembered that he was himself a portion of Viṣṇu, beyond comprehension.....” [VI. 47.104]), it goes without saying that Rāma must have ascertained his own true nature.

Now, in reply one may readily grant that He who rules over the power of nescience cannot have his knowledge obscured by it. Nevertheless, when Brahmā and the rest of the gods solicited his help (“O Viṣṇu, become a man and slay Rāvaṇa in battle, this massive thorn in the side of the world, whom the gods are unable to destroy” [I. 14.19]), he intentionally adopted the nature of a human being. It is inevitable, therefore, that he should believe himself to be a man, and so be completely ignorant of his true nature. One might object that, just because according to the verse cited he must inevitably become a man, there is no reason to suppose he must therefore necessarily be ignorant. But that objection does not hold. The *ātmā* is inherently and essentially disembodied; “becoming a man” means, precisely, taking on a human body, and, since the latter is purely the consequence of wrong knowledge, Rāma must inevitably be subject to it. (The causal relationship between false knowledge and physical embodiment is expounded in the *Śārīrakabhāṣya* [in the *sūtra*] on “uniformity of referential significance.”<sup>7</sup>) And thus is proved his susceptibility to ignorance, which would obscure [his awareness of] his true nature. On this analysis, moreover, Garuḍa’s words in VI. 835\* recover their peculiar propriety: “Do not be overcurious about my friendship for you, Rāghava. When you have done your deeds of battle, Rāma, you shall understand it fully.” For in asserting that only after slaying Rāvaṇa can Rāma become aware that he is Viṣṇu—the determinative

6 The principal evidence against this last verse is its absence in the so-called western recension (represented here by D 3, 4).

7 That is, Śaṅkara’s commentary on *Vedāntasūtra* I. 1.4, which Tryambaka goes on to quote (cf. ed. Benares, 1929 (Kashī Sanskrit Series 77), pp. 188). See also below, p. 12 and n. 15, 614

factor in Garuḍa's friendship for him—what Garuḍa in essence is saying is that prior to slaying Rāvaṇa Rāma cannot know his true nature, since in fact the destruction of Rāvaṇa can only be achieved by a human being.

Similarly, the seers such as Viśvāmitra and the others, though fully aware of Rama's identity with Viṣṇu by reason of their ascetic powers, did not straightaway make it known. They supplied the arms to be used in slaying Rāvaṇa, and only afterwards did they reveal the identity. That these men were indeed aware of Rāma's true nature prior to the slaying of Rāvaṇa is shown by Viśvāmitra's words to Daśaratha : "I know who great Rāma is, the prince who always strives for truth; so does mighty Vasiṣṭha and all others who are exercised in asceticism" [I. 18.14].<sup>8</sup> His father Daśaratha, for his part, was unaware of Rāma's identity with Viṣṇu prior to the slaying of Rāvaṇa; afterwards, however, he realized it, as he explains late in Book VI : "Now at last I understand, dear son, how it was by the gods' doing that [you,] supreme among men, were destined for this, for bringing about the death of Rāvaṇa" [VI. 107.17].

Again, it is after slaying Rāvaṇa and only then that Rāma can be informed of his true nature, as in Agastya's address to him in Book VII : "There is no one who could slay the *rākṣasas*, the enemies of the gods, thorns in the sides of the deities—no one but the god Nārāyaṇa, he who bears the conch-shell, discus and mace. You are Nārāyaṇa, the ever-lasting god with four arms, the eternal unborn god who took birth in order to slay the *rākṣasa*" [VII.8.24, with minor variants]. Rāvaṇa likewise thinks of Rāma only as a man : "I am familiar with that man, Rāma, the son of Daśaratha" [VI.1026\*.1], and he elsewhere speaks of him only as such (e.g., "I have been conquered by a man. . . ." [VI.48.5]). In the *Viṣṇupurāṇa* as well [the consequence of] Rāvaṇa's believing Rāma to be a man is treated of at length [IV.15.1-17]<sup>9</sup>. Precisely with this in mind

