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Articles

| | |
|--|-----|
| DOUGLAS Q. ADAMS, The Position of Tocharian Among the Other Indo-European Languages | 395 |
| DONALD DANIEL LESLIE, Japhet in China | 403 |
| ROGER DES FORGES, The Legend of Li Yen: Its Origins and Implications for the Study of Ming-Ch'ing Transitions in 17th Century China | 411 |
| E. J. REVELL, Stress and the <i>WAW</i> "Consecutive" in Biblical Hebrew | 437 |
| J. MERIC PESSAGNO, The Reconstruction of the Thought of Muḥammad Ibn Shabīb | 445 |
| A. J. E. BODROGLIGETI, Ghosts, Copulating Friends, and Pedestrian Locusts in Some Reviews of Eckmann's "Middle Turkic Glosses" | 455 |
| ELEAZAR BIRNBAUM, Turkish Manuscripts: Cataloguing Since 1960 and Manuscripts Still Uncatalogued, Part 5: Turkey and Cyprus | 465 |
| SHELDON POLLOCK, The Divine King in the Indian Epic | 505 |

Review Articles

| | |
|---|-----|
| JAY SAILEY, T'ung Shu-yeh, <i>The Tso-chuan</i> , and Early Chinese History | 529 |
| PETER SCHÄFER, Merkavah Mysticism and Rabbinic Judaism | 537 |
| DAVID J. HALPERIN, A New Edition of the Hekhalot Literature | 543 |

Brief Communication

| | |
|--|-----|
| FRANCESCO POMPONIO, The Fara Lists of Proper Names | 553 |
|--|-----|

| | |
|------------------------|-----|
| Reviews of Books | 559 |
|------------------------|-----|

THE DIVINE KING IN THE INDIAN EPIC

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For Daniel H. H. Ingalls

The problem of the divine status of the hero of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, which fundamentally conditions our understanding of this crucial text, has rightly, if inconclusively, preoccupied Western scholarship. The limitations of both text-critical and purely impressionistic studies may be avoided by an intensive analysis of some larger narrative features of the poem. One such is the theme of Rāvaṇa's boon, an integral component of the tale. This thoroughly "problematizes" the nature of the hero, and logically entails his transcendent nature. The "morphology" of the theme meaningfully relates it to much epic (and Vedic) mythopoesis, and corroborates this transcendent signification. In the *Rāmāyaṇa* the theme's power derives specifically from its striking correlation with a political-theological conception concerning the divine nature of the king. The prevalence of this conception in epic texts and its early Vaiṣṇava connections are adumbrated, and some tentative suggestions offered regarding a more global interpretation of the work.

THE PROBLEM OF RĀMA'S DIVINITY

THE TRADITIONAL READINGS OF THE VULGATE *Rāmāyaṇa*—including in the category "reading" both the literary adaptations of the work, from at the least the beginning of the common era onwards, and the critical tradition more narrowly conceived, of the medieval scholiasts—never questioned the epic's fundamental "organic" unity. Consequently it was never doubted that the divinity of the hero was an integral and authentic feature of the poem, and as such was fundamentally condition its interpretation. Although a wide range of other kinds of interpolations were identified, and a good deal of the narrative itself was felt to pose serious problems of exegesis, nowhere in the history of the indigenous artistic or scholarly appreciation of the poem do I find that arguments were ever raised against the divine status of the hero; never, for example, was the suspicion ever voiced that those portions of the epic explicitly positing Rāma's status as an incarnation of Viṣṇu were deliberate, and unassimilable, sectarian interpolations.

These and others like them, however, were the arguments and suspicions made and felt by Western scholars from their very earliest acquaintance with the poem. Wilson in 1840 noted quizzically, and with evident impatience at the inconsistency, that "Rāma, although an incarnation of Vishnu, commonly appears in his human character alone." The first editor of the

epic in Europe, A. W. von Schlegel, was said to have seriously questioned the authenticity of those passages that recount the avatar, though it was left to Lassen to argue the matter out on far wider narrative grounds, commenting,

In the epic poems Rāma and Kṛṣṇa appear, it is true, as incarnations of Viṣṇu, but at the same time as human heroes. These two conceptions are so poorly combined that both generally behave merely like exceptionally gifted men: They act in accordance with human motives, and do not assert their divine superiority at all. It is only in a few sections, interpolated precisely to inculcate their divinity, that they appear as Viṣṇu. One cannot read either poem carefully without having one's attention called to these later interpolated sections of deification, often awkwardly inserted, loosely connected with the development of the story, and quite superfluous.¹

¹ C. Lassen, *Indische Alterthumskunde* (Leipzig, 1843), Vol. I, pp. 448–489 (= 2nd revised ed., 1866, Vol. I/1, pp. 586–587. Lassen remarks on his teacher Schlegel's misgivings (never expressed in writing, to my knowledge) on p. 587 n. of the 1866 edition. For Wilson's puzzlement, see *The Vishnu Purana* (reprint Calcutta, 1961; originally published in 1840), p. ix.

Predictably attention was soon directed to these interpolations, which Lassen had felt to be so self-incriminating. With all the zeal of any nineteenth century Homeric analyst, an attitude naturally making it much easier to show how a given passage could be dropped without harm to the "story" than to show how it was "licit," not to say necessary (for little, in the end, is "necessary"), Muir marshaled a host of examples that by their contrariety, narrative inconsequentiality, illogicality or redundancy, were meant to prove that the divinity of Rāma could not have formed part of the "original" poem.²

If Gorresio and Weber could still call the question an open one,³ with the publication of Jacobi's book on the *Rāmāyana* in 1893, the issue was to be decided once and, apparently, for all. The view that Rāma is a divine incarnation, we are told, was not an original part of the poem but a later addition, one remaining restricted to the "attached" passages and in no way informing the entire work. The deification of Rāma is attributed to a slow process of Euhemerization, whereby a hero of (quasi-historical) saga merges with a popular local divinity, the resulting demi-god finally coming to be reckoned an avatar of Viṣṇu. But the divinity of the hero remains altogether a conception that cannot be demonstrated for the five "real" books of the poem; "quite the contrary, there Rāma is thoroughly human."⁴

Such in brief is the opinion that must be said to have been generally embraced in Western scholarship with respect to a major, perhaps the central, problem of interpretation bearing on India's first and without

² J. Muir, *Original Sanskrit Texts*, 2nd edition, revised (London, 1872; reprinted Amsterdam, 1967), Vol. IV, pp. 441-481 (anticipating, I later found, my historical survey to some extent). That the traditional interpretation of a good part of this material (particularly the synthesis of the eighteenth century scholar Tryambakāyamaḥi in his monumental *Dharmākūṭam*, cf. n. 89 below) quite brilliantly accounts for most of these apparent problems I hope to show in a later article devoted exclusively to the exegesis of the medieval scholiasts. Aside from certain anagogical schemata (deriving from later South Indian, especially Teṅgalai, Vaiṣṇavism), a good deal of the traditional interpretation would seem not to have been reading into the poem at all, but reading out what was in some measure already in it.

³ G. Gorresio, *Ramayana, Poema indiano di Valmici* (Paris, 1850), Vol. V, pp. xlv-xlviii (soberly concluding, *sub judice lis*); A. Weber, *Über das Rāmāyana* (Berlin, 1870), p. 6.

⁴ H. Jacobi, *Das Rāmāyana* (Bonn, 1893; reprinted Darmstadt, 1976), pp. 61, 65.

doubt most important poem.⁵ It is a notion of peculiar tenacity and prevalence, which now, through the operations of what is referred to, rather darkly, as *wirkungsgeschichtliche Bewusstseins*, in some basic ways conditions the response most of us will have to the text.

It is assuredly not my intention fundamentally to challenge the idea that sections of the *Rāmāyana* are later interpolations. The critical edition of the poem demonstrates, conclusively in my view, that perhaps as much as 25% of the vulgate did not form part of the monumental oral poem of "Vālmīki," from which all our recensions and versions must derive.⁶ For all that, it is striking that a substantial number of the passages so long under suspicion have been vindicated, text-historically at least, by the critical edition. Far from corroborating prevailing scholarly opinion, this edition raises questions about the development and interpretation of the poem that are considerably more complex than earlier scholars could have realized, or their relatively simple explanatory model have accommodated.

Moreover, while the critical edition also does reveal that there are in fact some interpolations in Books

⁵ See for example the standard literary history of Winternitz: "Only in Books I and VII is Rāma throughout considered as a divine being, an incarnation of the god Viṣṇu. In Books II to VI, apart from a few passages which are doubtless interpolated, he is always only a mortal hero. . . ."; ". . . in the genuine books Rāma is merely a human hero" (*A History of Indian Literature* [Calcutta, 1927; reprinted Delhi, 1972], Vol. I, pp. 496, 501; cf. p. 478). More recently Botto has asserted that Rāma, "a national hero, whose behavior in the course of the poem is essentially human, is at a certain moment [in the history of the transmission of the text] divinized. . . ." (O. Botto, *Storia delle Letterature d'Oriente* [Milan, 1969], Vol. III, pp. 64-65; cf. p. 69); Goldman and Masson regard Rāma as a "great, but strictly human warrior-prince" ("Who knows Rāvaṇa—A Narrative Difficulty in the *Vālmīki Rāmāyana*," *Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute* 50 [1969], p. 95); for the latest opinion, that of van Daalen, see below, n. 37. One dissenting voice, of which I have just been made aware without yet being able to examine in great detail (F. Whaling, *The Rise of the Religious Significance of Rāma* [Delhi, 1980]), seems not to marshal any new arguments to substantiate this dissent, see pp. 82-92.