8 The most recent translator of the *Bālakāṇḍa* rejects this, the traditional, interpretation of the verse in the belief that it is not indicated by the "straightforward matter" of the text (R. P. Goldman, *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmiki* Vol. I [Princeton, 1984], n. ad loc.). I disagree. The final phrase certainly suggests that only those endowed with ascetic powers "know Rāma", and then, why should asceticism be a condition of merely knowing the hero's valor (as it is thought), with which everyone in Ayodhyā is familiar? Anyway, the "sectarian" identification of Rāma with Viṣṇu is thoroughly established for the *Bālakāṇḍa*, and so there is really no need to try to eliminate it here.

9 Ed. Venkatesvara Press, Bombay, 1910. The passage is worth summarizing: Maitreya asks why the great *asura*, in his births both as Hiranyakaśipu and Rāvaṇa, failed to attain "absorption" in Viṣṇu as a result of being slain by the great god, whereas this occurred in his birth as Śiṣupāla. Parāśara replies that neither of the two was aware that it was indeed Viṣṇu who was incarnated in the man-lion and human forms. They attained progressively higher births, but not liberation. This, however, was achieved by Śiṣupāla: By constantly reciting the name of Kṛiṣṇa and bearing him in his heart—though it was all done out of sheer hatred—the demon was purified of all his sins, and so upon dying at the hands of Viṣṇu was absorbed in Him. *Itihāsa* (ad III.69.1 [ = III.64-1 of the Gujarati Printing Press edition]) Similarly

Sarvajñā [tma] muni<sup>10</sup> wrote, "It was an intentional act on the part of the delight of the Raghus that he became for some time ignorant [of his true nature]. Once the task of the gods had been achieved, and he had received instruction [from Brahmā] about his true self—which was merely the apparent cause [of his realization]—he abandoned this [ignorance]."

Consequently, neither Rāma when setting out to slay Rāvaṇa, nor Rāvaṇa himself when about to be slain had any notion that Rāma was in fact Viṣṇu. Had either of them known Rāma's true nature, he could never have slain Rāvaṇa, for the *rākṣasa* was invulnerable to gods. That he was in fact invulnerable not only to the gods in general but to Viṣṇu as well is stated in Book VII: "But gods or *dānavas* at any rate cannot slay the wicked creature in battle. The gift of a boon has made him unconquerable... Nor shall I [Viṣṇu] fight against Rāvaṇa, overlord of *rākṣasas*: Viṣṇu never returns from battle without slaying his enemy, and this desire of mine could never be fulfilled now that the *rākṣasa* has acquired a boon" [VII. 27.14-17]. This [the authenticity of the theme] is attested to likewise by the *Mahābhārata*. In Book III Rāvaṇa asks, "Let me never suffer defeat at the hands of *gandharvas*, gods, *asuras*, *yakṣas*, *rākṣasas*, serpents or *kiṅmaras*," to which Brahmā replies, "You shall never have to fear any creature among those that you have stipulated. You need never fear any but man; so it please you, and thus do I ordain it" [III.295.25-26 crit. ed.]. Thus in Book I of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, "Because of his contempt for them the *rākṣasa* did not stipulate men in his boon. Therefore it can be only a man, no one else, that shall cause his death... Become therefore a man, Viṣṇu, and slay Rāvaṇa in combat, this terrible thorn in the side of the world, who is invulnerable to all the gods" [I.14.14, 19]. In Book VI, likewise, Rāvaṇa himself says, "Here, at last, those terrible words of Brahmā's have come home to me: 'Know that men still pose a dangerto you.' I had secured invulnerability with respect to gods, *dānavas*, *gandharvas*, *yakṣas*, *rākṣāsas*, Serpents; but with respect to men, I had never asked for it" [VI.48.4-7]. In conclusion, then, it is necessary we have some indication that Rāma's intelligence is obscured by the inconceivable power of nescience, for this is indispensable to his believing himself a man, which as we have seen is itself essential [to the narrative].