⁶ I discuss the question in "The *Rāmāyana* Text and the Critical Edition," in R. P. Goldman, *The Vālmīki Rāmāyana*, Vol. I (Princeton, 1984).

II–VI touching on the divinity of the hero,⁷ they are still remarkably rare. Thus a satisfactory response remains to be offered to the main thrust of an important argument advanced by Ruben almost fifty years ago (and for all I can tell wholly ignored thereafter). He reasoned that, since so many interpolations in Books II–VI clearly *later* than the presumed late identification of Rāma with Viṣṇu say virtually nothing of it, the absence of this identification from the five “authentic” books *need not* indicate its lateness of date; a more cogent explanation might be that mention of it was suppressed in II–VI, “for one reason or other.”⁸ What these possible reasons might be will have to await detailed examination in another context, one dealing with the traditional interpretation of the epic. But I would at least indicate here what such an examination would in large part demonstrate, namely, that the commentarial tradition was entirely aware of the necessity of eliminating explicit reference to the identity of Rāma and Viṣṇu (a representative example is Govindarāja on III.4.18–19; numerous instances could be pointed to). This suggests that Ruben’s hypothesis cannot be lightly dismissed on the grounds that the assumption of “some unspoken but uniformly observed agreement

among generations of *Rāmāyaṇa* scribes and reciters” is unwarranted or inherently implausible.⁹

Even if one were to allow that, text-criticism not invariably being a sure guide in such matters, the question of Rāma’s divinity must be (as it generally has been) addressed from the perspective of “higher criticism,” and that thus materials authenticated by manuscript testimony might still be un-original (that is, a conception alien to the synthetic consciousness responsible for the creation of Books II–VI), one would expect to find these non-textual grounds for identifying insertions clearly reasoned out. But this has not been done. Nor can we blithely assume that a passage which is detachable must therefore have been attached, for again, how little of this, or any, poem isn’t finally detachable. And even were it so, the truly multivalent character of epic interpolation has yet to be scrupulously examined. As anyone familiar with the text-critical problems of these texts knows, interpolation often serves, not to introduce altogether new narrative material, but rather simply to expand or make manifest the elliptical or latent; what at first sight might appear to be innovation may in reality be amplification or elucidation.

Moreover, Indological scholarship has never posed the quite pertinent question of why it should have proved so perfectly easy to modify—adopting that word for the sake of argument—a “heroic epic” according to a later theological program,¹⁰ and to do so without a trace of resistance (whereas, by an interesting contrast, the varied allegoresis of the Homeric exegetes, from Theagenes to the Stoics and Neoplatonists, not only did not affect the text of the poems in any way, but was often fundamentally challenged, or ridiculed, in their own times, while making no lasting impact whatever on subsequent interpretations). And consequently, the reasonable explanation has never been proposed, that these interpolations are a direct function of some genetically analogous tendency more deeply, structurally, embedded in the text, which we have been all too prone to ignore in

⁷ See for instance III.423*; V.1048*.5 ff., especially lines 14–21; VI.254*, VI. App. I #32.

⁸ It may prove of use to translate more or less the full argument: “The contradictions . . . discovered to exist between the five ‘authentic’ books (II–VI), and the two ‘inauthentic’ ones (I and VII) are found not only in the archetype but also in the Urtext, and thus—whether one recognizes a hypothetical Urtext or not—they become a matter for ‘higher criticism.’ It has seemed particularly important that the story of Viṣṇu’s human incarnation in Book I appears to speak against the book’s authenticity, since virtually nothing is mentioned of this in Books II–VI. But the argument, in this form, is not sound. For all the interpolations of II–VI, which never speak of Rāma as Viṣṇu, are without doubt younger than the archetype, in which the story of Viṣṇu’s human incarnation was given in great detail. [All this is generally supported by the critical edition.] When nevertheless, in the later interpolations of II–VI, no mention is ever made of Rāma’s divinity [but see below for arguments that tend, in a way perhaps unanticipated by Ruben, to confirm his suspicions], clearly there must have been some reluctance, for one reason or other, to speak of Rāma’s identification with Viṣṇu there. The identification itself can still have been very old, and stood in the putative Urtext” (W. Ruben, *Studien zur Textgeschichte des Rāmāyaṇa* [Stuttgart, 1936], p. 63).

⁹ Thus Goldman, *op. cit.* “Agreement” there was without doubt, and not in the least unspoken. There need not have been anything conspiratorial about this; it can merely have been a function of the aesthetic and symbolic unanimity of artists participating more authentically in a work of art of their own culture.

¹⁰ Gorresio’s remark holds generally true, that the insertion of the avatar theme, supposing it to be an insertion, has been effected “*con grande studio e con molt’ arte*” (*op. cit.*, p. xlvi).

an attitude of suspicion provoked by some materials that are, admittedly, later insertions.

Authentic meaning, however, is not found only *au pied de la lettre*, in what is explicitly, directly signified in any given (and unstable) verse. It is often discovered to be inscribed in higher-level (and stable) narrative features, in the large and significant motifs and themes, for instance, which make necessary and meaningful implications both intrinsically and as a result of their literary-historical associations. And from such a perspective, as I hope to demonstrate in what follows, the divinity of the hero of the *Rāmāyaṇa* cannot be eliminated by the facile excision of any portions of the text. It is constitutive of the tale.

Much of the argument against the divinity of Rāma, furthermore, is based on a sense of the "divine" that conceals an embarrassingly narrow and unself-reflective ethnocentricity, and on the use of an inapplicable set of critical canons. What is "contradictory" in the behavior of "human incarnations," as Lassen would have it, may only be so according to a theological rationalism inappropriate in itself, and all the more so in application to Indian poetic texts. Even in passages that are widely held to be interpolations, such as Rāma's interview with his long-dead father Daśaratha, a curiously ambivalent, "contradictory" attitude is entertained towards the hero: While acknowledging that Rāma is in fact "the heart of the gods, their deepest secret" (VI.107.31; cf. vs. 30), the old king can still speak to him as if he were nothing more than his human son, wishing him "long life" (107.23; similarly Śiva, 107.4-6).¹¹

Unless we are so obstinate as to postulate interpolations in our "interpolation" here, we must rethink our own sense of what constitutes contradiction and propriety in a text that at times can be very foreign to us. After all, what are the appropriate standards against which we are to measure the reasonableness, the logic, of the behavior of a being so resolutely unreasonable and illogical as a human embodiment of divinity? We might recall too that it was precisely these "contradictory" aspects in the nature of Rāma that were emphatically invested with religious significance. We are told

¹¹ This applies likewise to what are evidently later insertions in the *Mahābhārata*, where Kṛṣṇa figures centrally as the supreme deity. He too displays an oddly "inconsistent" nature—now divine, now human—that cannot easily be explained as a result of interpolation (see for instance much of the earlier portion of Book XII, especially Chapters 51 ff., or a passage such as VI.102.59-70). The problem as it appears in the *MBh.* is worthy of further exploration.

that, in the eyes of Rāmānanda, the important religious reformer of the fifteenth (or fourteenth) century, "History does not afford a better example of a great ruler, loyal husband, and merciful Lord than Rāma."¹² For the Indian tradition then, at least, the unity of the "divine savior" with the "ideal human" was easily accommodated.¹³

A clearer sense of the authenticity and the nature of the divinity of Rāma, its (possible) Vaiṣṇava extrapolation, and finally its all-important social and political dimension may be obtained if we re-examine this issue in a spirit of receptivity to the poem's structured message, scrutinizing the text with particular attention to one of these higher-order narrative features, the boon of Rāvaṇa. This theme is inextricably meshed with the divine status of the hero, but like the latter it is widely misbelieved to be a later insertion.¹⁴ I want first to try to demonstrate that the boon is a component as central to the narrative, as "genuine," as any can be. Then I shall analyze the specific terms of the boon and their implications, arguing that their inherent logic requires the existence of some transcendent entity, one that is both god and man; only such a being can confront the cosmic evil that Rāvaṇa represents. I believe this is actually suggested, or rather confirmed, by the poem itself in various significant references to a divine plan underpinning the action of the epic. It is likewise the conclusion to which we are urged by the peculiar morphology of the boon-motif as seen in the context of the history of Indian mythology. I shall then examine, in rather narrower compass, the nature of the divine king in ancient India and its historical connection with early Vaiṣṇavism, and briefly turn to the task of practical criticism, suggesting some possible meanings of Rāma's divinity for our interpretation of the poem on a more global level. In large part my procedure is to allow the text as far as possible to speak to us on its own, to listen to it patiently instead of constructing its meaning more or less a priori ourselves (hence the need for rather copious quotation), and to discover the questions it seeks to raise, and how it goes about doing so.

¹² P. N. Srinivasachari, *The Philosophy of Viśiṣṭādvaita* (Madras, 1943; reprinted 1970), pp. 545-546 (cf. J. Gonda, *Die Religionen Indiens, Vol. II: Der jüngere Hinduismus* [Stuttgart, 1963], p. 169).

¹³ Cf. Gonda, op. cit., p. 169.

¹⁴ By B. S. Miller, for example, "The *Rāmāyaṇa*," in Dušan Zbavitel, ed., *Dictionary of Oriental Literatures, Vol. II: South and South-east Asia* (New York, 1974), pp. 132-133.

RĀVAṆA'S BOON IN THE RĀMĀYAṆA

The first mention of Rāvaṇa's boon in Books II–VI of the *Rāmāyaṇa* occurs in the *Aranyakāṇḍa*, when the *rākṣasa* is introduced to us for the first time:

It was he who long ago in the great forest had practiced asceticism for ten thousand years, and unflinchingly offered up his own heads to the Self-existent Brahmā. It was he who had no longer to fear death in combat with any beings—gods, *dānavas*, *gandharvas*, *piśācas*, birds or serpents—any beings but man (III.30.17–18).¹⁵

The causal connection between these two verses will no doubt be rather obscure to the reader unfamiliar with the whole story. And yet the obliquity of the reference is allowed to remain throughout the poem, illuminated elsewhere only dimly, as in the sixth book:

Then the overlord of the *rākṣasas*, in a towering rage, spoke in the midst of the *rākṣasas*, to encourage them to battle: "For a thousand years I practiced the most intense asceticism, in one holy place and another, until the Self-existent Brahmā was propitiated. In reward for this asceticism Brahmā graciously granted that I need never fear gods or *asuras*" (VI.80.22–24).

There may well have been aesthetic reasons for so partial, almost grudging, a revelation of Rāvaṇa's boon throughout the course of the poem, and in fact nowhere in Books II–VI is the whole story told consecutively and straightforwardly.¹⁶ But this fact should in no way lead us to impugn the authenticity of the theme.

Besides the absolute manuscript unanimity in those places I have already cited, the boon is mentioned in passing at strategic junctures in the story (all of which

¹⁵ My translation, as are all the rest in this essay unless otherwise noted. All abbreviations of Sanskrit texts, and the particular editions (again, unless otherwise noted), are those of the *Encyclopaedic Dictionary of Sanskrit* [Poona, 1976–]; see further the notes ad loc. in my annotated translation of the *Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa*, Vol. III: *Aranyakāṇḍa* (Princeton, forthcoming), concerning the variants in the northern recension and related matters. The commentator Satyatīrtha here remarks, "Rāvaṇa neglected to include men [in his request] since he considered them nothing more than his food." See further on this below.

¹⁶ The only detailed narration is in I.14.12 ff., and VII.10.10 ff. Cf. also *MBh.* III.259.22 ff.

it is hardly possible to athetize). Indeed, we are never permitted to forget the conditions under which the hero is operating. Sītā, for example, says to Rāvaṇa after he has abducted her, "It may be that *asuras* or gods cannot kill you, Rāvaṇa, but now you have aroused the deep hatred of someone you cannot escape alive" (III.54.8; cf. 52.18, "Deluded by the boon he had been granted, mighty Rāvaṇa spoke . . ."). In Book IV Sampātī relates the prophecy he received from Niśākara: "The demon [*nairṛta*] shall carry off his wife from Janasthāna—the lord of *rākṣasas*, whom neither gods nor *dānavas* can ever slay" (IV.61.6). In fact Rāma himself is shown to know of the boon, for he sends the following message to Rāvaṇa through an envoy: "Surely today, at last, your pride has been crushed that came from the gift of Brahmā's boon. For here I stand at the threshold of Laṅkā, bearing a staff to punish you, who gave me such sorrow by carrying off my wife" (VI.31.53; in 28.28 Rāma speaks of Rāvaṇa as being "filled with power by reason of the gift of a boon," a line that might appear to be merely formulaic, were it not for the passage just cited).

One function the theme of the boon has is to elevate the narrative to the realm of a mythic event, by reason of the structural affinity it bears to the many other epic boons that require a divine solution. I shall investigate this formal property in considerable detail below; here I want only to consider the terms of the boon itself, in isolation from its literary-historical associations, and try to reason out what precisely is implied.

By means of his ascetic mortifications Rāvaṇa has forced the hand of Brahmā and been awarded a boon, through which he becomes invulnerable to all divine and semi-divine beings. The inference naturally and immediately to be drawn from the terms of the boon, with respect to the attack of an army of men and monkeys, is that drawn by Rāvaṇa's general Prahasta in Book VI. There he tells his king, "Gods, *dānavas*, *gandharvas*, *piśācas*, birds and serpents are altogether incapable of harming you in battle—what of monkeys!" (VI.8.2), and of course, what of men? To be sure, it is emphasized in Book VII and elsewhere in the *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition that Rāvaṇa did not even bother to ask for invulnerability from men and other lower forms of life: it would have been pure supererogation. He scorned them for their utter impotence; they were, in his eyes, nothing more than food.¹⁷ But

¹⁷ See for example VI. App. I #32.55; *MBh.* III.265.28. Recall also Rāvaṇa's scarcely figurative threat to eat Sītā for breakfast, *Rām.* III.54.22.

it does not take much effort to perceive that precisely, and solely, that which was excluded from the boon can, ipso facto, be transformed into the engine of destruction. Hanumān's inference, accordingly, is the very opposite of Prahasta's when he warns Rāvaṇa, "Because you are invulnerable to gods, *dānavas*, *gandharvas*, *yakṣas* and *rākṣasas*, you could defeat them. Still, monkeys pose a danger to you" (VI.47.53; cf. the insertion of the southern recension, VI.547*). Yet the true conclusion of the inference, hinted at already in III.30.18 (above, p. 508), is reached in the fifth book, when Hanumān again addresses Rāvaṇa:

All the *dharma* [i.e., here "power"] you came to possess by your intense practice of asceticism it would be most imprudent to destroy—and the life, too, that you possess. You are relying on the invulnerability you secured by your ascetic practices, invulnerability with respect to gods and *asuras*. But there is one all-important consideration with respect to that¹⁸: Sugrīva is not a god or *asura* or *rākṣasa*, not a *dānava*, *gandharva*, *yakṣa* or serpent. Rāghava is a man, your Majesty, and Sugrīva the king of monkeys. How therefore do you hope to save your life? (V.49.23–26).¹⁹

And in the end, with clear if futile insight, Rāvaṇa himself grasps this bitter fact:

Seated upon his heavenly golden throne Rāvaṇa glanced at the *rākṣasas*, and then spoke: "In vain, all in vain was the intense asceticism I practiced. The equal of Indra I may be, and yet a man has defeated me. Here, at last, those terrible words of Brahmā's have come home to me: 'Know that men still pose a

danger to you.' I had secured invulnerability with respect to gods, *dānavas*, *gandharvas*, *yakṣas*, *rākṣasas*, serpents; but with respect to men, I had never asked for it" (VI.48.4–7; see also the lament of the *rākṣasa* women, VI.82.29, below, p. 516).

Considering for the moment just the terms of Rāvaṇa's boon and the gradual revelation of its single yet critical flaw, one must conclude that only two interpretations are possible: a) Rāvaṇa hubristically, and fatally, underestimated the power of man; it was far greater than he knew, and this he learned in the hardest way possible, by being killed by one; b) Rāvaṇa's estimation of man's power was correct; such creatures, along with all lower forms of animal life, were omitted from the demon's boon because there was no possibility of one ever slaying him; men are indeed weak and powerless, all the more so in the face of such cosmic evil as Rāvaṇa represents—and consequently, he who killed the overlord of *rākṣasas* could not, in truth, have been a man at all.

It is worth stressing the importance of this central ambiguity or ambivalence—which holds true whichever alternative we choose—running like a red thread through the poem. Man was not included in the provisions of the boon because he was judged to be altogether powerless. (His being associated in his undertaking with other animals serves to intensify this impression of utter helplessness.) At the same time, and by reason of that very exclusion, man becomes the sole being capable of slaying Rāvaṇa, and, in that one respect at least, more powerful than the very gods.

Now, what are the necessary implications of our first explanation? Briefly, that the *Rāmāyaṇa*, viewed synoptically, must be offering us a celebration of human potentiality, a paean to man's endurance and triumph over superhuman adversity in an almost Sophoclean mode ("So many awful wonders, yet none more wonderful than man," etc.). It envisions, we would have to suppose, a man-centered cosmos—for let us remember, it is the poem itself that is raising the issue, and insistently, of the efficacy of man struggling against evil. I would submit, however, that there is no evidence at all elsewhere in the epic to support this supposition, and nothing whatever in traditional Indian culture that would make such an interpretation likely, or even possible.

If the theme of Rāvaṇa's boon does not, if it cannot serve to exalt the powers of man, then what is its function? what is it telling us? To my mind it implies that we cannot here be dealing with the simple story

¹⁸ I substantially agree with Govindarāja (*ayaṃ vakṣyamāno hetuḥ*, though he goes on to gloss *bhavadvadhatetuḥ*), against most of the other commentators in my interpretation of the verse.