Let us now consider those instances where Paraśurāma [I.75.17] and Lakṣmaṇa [VI.1585\*] enlighten Rāma. It does not at all follow that in consequence Rāma would necessarily be led to ascertain his true nature. Inasmuch as, for the reasons adduced, no counterindication can be given [prior to the

---

remarks that Rām's show of grief at the disappearance of Sitā from Janasthāna inhibits Rāvaṇa from realizing him to be divine, which in turn prevents the *rākṣasa* from attaining *mokṣa* after being slain at his hands.

10 C. A.D. 850-900. I have traced this verse to his *Saṁkṣepaśāstrīka* (edited by N. Veezhinathan [Madras, 1972]), 2. 182 (p. 337).

slaying of Rāvaṇa] with respect to Rāma's believing himself a man, these two passages must be interpreted as having some other signification.

In the first case, Paraśurāma engages Rāma in a duel without at all being aware that he is Viṣṇu. Rāma's stringing his bow gives him to realize that he has superhuman powers, and he concludes, remorsefully, that he must be Viṣṇu. . . Rāma, however, simply supposes that his opponent, terrified at his having drawn his bow, is praising him. And on this interpretation no objection can be raised to Paraśurāma's words.

When Rāma is grief-stricken over the loss of the magical figure of Sītā [ VI.70 ], and Lakṣmaṇa asks him if he truly understands "himself", Rāma must take him to be urging the kind of self-reflection employed to assuage grief such as he was then feeling, not any ascertainment of his true nature. (This type of self-reflection is mentioned in the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*, "He who knows himself [the Self] crosses over sorrow" [ VII, 1.3 ].) It is erroneous to maintain that since Lakṣmaṇa, who is a portion of Rāma, has ascertained his true nature [ VI, 47.104 ], a fortiori Rāma must have likewise. Lakṣmaṇa's task is to slay Indrajit and others for whom no restriction is in effect that they be slain only by a man. Thus there is nothing stopping him from ascertaining his true nature. In Rāma's case, as we have said, no counterindication must be given to his believing himself a man (prior to the slaying of Rāvaṇa), and this is achieved by his true nature being hidden from him. In actual fact, however, since it is only at the moment of fainting that Lakṣmaṇa ascertains he is a portion of Viṣṇu, in his normal state he has no such knowledge. Thus the ensuing verse, "Recollecting himself, catching his breath and having the arrow removed . . . ." [ VI, 47.115 ], shows that he has only a normal self-awareness after the pain of fainting has passed<sup>11</sup>.

One might even yet object that, granted all that has been asserted here is true, none the less Rāma's request (" . . . . . tell me who I really am . . . . . ") and Brahmā's response are really quite unnecessary *after* Rāvaṇa has been slain, because the termination of Rāma's ignorance, and his ensuing knowledge of his true nature, should then come about as a matter of course. That, however, would not be a cogent argument. For it is everywhere shown to hold true that one who believes himself nothing but a man attains knowledge of his true nature [ read— *jñānasya saṃpādanīyatvāt* ] only as a result of instruction ( cf. the scriptural statements, "Only a man who has a teacher knows . . . ." [ *ChāndoU.* VI. 14.2 ]; "Unless proclaimed by one who knows It as non-different, there is no way to It" [ *Kāṭha U.I.* 2.8 ]. Rāma likewise, therefore, could acquire the knowledge that puts an end to ignorance only by the instruction of a teacher. This notion has been set forth in the commentary on the *Dvādaśamanjari* [ on the following

11 Tryambaka misquotes here. The verse actually runs, "Catching his breath and having the arrow removed, remembering himself to be an inconceivable portion of Viṣṇu," though the impossible final participle, among other things, does suggest some corruption here.

verse ]<sup>12</sup> : “ By means of the words of a teacher Rāghava, when deluded by his existence as a man, came to know that he was Viṣṇu; in the same way the one called Rādheya, himself unaware of it, came to know that he was a king; in the same way a man who knows to count but to nine learns ten when he has a tenth child. And in the same way, by the words of a teacher, an awareness that one is *brahma* arises conclusively in one’s mind.”<sup>13</sup> Toṭakācārya<sup>14</sup> likewise writes, “ Just as was told to the delight of the Raghus, every embodied being must be told these two [ words, *tat*, *tvam(asi)* ] which are in no way inconsistent : The knowledge of the Self [ is ] always [ attained ] exclusively as a result of instruction, so always the fact that it is identical with the Supreme Self.”