¹⁹ There are several textual problems in vss. 25–26, though none of them, I think, major. I read with the vulgate in vs. 25, for as the northern recension serves to corroborate, and one of the oldest commentators, Rāmānuja, affirms, the reading *mānuṣaḥ* in *pāda* b is unquestionably a corruption. Note too that, while much of the southern recension (though not the vulgate) omits vs. 26ab, the idea has sufficient representation in the parallel tradition preserved in 1045*. Its absence in part of the southern recension may have been due to the belief that clarifying to Rāvaṇa the danger posed by Rāma (who, unlike Sugrīva, will indeed kill him), was aesthetically and/or narratively improper.

of a mortal hero, however powerful he may be, struggling with and overcoming a demonic creature (as in the stories of Theseus, Beowulf, Siegfried and the rest). For had that been the conception of the composer of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, there would have been no reason whatever to include, as a constituent component of the story, the motif of the boon. This has no other purpose that I can conceive of than to "problematize" the human dimension of the hero; the very *Fragestellung* inherent in theme itself provokes disbelief and uncertainty about that dimension. Besides linking up the narrative and its hero with an ancient mythic paradigm, which I believe can be demonstrated with adequate cogency, the boon-motif necessarily raises questions about the nature of the hero that need never and would never have been raised unless his nature were itself meant to be offered as matter for speculation, interrogation, and wonder. Everywhere the poem indicates that Rāvaṇa's assessment of man was the correct one. We are continually being reminded how impossible it is that a man should slay Rāvaṇa and the other *rākṣasas*, and thus, at the same time, we are being invited to conclude how improbable it is that Rāma is indeed a man.

The pathetic mortality, or presumed mortality, of the hero is the subject of continual allusion in the *Rāmāyaṇa*, something that occurs in no other epic tradition of which I am aware, and certainly not elsewhere in Indian epic literature. Naturally this is in part a direct function of the boon itself (which incidentally at the same time corroborates its narrative centrality), but the cumulative effect of the reiterated reference to Rāma's human limitations is, finally and perhaps designedly, to induce total incredulity in the audience, as in the characters themselves, about, precisely, his status as a human:

(Śūrpaṅkhā to Khara:) You aren't brave but merely a braggart and your prowess nothing but a sham, if you cannot kill Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa, mere human beings the two of them (III.20.16).

(Khara:) Were the King of the gods himself to come on his rutting elephant Airāvata and attack with thunderbolt in hand, I could, if angered, kill him in battle. What of two human beings! (III.22.24)

Fourteen thousand awesome *rākṣasas* were killed by a man, fighting all alone and on foot—Rāma (III.25.22; cf. 31.11, 34.8).

(Rāvaṇa to Mārīca:) You cannot talk me out of doing battle with Rāma—a man, after all, an evil foolish man . . . (III.38.4–5).

(Rāvaṇa to Sītā:) For you shall enjoy not only the pleasures mortals enjoy [cf. III.45.1], lovely lady, but divine pleasures, too, which will make you forget that mortal creature, Rāma (III.46.14; cf. 47.12 and *MBh.* III.265.28).

(Vinatā to Sītā:) Give your love to Rāvaṇa . . . and give up Rāma, a wretched mortal (V.22.18–19; cf. vss. 3–4).

(Rāvaṇa:) Rāma is a wretched mortal, all alone with only monkeys to aid him. How can you think him capable of doing anything . . . ? And I am lord of *rākṣasas*, a source of terror to the gods themselves! (VI.27.4–5)

(Rāvaṇa to Indrajit:) You defeated Indra in combat, one whose deeds have no peer. Shall you prove incapable of slaying two mortals when you face them in combat? (VI.67.3).²⁰

(The wives of Rāvaṇa:) He who filled Śakra and Yama with terror, who stripped Vaiśravaṇa of the aerial chariot, Puṣpaka, who struck wild terror into *gandharvas*, seers, and the great gods, here he lies slain in battle. He who knew no reason to fear *asuras*, gods, or serpents, had this to fear, and from a man. Gods could not kill him, nor could *dānavas* or *rākṣasas*, yet here he lies slain in battle by a mere man, fighting on foot. He whom gods could not slay, nor *yakṣas* or *asuras*, has found his death, like some utterly powerless being, at the hands of a mortal. (VI.98.12 ff.)

(Mandodarī laments Rāvaṇa's death:) But surely it was true, great-armed brother of Vaiśravaṇa, that even Indra himself, the breaker of fortresses, feared to stand face to face with you when angered. Surely the seers, veritable gods on earth, the glorious *gandharvas* and the *cāraṇas* took to the horizons in dread of you. And here you are, defeated in battle by Rāma, a mere man. Can you feel no shame, your Majesty? What can this mean, bull among *rākṣasas*? You bestrode the universe in all your royal majesty and might, no one could withstand you—and yet you have been slain by a man, a hermit of the forest. You could take on any form at will, and moved beyond the realm of mortals. It makes no sense that Rāma should have destroyed you in combat (VI.99.3 ff.).²¹

²⁰ Cf. the doublet VI.60.17 (belonging to the northern recension), which suggests that *dhṛṣṭyau* [for *dhṛṣṭvā*] is the probable reading here.

²¹ Into this category should be placed the repeated, and to my mind rather curious, epithets applied to Rāma: *gatāyuh*

Gradually from the many passages such as these with which the *Rāmāyaṇa* is laden, the mystery of Rāma's nature begins to emerge. "It makes no sense" that Rāma should destroy Rāvaṇa in combat—as a man, of course, "a mere mortal," it makes no sense. The supposition offered by the characters of the story, consequently, is that Rāma cannot be a man at all:

(Aviddha to Rāvaṇa, as reported by Saramā to Sītā:) Restore Sītā to the lord of men, and show him high honor. The miraculous events at Janasthāna are surely sufficient evidence for you . . . What man on earth could have slaughtered those *rākṣasas* in battle? (VI.25.21–22)

(Mālyavān to Rāvaṇa:) We believe that Rāma is Viṣṇu in a human body.²² Powerful Rāma cannot be a mere man, not he who bridged the ocean, a most miraculous accomplishment. Rāvaṇa, make peace with Rāma, the king of men (VI.26.31–32).²³

(The lament of the *rākṣasa* women:) It must be Rudra or Viṣṇu, or great Indra, god of the hundred rites, or Death itself who has taken on the form of Rāma and is killing us . . . No god or *gandharva*, no *piśāca* or *rākṣasa* can save a creature attacked by Rāma in combat (VI.82.24 ff.).

(The lament of Mandodarī:) I cannot believe this deed was Rāma's that was done at the forefront of the army, that he should defeat you, who were fully prepared for any challenge. Long ago you conquered,

(e.g., III.46.14, 53.21; V.22.21); *parimitāyuh* (e.g., III.47.13); *kṣṇajīvitaḥ* (e.g., III.2.10, 21.3, 34.10). I would here only briefly point out that precisely such an antinomy (here the fact that a "mere man, fighting on foot," a "hermit of the forest" should become the slayer of Rāvaṇa), is masterfully exploited by author of the *Harivaṃśa*, particularly in Kāmsa's frenzied monologue in chapter 65 (cf. vs. 34, for example, "On the one hand there is this wretched cowherd, this man whose powers are sapped by death; and on the other, those wonders performed in my pasture-lands that only one powerful as a god could perform"). It may be that, like many of its other literary characteristics (cf. D. H. H. Ingalls, "The *Harivaṃśa* as *mahākāvya*," *Mélanges d'indianisme à la mémoire de Louis Renou* [Paris, 1968], p. 393), the *Harivaṃśa* borrowed this one also from the *Rāmāyaṇa*.

²² The northeast version reads, "in the deceitful form of a man."

²³ Kataka [and following him, Tilaka] call the verse an interpolation. The Telugu tradition alone, to which Kataka belongs, does not transmit it.

first your senses, and then the three worlds: Your senses remembered that enmity, and it is they who must now have conquered you. Or no, it must be Vāsava come in person in the form of Rāma, exerting his magic powers without warning, to destroy you.²⁴ For the very day your brother Khara, accompanied by all those *rākṣasas*, was killed in Janasthāna, I knew Rāma could not be a man (VI.99.8–11).²⁵

But again, the conditions of the boon, so frequently alluded to, must be kept securely in mind. If such references as these served only to show that Rāma is in fact a god, then the terms of the boon come into play, and Rāvaṇa need have had nothing to fear: A god cannot slay him. A mere man, *qua talis* could not possibly kill Rāvaṇa, but neither could a god, *qua talis*—and yet Rāvaṇa lies dead. The logic of the narrative is clearly encouraging us, if not requiring us, to conceive of some *intermediate* being that shares in both existential realms, combining and transfiguring the nature derived from each into some new and super-ordinated power—to conceive, in fact, of a god-man.