In sum, adopting the nature of a human being up till the slaying of Rāvaṇa he was Rāma, and then Viṣṇu when this human condition was dispelled by the instruction of Brahmā, and he comprehended his true nature. One should not find anything amazing in this. It is the conclusion of all vedānta systems that once the physical body has been created by means of the water, fire and so on of the existent *brahma*, the living soul enters it and so becomes a transmigrating entity; but by means of the instruction of a teacher ( “ That art thou, ” and the like ) it recovers its true nature. Thus in *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* [ VIII.12.1 ] : “ The mortal body is possessed by death, but at the same time is the location of the immortal, bodiless Self. When embodied, the Self is possessed by pleasure and pain. So long as the Self is embodied, pleasure and pain do not leave it; but when it is disembodied, pleasure and pain do not touch it.”<sup>15</sup>

It is worth noting that, should such an embodied being acquire knowledge of his true self merely to effect some transient purpose or other, the knowledge does not last. Thus, in order to convince Arjuna to fight, the Blessed Krishna revealed to him his true nature.<sup>16</sup> Later on, however, when Arjuna puts a question to him, Krishna discovers that his friend has forgotten what he had shown him.<sup>17</sup>

12 The work ( to my knowledge never printed ) is attributed to Śaṅkara. Is the commentary supposed to be Tryambaka’s ?

13 As cited ( p. 344 ) the verse appears to be corrupt. It lacks two *laghu akṣaras* in *pāda d*, while *rādhey*—[ for *rādahaya*— ] seems to be required both for sense and *metricausa*.

14 One of the four direct students of Śaṅkara ( thus c. A.D. 800 ). I have located this quotation in his *Śrutisārasamuddhāraṇa* vs. 85 ( in the only edition available to me: Edited by Svami Vidyānandagiri [ Rsikesh, 1972 ] ). We must correct Tryambaka, and read in *pāda c* *matih* ( for *gatih* ), and in *pāda d*, —*satattva*—for—*satatva*—.

15 Along with the passage Tryambaka cites ( p. 344 ) the commentary of Śaṅkara, which is not dissimilar in import to the *Brahmasūtra* passage mentioned above ( n. 7 ).

16 Curiously ( given his earlier arguments ) Tryambaka finds nothing inconsistent in the fact that Krishna for his part is unaffected by the epistemological constraints of his incarnation.

17 Tryambaka cites *MBh.* XIV.16.9 ff.: Arjuna’s question is contained in VSS. 5-7.



To summarize: Rāma is truly Viṣṇu, but in order to effect the purposes of the gods he intentionally became a human being; the obscuration of his true nature, and the ensuing question and revelation, have therefore perfect propriety.

What strikes me as one of the more important things about Tryambaka's interpretation is that it seems competent to explain more of the *Rāmāyaṇa* (Vālmiki's monumental version, to which we have access through the critical edition) than one which refuses to acknowledge that the divinity of the hero is an authentic feature of the poem. It may strain credibility to suggest that the metaphysical notion linking embodiment and ignorance—if apparently quite ancient (and clearly connected by a relatively old *Advaita* tradition with the *Rāmāyaṇa*, as the quotations from Toṭaka and Sarvajñātma, inter alia, prove)—fundamentally informed Vālmiki's poem. Nevertheless, Tryambaka directs our attention to areas that may well contain more than a grain of truth. I wish now to explore several of them, at least those that pertain to Books II-VI.