Besides the narrative logic of the poem, one can point to explicit statements that foster this conception. When Śūrpaṅkhā describes Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa to her brother Khara, saying "There have come two handsome young men, delicate yet powerful . . . They are the image of the king of *gandharvas*, and bear all the signs of royalty. Whether they are gods or men I cannot tell for certain" (III.18.11–12); when Sītā refers to Rāma as having "divine powers" (III.54.14) or Lakṣmaṇa speaks of him as "my brother, who has the powers of a god" (III.66.11), we might be inclined to dismiss it as so much epic hyperbole, along with all the other comparable similes (*devopama*-, "godlike," and so on), which I am ignoring here. But it becomes increasingly difficult not to take these statements at their face value when we encounter more pointed verses such as the following: "Your thoughts are too profound for even the gods to

²⁴ Cf. the insertion of the southern recension, 3114*: "But Indra is too weak; This must have been the great magician [*mahāyogin*] Viṣṇu. . ."

²⁵ To demonstrate this may, in fact, be the function of chapters 19–29 of the *Araṇyakāṇḍa* (note that the northern recension here adds similar verses about Rāma's slaying of Vālin and Mārīca, 3115*). Nīlakaṅṭha Dīkṣita, the learned seventeenth century poet, makes precisely this point in his *Rāmāyaṇasārasaṃgraharaghuvīrastava*, vs. 12 (see the edition of Pierre-Sylvain Filliozat, *Oeuvres poétiques de Nīlakaṅṭha Dīkṣita* Vol. I [Pondichery, 1967], pp. 178 ff.).

fathom, wise brother," Lakṣmaṇa says to Rāma when in Book III he is ready to destroy the worlds in a fit of rage over the loss of Sītā. "Be aware of your powers, which are as much divine as human."²⁶

No doubt we encounter in other epic traditions frequent reference to what might be judged no more than a semi-divine status of the hero—*theoikeilos axilleús*, for example, to go no further afield than the *Iliad*. Yet in such cases the descriptions are purely rhetorical, and this is made quite clear when Homer is compelled to explain, *theoi dé te phérteroi ándrōn* (II. XXI. 264; in Pope's epigrammatic version, "The first of men [Achilles], but not a match for Gods"). It is precisely the asymmetry between the hero's aspiration to divinity and his irreducible humanity that lies at the core of Homeric and much other Indo-European epic poetry. As one of the wisest of contemporary Hellenists put it in describing just this contrariety (what he has termed "the heroic paradox"), such allusions as the epithet I cite above "imply a kind of absolute status which the hero strives to gain," although at the same time he possesses "a desperate self-knowledge" of his mortality and ineluctably advancing death.²⁷ The comparable passages in the *Rāmāyaṇa*, taken in their all-important, determinative context of the boon—which as we saw categorically debars gods and implicitly debars men—acquire a peculiarly mythic resonance markedly different from that of the Greek epic with its pervasive tragic humanism. And much of the narrative of the *Rāmāyaṇa* seems in fact to serve little other purpose than to amplify this resonance (it assuredly does not serve to lay stress upon his frail humanity), till such point as Rāma's unique status, as this sort of second-power being, forces itself unmistakably upon our awareness.

THE MORPHOLOGY OF THE BOON-MOTIF

The theme of Rāvaṇa's boon, considered morphologically, so to speak, opens a similar perspective, from where we perceive far more than a simple human

aspect in Rāma, more too than a "superhuman" aspect. He exceeds the one no less than the other because, as the structure of the narrative itself seems to urge us to recognize, he is some altogether new order of being.

If the thematic structure of the *Rāmāyaṇa* will be seen to necessitate our transferring the narrative to the level of mythic struggle, so too does the very character of the antagonist. How unlike the second great epic, the *Mahābhārata*, is Vālmīki's poem with respect to the dimensions of the struggle in which the hero is engaged; how formidable and vast, on an altogether unearthly scale, is the demonic power of the foe:

[Śūrpaṅakhā] found Rāvaṇa in his splendid palace, radiant in his power . . . He was a hero invincible in combat with gods, *gandharvas*, spirits or great seers. He looked like Death itself with its jaws agape. He carried wounds from lightning bolts received in clashes with gods and *asuras*. His chest was seamed with scars where Airāvata's pointed tusks had gored him. Twenty arms he had and ten necks . . . In combat with the gods his body had been injured in hundreds of places, by blows from Viṣṇu's discus and all the other weapons of the gods. With no effort he could perturb the imperturbable seas, throw down mountain-tops and crush the gods . . . It was he who had gone to the city of Bhogavatī, defeated Vāsuki and Takṣaka . . . It was he who had gone to Mount Kailāsa and conquered the man-borne Kubera . . . It was he who in his mighty rage would destroy the gardens of the gods . . . It was he who, tall as a mountain peak, would stretch out his arms and stop the glorious powers, the sun and moon, from rising . . . He was Rāvaṇa, "who makes all creatures wail," the terror of all the worlds. (III.30.4–20).²⁸

The scale of evil envisioned by the poet, spanning the universe from the nether regions to the heavens, carries us well beyond the world of most familiar Indo-European epics where the powers of the antagonist, if sometimes exaggerated, generally retain dimensions that are meaningfully human. The lord of *rākṣasas*²⁹ exceeds the human capacity for evil to an

²⁶ III.62.19. See also the note on II.17.26 (in my annotated translation of the *Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa*, Vol. II: *Ayodhyākāṇḍa* [Princeton, in press]) on the age of Rāma. With the sole, and inconsistent, exception of northeast manuscripts (which, as I believe I have shown, misunderstood and revised), the tradition unanimously makes him twenty-five years old (III.45.10), "and that, they say," as Rāma himself explains for us, "is always the age of gods" (III.4.14).

²⁷ C. H. Whitman, *The Heroic Paradox* (Ithaca, 1982), p. 22.

²⁸ On the name "Rāvaṇa" cf. the note on III.30.20 (in my forthcoming translation of the work), and observe that this popular etymology and its cosmic dimension is corroborated by so (relatively) early a text as the *Harivaṃśa*, *trailokyārāvaṇaṃ krūraṃ rākṣasaṃ rākṣaseśvaram* (31.123).

²⁹ *Rākṣasas*, *asuras*, *dānavas*, and all the other cosmic powers of evil become virtually indistinguishable in epic

even greater degree than he exceeds, with his ten heads and his twenty arms, the physical power of human beings:

I am he who terrifies the worlds, the gods, *asuras* and serpents. I am Rāvaṇa, Sītā, supreme lord of the hosts of *rākṣasas* (III.45.22).

Their fear of me makes gods, *gandharvas*, *piśācas*, birds and serpents flee in terror, as all things born are put to flight by the fear of Death . . . At the mere sight of my face, Maithilī, once my anger has been provoked, the gods with Indra at their head flee in terror. In my presence the wind blows cautiously, and the sun's hot rays freeze in fear. The leaves on the trees stop rustling and the rivers slacken their current wherever I am present, wherever I might go (III.46.3, 7-9).³⁰

I 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. . . . (III.47.3-4).³¹

In general it is fair to say that the question of evil, even if indeed it ultimately has meaning primarily as a psychosocial problem of human life, is in Indian cultural history conceived and represented largely as a mythic problem on a cosmic plane. Here the demonic does not constitute itself as a patently human issue; it is not formulated in human terms at all. It defines itself only against the divine, as the latter defines itself

literature (cf., for example, E. W. Hopkins, *Epic Mythology* [Strassburg, 1915], p. 48, and below, n. 63). For further remarks on *rākṣasas*, see "Rākṣasas and Others" (*Indologica Taurinensia*, forthcoming).

³⁰ When searching for his wife Rāma comes to the Godāvarī river and cries out over the waters, "Where is Sītā?" And then, "The animals urged the river, 'Tell him about his love,' but she refused to reveal Sītā's fate, no matter how plaintively Rāma asked. For the river was thinking about the evil Rāvaṇa, how he looked, what he could do, and was too afraid to tell what had happened to Vaidehī" (III.60.8-9). Cf. also the threats made by the female *rākṣasas* to Sītā: "For fear of him the sun stops shining, the wind stops blowing—how shall you not yield to him?" (V.21.16).

³¹ It is rather instructive to compare these last verses with Sītā's description of Rāma later in the *Aranyakāṇḍa*: "He who could destroy the moon in the sky, who could send it crashing down to earth, or dry up the ocean, shall come here and set Sītā free" (III.54.11).

only against demonic.³² This is plainly all the truer with respect to evil of the magnitude of Rāvaṇa; the struggle against such evil, in Indian mythology, lies wholly outside the sphere of human participation.

That the universal order, no less than the terrestrial, is imperiled by the existence of Rāvaṇa should be clear from the citations I have already brought forward. That his extermination is indeed a matter of divine concern and intervention is something the poet takes pains to call to our attention at critical moments throughout the narrative.