Perhaps more than any other commentator Tryambaka perceptively recognizes the significance of the boon granted to Rāvaṇa. As I have tried to show in detail elsewhere<sup>18</sup>, this theme, which in fact is far more pervasive than even the scholiast may have known, is not only securely attested, but appears to be an essential condition of the narrative, a basic component of the developed legend of Rāma. My point in the earlier essay was that the divine king of traditional India is precisely the one being that escapes the limitations of the boon. For he is a being with the power of a god (principally, though by no means exclusively, through a fundamental, substantial relationship with Viṣṇu, a conception of great antiquity), and yet still participating in the world of mortality—a being who is consubstantially god and man, and who in some definite sense transcends the gods (since it is he alone that can slay Rāvaṇa). For Tryambaka and all the traditional commentators on the poem, the solution the text offers to Rāvaṇa's boon is understood with a slight variation: not a god-man in quite the sense I propose, but instead a god "in the form of a man" (a topic of divergent theological interpretation, as we shall notice below), an incarnation of Viṣṇu. On the former view the transcendent being, it would seem, cannot know his true nature, for he "remains, in some measure, a man" [VII, App. I No. 10.28]. On the latter, not only is he constrained by comparable, natural limitations of an epistemological sort, but he must not know: It is only the ignorance of his divinity that ensures he is in some way not altogether divine; were he to know, there would be, by the conditions of the boon, no possibility of his slaying Rāvaṇa. On either interpretation, the ignorance of the hero, a direct function of the essential theme of the boon, itself becomes essential to the narrative. Thus, far from foisting upon the poem a set of extrinsic and

18 Pollock, *op. cit.*, passim.

alien concerns, Tryambaka's interpretation articulates inherent problems, and offers some cogent explanations.

Consider for example the "propriety" with which Garuḍa's words in VI. 40 can now be re-invested. Tryambaka's interpretation is, unarguably I would say, the correct one. However, the real questions we must address are, first, does the passage cited have any sure claim to textual authenticity, and second, is there any evidence elsewhere in the poem supporting the possibility of such irony (deriving from the fact that the audience is allowed to share in the knowledge of the hero's divinity, while this is hidden from the hero himself) ?

The verse singled out by Tryambaka has, it is true, been rejected by the critical edition ( VI. 835\*, reported in all southern manuscripts ) :-

*na ca kautūhalaṃ kāryaṃ sakhitvaṃ prati rāghava |*  
*kṛtakarmā raṇe vīra sakhitvaṃ anuvetsyasi ||*

Yet this rejection is the result, in my view, of an unreflective application of editorial principles. For note that the identical notion is represented in 833\*, the version of the northern recension :

*kāraṇaṃ ca vayasyatve na praṣṭavyo 'smi rāghava |*  
*nihate rāvaṇe pāpe sakhitvaṃ jñāsyase' nagha ||*

Not only does the census of manuscripts here show that the narrative element is contained in every manuscript used by the critical edition, but this is precisely the type of variation most indicative of the oral stratum of the text, which may claim the greatest antiquity in the history of the transmission of the poem<sup>19</sup>.

Anyway, whether or not we accept this particular verse as genuine, as a whole the episode of Garuḍa's healing Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa is fully represented in our codices, and thus we are still obliged to explain its purpose. Of course, Indrajit's *sarpabandha*, in which Rāma has been ensnared, is made of *kādraveya* snakes ( VI.40.49 ), and the enmity between Garuḍa and his "cousins" is the subject matter of ancient myth. But why then have we the repeated and well-attested assertions of Garuḍa's friendship with Rāma ( VI.40.46, 51, etc. ) ? The explanation offered by Tryambaka, cogent in itself, derives additional support from an earlier incident that is clearly parallel, Rāma's encounter with Indra in the *Aranyakāṇḍa* ( III.4.4. ff. ) : " Nearing the abode of Śarabhaṅga . . Rāma saw a great marvel. He saw the Lord of the wise gods himself, his body luminous as fire or the sun . . . " and, as Rāma advances to meet the god, " Indra caught sight of him . . . and said, ' That man approaching is Rāma. Before he can address me, lead me off to my residence ; hereafter he may see me.

19 See my " Text-critical Observations on Vālmiki Rāmāyaṇa " ( *Sternbach Felicitation Volume* [ Lucknow, 1981 ], pp. 317 ff. ), and " The Rāmāyaṇa Text and the Critical Edition " ( in Goldman, *op. cit.* ).

When he has accomplished his task and achieved victory, I will straightway see him. For he has a great deed to do, all but impossible for anyone else.' "The significance of this passage, to which no hint of interpolation attaches, is exactly comparable, in my opinion, to the Garuḍa incident as interpreted by Tryambaka. As one commentator on the *Aranyakāṇḍa* explains, "Were Indra to speak with Rāma he would thereby reveal Rāma's divine nature. . . . and he must do his great deed—the slaying of Rāvaṇa and so on—in the guise of a man" (Govindarāja ad III.4.18-19 [= 5.22-23 vulg.] : so too basically Kataka )<sup>20</sup>.

It is worth observing also that, within the generally singleminded narrative of the *Aranyakāṇḍa*, one of the few digressions concerns Garuḍa. The story, relating the bird's quest for the drink of immortality<sup>21</sup>, is told while Rāvaṇa is flying over the ocean, headed for Mārīca's *āśrama* to commit the outrage upon Rāma that will seal his doom. It seems an odd, almost gratuitous, and quite uncharacteristic, divagation. Once more, I believe, some explanation is called for, and the most compelling seems again to be that of the medieval scholiasts : "The poet here is mocking Rāvaṇa ; he is implying how stupid he is to be opposing Rāma [= Viṣṇu ], by showing us that even his mount [ Garuḍa ] has such illimitable power" (Govindarāja ad III.33.28 [= 35.27 vulg. ]).

If a given passage, therefore, can be shown to have precisely the quality of textual authority as any other part of the poem, and if narratively it is not atypical but closely paralleled elsewhere in the work, then it becomes very hard to see how we can persuasively identify it as an interpolation. Recalcitrant subjectivity in these matters only introduces an extreme relativism, and finally tells us less about the text than about the interpreter himself.

The self-recognition of Lakṣmaṇa ( VI. 47. 104 ff. ) presents a problem of interpretation that is not solved by appeal to parallel instances. In this episode the prince is wounded by a lance hurled by Rāvaṇa :

Struck by the Brahma-lance in the middle of chest, Saumitri remembered himself, his own inconceivable portion of Viṣṇu ( 104 ). Rāvaṇa, the thorn in the side of all the gods, then sought to squeeze him in his arms—Saumitri, who could shatter the pride of *dānavas*—but he proved unable to raise him ( 105 ). He could lift Mount Himālaya, Mandara, or Meru, he could lift the three worlds in his arms,<sup>22</sup> but not the younger brother of

20 Edited by N. S. Venkatanathacharya ( Mysore, 1965 ), ad. III.5.22.

21 III.33.28-35 ( a fuller epic version of the myth is found in *MBh.* 1.24 ff. ); cf. also the interesting allusion at *Rām.* II.22-14.

22 Compare III.47.3-4; " I [ Rāvaṇa ] could lift the earth in my arms while standing in the sky; I could drink up the ocean, I could slay Death in battle. With my sharp arrows I could shatter the earth or bring the sun to a standstill....."

Bharata<sup>23</sup> in battle (106). Rāvaṇa stood astonished beholding the unconscious Lakṣmaṇa, a portion of viṣṇu embodied in a human form (107).... But because of the friendship and deep devotion that Hanumān, son of the wind bore him, he became light in the hands of the monkey, though his enemies could not budge him (112).... Catching his breath and having the arrow removed, remembering himself to be an inconceivable portion of Viṣṇu (115) . . . .