The first intimation that Rāma's personal tragedy—his exclusion from succession to the kingship, and his banishment—is in fact an essential component in some far larger plan of action occurs in the second half of the *Ayodhyākāṇḍa*. En route to visit Rāma Bharata meets the seer Bharadvāja, who admonishes the young prince in the following words: "Bharata, you must not impute any fault to Kaikeyī. The banishment of Rāma will turn out to be a great blessing" (II.86.28). For an "original" audience the idea that any "great blessing" could come about as a result of the tragic events in Ayodhyā—the death of the king, the irreparable divisions in the palace, the disaffection of the entire populace—had to have seemed quite paradoxical. It is not till the very end of the second volume that some clarification is offered, when for the first time in Books II-VI Rāvaṇa's name is mentioned. Bharata has stubbornly refused to accede to Rāma's wishes to accept the kingship, in the manner that Rāma intends to accept his lot. It is the intervention of semi-divine beings that seems to turn the balance: "Then all at once the hosts of seers [i.e., the invisible "seers, perfected beings and supreme seers" (vs. 1), the "*gandharvas*, great seers and royal seers" (vs. 7)], eager for the destruction of Ten-necked Rāvaṇa, spoke in a body to Bharata" (II.104.4).³³

What had appeared to be a localized, circumscribed, self-contained set of social and political problems in the "City of Ayodhyā," the poet now intimates is part of some divine purpose, one which, like all such concerted activity of the gods, is made necessary by the periodic recrudescence of demonic evil. The *Ayodhyākāṇḍa*, given the peculiar focus of its social vision,

³² Further thoughts on these issues may be found in W. O'Flaherty, *The Origins of Evil in Hindu Mythology* (Berkeley, 1976), pp. 9, 58.

³³ See my note ad loc. While I am still inclined to fault the passage on aesthetic grounds, I am considerably more sceptical about, if not prepared to recant altogether, the text-critical remarks I make there.

was an inappropriate arena for anything more than these very fragmentary revelations. Quite different is the *Aranyakāṇḍa*, where Rāma finds himself in a realm that transcends the human world to the same degree that it descends to the demonic. The very gods now present themselves to corroborate for us the heavenly plan to which all the hero's suffering is meant to contribute; and the demons themselves do likewise, to allow Rāma to advance it.

While proceeding to the ashram of the sage Śara-bhaṅga,

Rāma saw a great marvel. He saw the lord of the wise gods himself, his body luminous as fire or the sun . . . As [Rāma] was advancing Indra, lord of Śacī, caught sight of him. He took leave of Śarabhaṅga, then turned to the wise gods and said, "That man approaching is Rāma. Before he can address me, lead me off to my residence; hereafter he may see me. 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 any one else." So Indra spoke, wielder of the thunderbolt (III.4.4-5, 17-20).³⁴

This somewhat mysterious passage raises several pertinent questions that the traditional interpretation alone seems capable of addressing effectively (the incarnate god is, or in this particular case must be, ignorant of his divinity; see below, cf. n. 89). But what is of immediate interest is how it intensifies our suspicion of some vaster, in fact cosmic, background of the

action of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. This is finally confirmed by the events that happen at the abduction of Sītā:

When Vaidehī was assaulted a blinding darkness enveloped the world, the whole world without end, all things that move and do not move. With his divine eye Brahmā saw poor Sītā defiled. "What had to be done has been done," the majestic Grandfather murmured . . . As [Rāvaṇa] carried Vaidehī over Varuṇa's abode, the waves heaved wildly, and the fish and serpents were trapped deep below. Then, celestial musicians hovering in mid-air raised a clamor, and perfected beings cried out, "This is the end of Rāvaṇa!" (III.50.9-10; 52.9-10).³⁵

And Sītā herself will later tell Rāvaṇa, "I know for certain I could never have been stolen away from the wise Rāma, were it not that Fate had destined it—to bring about your death" (V.20.21).

There are two more short passages that I should like briefly to consider in light of those already adduced. Text-critically there is nothing to speak against the verses. Not only are they fully represented in every recension and version of the poem, but often they (or the environment in which they are embedded) offer precisely those sorts of inter-recensional variants which, to my mind, certify their existence during the period of the oral transmission of the poem.³⁶ Yet they have often been called into question on the grounds of "higher" criticism, as being somehow out of keeping with the overall character and concerns of Books II-VI.³⁷

The first occurs late in the sixth book, when after the defeat of Rāvaṇa Rāma's long-dead father comes before him on a celestial chariot. In a moving passage entirely worthy of the monumental poet Daśaratha says, "Now at last I understand, dear son, how it was

³⁴ Later on, in III.29.29-32, after the defeat of Khara and the fourteen thousand *rākṣasas*, the "royal seers and supreme seers" will assemble, and tell Rāma that "It was to this end that the great and mighty Indra . . . paid his visit to the holy ashram of Śarabhaṅga. The great seers contrived a means of bringing you into this region in order to slay these savage, evil *rākṣasas*." But Indra does not, as promised, appear to Rāma here, and in fact will not until after the death of Rāvaṇa (VI.105), where interestingly a verse is found virtually identical to one here in the *Aranyakāṇḍa* ("You have done what we required, son of Daśaratha [champion of righteousness]," III.29.32 = VI.105.26). The whole story of Khara is typologically a clear prefigurement of the Rāvaṇa episode, and one suspects the poet of III.4 in fact had the latter rather than the former in mind when composing the Indra passage of Book III. For further remarks on this episode, especially the traditional interpretation of Indra's reluctance to converse with Rāma, see the notes in my edition ad loc.

³⁵ Mālyavān, the venerable great-grandfather of Rāvaṇa, later urges the demon king to restore Sītā to Rāma, and make peace with him; since "the gods and seers and *gandharvas* wish him victory," it is useless to fight him (VI.26.10).

³⁶ Pollock in Goldman, op. cit.; cf. VI.1864*, 1865*, 1866*, etc.; VI.3278*, 3298*, etc.

³⁷ The first from at least as early as Muir (" . . . this chapter, as it now stands, could not have formed part of the original *Rāmāyaṇa*," op. cit., p. 178), to, most recently, van Daalen ("[I]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*" [*Vālmīki's Sanskrit* (Leiden, 1980)] p. 139; cf. p. 190).

by the gods' doing that [you,] supreme among men [*puruṣottama*],³⁸ were destined for this, for bringing about the death of Rāvaṇa . . . You have completed your stay in the forest, and kept your promise; you have fulfilled the wishes of the gods by killing Rāvaṇa in battle" (VI.107.17, 22). The second is a more extended passage occurring during the lament of the *rākṣasa* women, just before Rāvaṇa is slain:

The Grandfather had once been won over by Rāvaṇa, and granted that he should never suffer harm at the hands of gods, *dānavas*, *rākṣasas*. But he had never asked for that with respect to men, and now it is from a man that harm is coming, we are certain, terrible harm that shall take the life of Rāvaṇa, and of every *rākṣasa* . . . When the *rākṣasa* had got his boon, he began to oppress the gods with his power. They went and paid homage to the Grandfather where he sat blazing with ascetic splendor. The Grandfather was gratified and for their welfare the great one spoke these great words to the deities: "For evermore from this day forth all *dānavas* and *rākṣasas* shall eternally roam the universe overmastered with fear". . . The gods then convened and under the lead of Indra they all propitiated the great god, the bull-bannered destroyer of the Triple City.³⁹ The great god was propitiated, and said to the deities, "For your welfare there shall come into being a woman, to bring destruction upon the *rākṣasas*" [Cf. III.52.6, 11]. . . And Sītā must be she, employed now by the gods to slay the *rākṣasas*—as once, long ago, Hunger slew the *dānavas*—and she shall devour us, us and Rāvaṇa as well. (VI.82.29–36).⁴⁰

I think we can now see that, in the total context of Books II–VI of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, there is little that argues against, and much that argues for the authenticity of these last two passages. They now appear to

³⁸ Or indeed, "Supreme [i.e., Primal] Being;" on this see further below. Note that both Maheśvaratīrtha and Govindarāja read the vocative here (not reported in the critical edition). The northern recension gives for the second half-verse, "That You incarnated Yourself in this world [or, on earth]."

³⁹ Tilaka remarks that Brahmā had ordained only that the *dānavas* and *rākṣasas* live in terror; Rudra would provide for their annihilation.

⁴⁰ Cf. III.35.5, where Sītā is suspected of being "destined from birth" to take Rāvaṇa's life. The theme doubtless contributed to the creation, or absorption, of the story of Vedavatī, *Uttarakāṇḍa* 17.

be, not afterthoughts or isolated allusions, without meaningful reference, but part of a design. And again, the cumulative impact of such periodic revelations, whether direct or oblique, is to alter fundamentally the perspective in which we view the story, and lend it dimensions of a cosmic magnitude. Once more, and rather plainly, the assumption is encouraged that the human narrative is intricately meshed with, and finally subsidiary to, a divine plan, in which Rāma (along with Sītā)⁴¹ has for some reason been appointed the principal actor. The character of Rāvaṇa, as we have had a chance to see, reinforces this assumption. So does the boon-motif itself, morphologically considered. Its mythic armature, the very formula by which it is constituted posits this signification, and at the same time clarifies why it is that this "mere man" should have become the instrument of a cosmic purpose.