While there is some minor manuscript disagreement here (vs. 106 is missing in the north-western version; several southern manuscripts omit vs. 107, and as noted above there is some uncertainty about the correct constitution of vs. 115), it is hardly sufficient to throw text-critical doubt over the passage as a whole, for which we have otherwise overwhelming testimony. Indeed, as even the most uncompromising of analysts is forced to admit, the passage would appear to present us with yet another of those self-contradictory cases, an archetypal interpolation: "As to 6, 47, 104; 115. [we] must now suppose an interpolation in all the recensions, already occurring in the archetype."<sup>24</sup> There is virtually nothing to impugn the authenticity of the verses, except of course the a priori conviction that such "sectarian" interests could (or, should) have been no concern of Vālmiki's. The burden of proof, therefore, must be placed back where it rightly belongs, on those who share such a conviction; those who do not are under no obligation to demonstrate the necessity and indispensability of the passage, an undertaking which for a literary text is often, if not always futile.

It may prove of interest briefly to examine here the divergent theological understanding of the Rāma *avatāra* alluded to earlier, by considering the animadversions of the commentators provoked by this particular passage. With the exception of his explanation of VI. 47. 115 (see above, p. 10 and n. 11), Tryambaka's interpretation strikes me as quite sound. It is not, however, the dominant interpretation of the southern school. That is represented by Govindarāja, who articulates generally the allegorical reading of the Vaḍagalai Vaiṣṇavas.<sup>25</sup> His

23 Govindarāja persuasively remarks that the epithet (which, while I have no actual figures, appears to be extremely rare in reference to Lakṣmaṇa) implies how impossible it would be for Rāvaṇa to defeat Rāma, since he cannot even lift his younger brother's younger brother, who has only a quarter of his potency [for the arithmetic cf. I. 15.25-27].

24 Van Daalen, op. cit., p. 190 (the author adds, rather cryptically, "I think the supposition is very attractive"). If I may offer the observation without sounding too petulant, Indological scholarship has probably few parallel cases of such illogical denial in the teeth of evidence as has occurred in the interpretation of Rāma's divinity over the past 150 years. Even when every single manuscript—every possible source of our knowledge of the poem—testifies in its favor, the representation can still be banished to the outer reaches of authenticity, to this suppositious archetype, whose sole *raison d'être* seems to be to provide a ghetto for ideas believed to be alien to the "original" *Rāmāyaṇa*.

25 The topic is examined at length in a paper of mine, currently in preparation, on the Śrī. Vaiṣṇava allegorical interpretation of the *Rāmāyaṇa*.

position is made clear when he remarks “Lakṣmaṇa has the power to know [ his real essence ] even when he is in a faint. This is set forth here for us so that we realize that those few places where Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa are shown to be ignorant or weak are only meant to complete their costume as mortal beings [ *mānuṣa-veṣanirvahaṇapara-* ]” ( ad VI, 47.115 = 59.120 vulg. ). For Govindarāja and the majority of southern commentators, Viṣṇu’s *avatāra* as man has a pre-eminently didactic purpose ( this is the position set forth in some detail in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* )<sup>26</sup>, and consequently his behavior has something of the dramatic presentation about it. God’s ignorance or suffering is not—cannot—be real; it is mimetic, adopted to encourage adherence to *dharma* by supplying a model recognizably human, even if, in the interests of verisimilitude, instances of doubt and weakness on the part of Rāma should thereby be necessitated.

I do not at present intend to set out in detail the position of Govindarāja’s principal target here, Maheśvaratīrtha. Suffice it to say that in general for him, as apparently an adherent of the Tēngalai school, “everything that happens in the *Rāmāyaṇa* is absolutely, literally true” ( ad II, 36.9 [ = 41.10 vulg. ] ).<sup>27</sup> Although this position is not explicit in Maheśvara’s comments here, it fundamentally informs them : “ . . . [ Lakṣmaṇa ] called to mind the Blessed Viṣṇu, his own root cause, in order to obviate the disaster about to happen to him [ i.e., only for this one purpose ]. Otherwise, were this memory always present, the motion that he is a man—which must always be present—would be contradicted. And were it in fact contradicted, the deeds that must thereby be effected—the destruction of Rāvaṇa and the rest—would not be possible. This recollection is the cause for the heaviness Lakṣmaṇa’s body takes on ” [ ad VI, 47.104 ( = 59.112 vulg. ) ]<sup>28</sup>.