The boon, to recall its specifics, was granted to Rāvaṇa by Brahmā in response to the intense asceticism the *rākṣasa* had performed over thousands of years, and it provided that he could never be slain "by gods, *dānavas*, *gandharvas*, *piśācas*, birds or serpents." It is virtually formulaic in epic and puranic literature that the performance of *tapah* compels the divine regents of the universe, however unwilling, to give free play to the forces of evil. Quite mechanistically "holy" ascetic self-mortification can oblige the gods to cede the power by which alone they can maintain their supremacy: that deriving from immortality, won by them at such great cost at the churning of the empyreal ocean, and laid up in heaven where it is jealously guarded. But the very formulation of these boons always works to ensure their subversion.

The gods may never in such circumstances actually grant immortality itself, as the *Mahābhārata* often tells us (I.201.20 ff; VIII.24.6 ff., etc.). Yet like so many others Rāvaṇa seeks to achieve the same result by a gambit widely familiar in folklore, by attempting to frame the perfect wish. The sheer impossibility of an exhaustive catalogue, however (in this case overdetermined by Rāvaṇa's scornfully discounting man altogether), immediately implies that a solution is assured; the very provisions of the boon make it inevitable that some proxy will be found. Not a god, since the gods have become, so to speak, contractually

⁴¹ As has long been maintained, given Sītā's birth-story (I.65, II.110) and the radical signification of her name (literally, "furrow," or in my view, "crown land"), she would represent some kind of earth goddess; in a more Frazerian reading of the epic, perhaps specifically the Earth goddess joined by a *hieros gamos* to the sacral king.

impotent; nor yet a man, men being constitutionally impotent, the "food" of *rākṣasas*. Instead it must be some fusion of the two, a god-man.

The divine plan sketched out above is in part a manifestation of these thematic implications. Moreover, the formulation of the boon itself, a "morpheme" of Indian myth reverting, it seems, to the earliest stratum of Indo-Aryan mythopoesis,⁴² inherently entails the counteraction of the boon by some previously nonexistent creature or phenomenon, either one purely deceptive or else—and this is more frequent—one entirely outside the catalogue of natural possibility.

I want now to demonstrate how this morpheme functions as a structural feature of much epic myth-making. I shall suggest additionally that it has roots discernible in the Vedic tradition, and comes to be particularly and intimately associated with the corpus of Vaiṣṇava mythology. Several familiar instances of the motif in the *Mahābhārata* come immediately to mind, which may serve to illustrate most of its principal features, and indicate some of the essential meanings and implications it can bear.

In *MBh.* I.201 is found the *itihāsa purātana* of Sunda and Upasunda, brothers born in the line of the "great *asura*" Hiraṇyakaśipu. Inseparable companions and deeply devoted to one another they together resolve to conquer the universe, and go off to the Vindhya mountains to practice *tapah*. The gods fear their growing ascetic power and try to disrupt and ruin their mortifications by seducing them with precious objects, women, and the like. But they are unsuccessful, and in the end the Grandfather must appear before them and grant them a boon. In addition to magic powers, they seek immortality, the one thing Brahmā must withhold, since they had not been disinterested in their practice of asceticism and instead

⁴² Curiously the motif of the boon granted in recompense of asceticism has never to my knowledge been subjected to detailed examination, despite its prevalence in the literature. In fact, I am unable to find much outside of Hopkins rather silly comment that "the weakness of the gods mentally continually leads to their giving boons to their cunning foes" (Hopkins, *op. cit.*, p. 43). Hopkins failed to comprehend that this mechanistic dynamic is of the very substance of *tapah* and yoga (for it is a commonplace in Indian texts that ascetic renunciation, if once undertaken, must some day, inevitably, bear its fruit). The gods grant the boons under a compulsion that is beyond their power to control, yet the terms by which they do grant them demonstrate, precisely, their comprehensive foresight.

sought definite (and malevolent) ends. "But," says Brahmā, "you may choose some way of dying that will make you as good as deathless" (I.201.20; on this often misunderstood line see Nīlakaṇṭha *ad loc.*). They reply, "Let us have nothing to fear from anything existing [*bhūtam*] in the three worlds, anything that moves or does not move—anything, Grandfather, but ourselves" (201.23). There must of course be some omission in their request of invulnerability—otherwise they would indeed be immortal—and so they choose what alone seems to them unthinkable as source of danger. Brahmā agrees, and in the possession of their boon the demons attack the gods, conquer heaven and the netherworld, and coming to earth slaughter kings and brahmins, on whose sacrifices the power of the gods depends. The seers appeal to Brahmā, who reveals the way to slay the demons. Viśvakarman is asked to create a woman, and gathering "every existing thing in the three worlds, everything that moves and does not move, that was beautiful" (203.12), the divine craftsman thereby fashions a new creature whose beauty was unlike that of any female in the three worlds (203.14). Sunda and Upasunda see her, fall to fighting over her, and so kill each other.

The cosmic dimension of the story is worth singling out first of all. The boon activates a power that throws the universe—the triple world of heaven, earth, and the underworld—into turmoil, making divine intervention unavoidable. The catalogue of conditions in the boon requested by the *asuras* is familiar, as is the use of a ruse to obviate them. The demons had aimed at and nearly achieved the exhaustive list; what they neglected to include was the composition or conflation of already existing components or substances into some new and hitherto nonexistent being, emanating from the gods and yet not one of them. And it is this, and this alone, that is able to trigger the necessary yet seemingly unattainable event, the fratricidal conflict.

A second epic example of the motif is contained in the well-known story of the demon Tāraka and the birth of Skanda (the version to which I refer here is found in *Mahābhārata* XIII.83–86). When after their marriage the divine couple Śiva and Umā begin their love-making, the gods grow fearful lest the offspring of such a union bring about universal destruction, and therefore implore Śiva to withhold his seed. He agrees, but Umā, furious that the chance of her bearing children is ruined, curses the gods to be childless themselves. Agni, the god of fire, was absent at the time of the curse. A drop of Śiva's seed, moreover, had fallen from him and into Agni, where it grew

great. Now, at this time, oppressed by the demon Tāraka, the gods and all other divine creatures seek the aid of Brahmā, explaining, "The Blessed One gave the *daitya* a boon, and he has become overweening in his power. The gods cannot kill him. How then is he to be quelled? For the boon he acquired from you, Grandfather, was this: 'Let me be invulnerable to gods, *asuras*, *rākṣasas*.' And the gods have now been cursed by Rudrāṇī [= Umā] when we ruined her chance of bearing children."⁴³ She said, 'You shall never have offspring,' lord of the universe" (XIII.84.5–7). And Brahmā replies, "Agni was not there, at the time of the curse, best of gods. He shall produce a child to slay this enemy of the gods. And that shall be a creature transcending the gods, *dānavas*, and *rākṣasas*, *gandharvas*, men, serpents and birds . . ." (84.8–9). Skanda is later born, and slays Tāraka (XIII.86).

As in the previous myth, in addition to the boon granted by Brahmā, the catalogue of divine powers excluded by it, and the ensuing cosmic peril, we find that once again some being of an entirely new order is required (here its engenderment seems designedly complicated by the story of the curse of Umā). It is different from and greater than any existent divinity insofar as its biological status, so to speak, is conformable to none of theirs, and in fact is antinomic: It is the seed of Śiva, borne by Fire (Agni), fertilizing Water (the Ganges) (84.52 ff., especially vs. 75), and brought forth simultaneously by six different mothers, whereupon its several parts miraculously merge (86.5 ff.).

Especially provocative is the myth of the *asura* Hiraṇyakaśipu and his death at the hands of Viṣṇu in the form of a man-lion. Probably the earliest version is that contained in the *Mahābhārata* tradition,⁴⁴ but on narratological grounds one infers that the story must have been well and widely known before that, given the terse, highly elliptical form it here exhibits⁴⁵:

Moreover, the great-armed [Viṣṇu] took on a form that had never before existed: The Lord made one half of his body a man's, the other half a lion's, and rubbing his hands together he went to the assembly

⁴³ An unidentified commentary, cited in the critical notes ad loc., is I believe in error here.

⁴⁴ P. Hacker, *Prahlāda, Werden und Wandlungen einer Idealgestalt* (Mainz, 1959), pp. 25–26 and n. 1.

⁴⁵ Note that the myth supplies material for paradigmatic reference in the old battle-books of the epic; see for example *MBh.* VII.164.146; 168.21 (cf. also III.100.20).

hall of the lord of *daityas*. The Primal Being [*ādipur-ruṣa*] of the *daityas*, the enemy of the gods, the delight of Diti, saw that form, one such as had never before been seen, and his eyes blazed red in anger. Hiraṇyakaśipu . . . closed with the man-lion, the far mightier lord of beasts . . . and with its razor-sharp claws the man-lion's body tore the demon to pieces (III.27*.53–62).