Govindarāja answers his predecessor point by point :

This heaviness is the natural condition of his body [ and not suddenly taken on ], for he is not said to do any other act than “ remember ” his true form. It is wrong to hold that Lakṣmaṇa’s recollection brings about the heaviness of his body. Neither the sentences nor the individual words can bear that meaning. Nor is there any proof that recollecting one’s own form is the cause of heaviness. Further, the claim that he remembers Viṣṇu . . . to obviate the disaster, is also wrong. He himself *is* Viṣṇu, nor

26 See Pollock, *op. cit.*, (n. 3), and my forthcoming paper, “ Rāma’s Madness ” ( WZKSA ) ”.

27 See further on these differentiations in *Aṣṭādśābhedanirṇaya* ( ed. S. Sāruve [ Pondichery, 1978 ] ), pp. 62-63.

28 Maheśvaratīrtha elsewhere does employ the exegetical principle of the mimetic dimension of Rāma’s incarnation, and similarly can reject the notion that Rāma could truly be ignorant: “ . . . Those who assert that in his fractional [ *avatāra* ] the wisdom of the Blessed One is veiled over with *māṇā* should hide their faces ” ( ad III, 64.29-30 [ = III, 68.29-30 vulg. ] ).

is there any other way to avoid the disaster. Erroneous also is the claim that he must think on Viṣṇu [actively], because otherwise, if his body became heavy of itself, the conviction of his being a man would be contradicted<sup>29</sup>. For regular worldly beings cannot know what his mental belief is, and so the belief in his being a man remains unchallenged. In truth, it is by his inherent nature, as an entity beyond all censure, to be, now heavy, now light, according as devotees or enemies [lift it]. That is why it is said to be "incomprehensible". [ad VI.47.104 (= 59.112 vulg.)]

Again, whatever we may judge to be the merits of any of these traditional theological exegeses, it seems increasingly clear that they may not be thoroughly anachronistic nor all that far from the mark. What after all can this motif of the *deus absconditus*, the "hidden god," mean, and why is it present in our poem at all? As an interpolation it would seem to be a singularly odd one, while as a legitimate feature of the text it construes meaningfully with the central themes of the poem as a whole. For the text as a whole, I believe, feels it has something profoundly important to tell us, very generally, about man's understanding of the divine, his (possibly inevitable) failure to understand, and the natural limitations to understanding that the human condition enforces; and quite specifically (from what I have called a political-theological perspective), about the peculiar self-awareness of those gods among men, kings—or (if one prefers the medieval reading) about God's antinomic actions during his incarnations, those miraculous interventions in the realm of necessity. Text-critically and on the evidence of the internal logic of the narrative, the general problematic which has provoked these traditional interpretations would appear to be to a great extent an authentic one, largely shared by the artist who fashioned India's first poem.

---

In comparable fashion Kataka argues that any apparent diminution of Rāma's omniscience is merely a self-willed concealment by means of *tamaḥ* (ad III. 60.38 (= III. 64.56 vulg.), 64.20 [= 63.30 vulg.]), etc.

<sup>29</sup> The question is often left unexamined in the commentators: precisely whose conviction is this supposed to be, that of outsiders (especially Rāvaṇa), and/or Lakṣmaṇa's (and Rāma's)? For Govindarāja, unlike the *Dharmākūtam*, it seems to be solely the former, as for Tilaka, who, as I note in my essay on Rāma's madness (above, n. 26), argues that Rāma's show of grief (made known to Rāvaṇa by spies) is intended to confirm that the demon has to do with a man, an order that he can be slain in compliance with the terms of the boon: negatively, were the hero to show no anger at such a moment, Rāvaṇa would be convinced that he is not a man (ad loc. cit., above n. 9).