The story, as I have suggested, must have been known in a fuller form, one that supplied the answer to the question quite naturally raised by the present account: why the form of a man-lion?⁴⁶ In the next earliest stratum of textual history of the myth, one that placed considerably less value on breviloquence, the answer is supplied:

Long ago, in the Kṛta age, the haughty enemy of the gods, the Primal Being of *daityas*, practiced austerities for ten thousand years, and ten hundred years, and five . . . Brahmā was pleased with his asceticism and acts of self-denial, and appeared before him in person. . . . "Please choose a boon," he said, "and fulfil whatever desire you wish." Hiraṇyakaśipu replied, "O best of gods, let me never be slain by any gods, *gandharvas*, *yakṣas*, *rākṣasas*, *piśācas* or men. . . ." (*Harivaṃśa* 31.32–43; cf. *MBh.* II.21*.170 ff.⁴⁷)

The cosmic dimension of the myth is clearly revealed as well. When asking for his boon Hiraṇyakaśipu also demands that he be permitted to assume the roles of "the sun and moon, wind and fire and water, the sky, the constellations, the ten directions; Anger, Desire, Varuṇa, Vāsava, Yama . . ." (31.44–5). The demon predictably proceeds to terrorize the worlds. The gods, none of whom could kill him,⁴⁸ take refuge with Brahmā, who explains that Viṣṇu shall slay him. The supreme god's contrivance of the *apūrvavapuḥ*, "an embodiment that had never before existed," is once

⁴⁶ Surprisingly this is the one question Hacker did not ask (op. cit., p. 26).

⁴⁷ The text and interpolations here, as in later versions of the myth, extend the list to exclude death by any weapon, by anything wet or dry, neither by night nor by day, in the sky or on the ground, inside or outside (see also *MBh.* II.21*.194–199), which together result in the elaboration in later renditions, that Viṣṇu slays the demon at sundown, emerging from a pillar in his palace, and so on.

⁴⁸ Cf. also 31.63; the connection with the *rāmāvatāra*, 31.123, can hardly be missed.

more a miraculous life-form necessitated by the comprehensive exclusions of the boon.⁴⁹

Whatever the further text-critical and religious-historical complications of the man-lion myth,⁵⁰ perhaps this account may suffice as one additional illustration in support of the claim I wish to make. There appears to be an established constellation of mythological components in these narratives: a boon awarded in consequence of ascetic practices; an ensuing threat of cosmic evil; the intervention of the divine and its transmutation into some preternatural phenomenal form that circumvents the boon's apparent all-inclusiveness by a predicatable stratagem; the uncontainability of the divine within any quotidian taxonomy of possibilities. And this constellation constitutes in epic literature a definite pattern of expectation.

To some degree this seems to be a particularly ancient pattern, as a brief digression into Vedic mythology will make clear.

Indra and Namuci, the "wily" *asura*, engage in a cosmic struggle according to a myth that reverts to the *ṚgVeda*.⁵¹ From the very beginning of the tradition the narrative has a manifest soteriological aspect: Indra's slaying the demon is intended "to grant free movement to Manu," that is, to man.⁵² In the Taittirīya version as given by Bloomfield,

Indra, having slain Vṛtra, and having overcome the Asuras, did not catch the *asura* Namuci. But by means of Śacī (his might) Indra seized him. They

closed upon one another. Namuci was more successful than this one. Namuci said: "Let us form an agreement; then I will let you down: you shall not slay me with anything dry nor with anything wet, neither by day nor by night." (*TaiBr.* 1.7.1.6).⁵³

The conclusion of the tale, as given in the *Maitrāyaṇī Saṃhitā*, is arresting yet thematically now quite recognizable: "At sunrise Indra spread a foggy mist, and with the foam of the sea cut off Namuci's head" (*MaiSam.* IV.3.4).⁵⁴

In this myth we do not have to do with a boon, strictly speaking; the texts allude instead to an agreement struck between the two when, unleashing his superior power, Namuci grievously threatens Indra. But this is precisely a feature most often associated with the boon motif: The demon employs his (ascetic) power to compel the divine to observe certain seemingly iron-clad conditions, allowing the demonic to exercise the full scope of its might. Indra's "solution," moreover, exploits a miraculous fusion of elements by now familiar: the creation of some unnatural time that is neither day nor night, and the transformation of the soft foam into a weapon of decapitation.

A second example of the Vedic antecedence of these themes is offered by the narrative of the dwarf incarnation of Viṣṇu.⁵⁵ Allusions to the story are frequent in the earliest strata of Vedic literature, although the first connected narrative is that of the *Maitrāyaṇī Saṃhitā*:

[The gods wanted to recover their realm from the demons.] They turned Viṣṇu into a dwarf and brought him [to the demons]. "Whatever he might cover in

⁴⁹ Both here, at 31.52, and in the second *Harivaṃśa* version, App. I #42A, 49–50, we are told that the demon "must needs attain the rewards of his asceticism, and when it has come to an end Viṣṇu shall slay him." I fail to comprehend the purport of this. When the power derived from his asceticism comes to an end, surely any of the gods could slay the demon. But then, too, boons are never said to expire. Have we here some sort of inept conflation of discrete motifs?

⁵⁰ Cf. Hacker, *op. cit.*, pp. 27 and n. 1, 28.

⁵¹ Most of the materials for the early history of the story are assembled in M. Bloomfield, "Contributions to the Interpretation of the Veda, I: The Story of Indra and Namuci," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 15 (1893), pp. 143–163; For Namuci as the "wily" *asura*, see *ṚgVeda* I.53.7.

⁵² As Gonda no doubt correctly understands it (J. Gonda, *Die Religionen Indiens, Vol. I: Veda und älterer Hinduismus* [Stuttgart, 1960], p. 58; cf. *ṚgVeda* V.30.7).

⁵³ Bloomfield, *op. cit.*, p. 147. Sāyaṇa elsewhere explains, "Indra conquered all the *asuras*, but Namuci was greater than all of them . . . and greater in strength than Indra himself. He seized him and said, 'I shall let you go only if you not slay me . . .'" (ad *PañcBr.* XII.6.8).

⁵⁴ This version is the one that was largely adopted by the epic poets, cf. for example *MBh.* IX.42.31 (n.b. *śṛṣṭvā* for the vulgate *dṛṣṭvā*). In other Brāhmaṇa texts Indra slays Namuci just before sunrise, at dawn (cf. Bloomfield, *op. cit.*, pp. 155–156). That the story of the ruse itself reverts to the oldest stratum of Vedic myth is suggested by *ṚgVeda* VIII.14.13, where Indra "twists off" the head of Namuci with the "foam of water."

⁵⁵ See the monograph of G. C. Tripathi, *Der Ursprung und die Entwicklung der Vāmana-Legende in der indischen Literatur* (Wiesbaden, 1968), where most of the relevant data is collected.

three strides shall belong to us [the rest to you]." He strode first over this, then this, then that [= earth, sky, heaven]. (*MaiSam* III.7.9).⁵⁶

Neither in this version nor in any of the others found in the Vedic texts are we informed how the demons had acquired the power to seize control of the universe. In the epic and earliest puranic accounts, however, where the demon Bali replaces the anonymous horde of *asuras*, the standard motif resurfaces:

Bali, the great *asura*, had become invulnerable to all creatures, and you [Viṣṇu] took on the form of a dwarf and ousted him from the triple world. (*MBh.* III.100.21)

Brahmā, the granter of boons, granted that you [Bali] attain the power of Indra, that you be deathless and unconquerable in battle. (*HariVa.* App. I #42B, ll. 2325–2327 [= III.63.5–6 vulg.])⁵⁷

But it is interesting that the motif is thereupon subject to a slight inversion; it is now the demons/Bali who for their part dispense a boon to Viṣṇu. The dwarf is given as much land as he can cover in three steps and, as the *Mahābhārata* tradition puts it, "Hari took on a divine, utterly miraculous form as he strode out, and with three strides he took all the earth" (*MBh.* III.27*.79). Once again, from the very earliest Vedic texts, and in a way seemingly first deriving from, and then displacing that of Indra, these strides have been associated with Viṣṇu's soteriological mission.⁵⁸ And indeed, in the later versions of the epic Bali—exactly like Hiraṇyakaśipu, and Rāvaṇa—is regularly represented as a power of cosmic dimensions: "It was Bali who made the sun set, and the lightning light up the horizons . . . He was Wind and Varuṇa, lord of waters, the sun and moon; he was Fire that burns all living

things, and the Earth" (*MBh.* XII.216.5–6; cf. *HariVa.* App. I #42B, ll. 2322–2324 [= III.63.4 vulg.]).

Naturally we may be inclined to judge that in this last instance the motif of the miraculous transformation represented from the beginning little more than a trickster's "stratagem to avert the suspicion of the *asuras*."⁵⁹ But the myth does fit quite easily into the pattern that I have been tracing, and in that environment the "stratagem" seems to recover something of its fundamental antinomic signification, which may derive from an intimation, deeply felt because so widely recurring, of the nature of the divine. As in the case of the myths of Namuci, the man-lion and an array of others, an attempt is made to give expression to the incomprehensible character of the divine, whereby we can begin to comprehend that it does not exist within the world of nature, "the realm of necessity;" that it is not constrained by the limits of the possible. No inventory of the physical world, however exhaustive, can subsume the capabilities of what transcends all natural categories. Thus on the one hand the divine may not be what it very well seems to be (the dwarf, for example), and on the other can indeed be what has never been seen to be (the man-lion).⁶⁰

⁵⁹ A. A. Macdonell, *Vedic Mythology* (Strassburg, 1897), p. 41; see also J. Gonda, *Aspects of Early Viṣṇuism* (Utrecht, 1954; reprinted Delhi, 1969), p. 146.

⁶⁰ I do not intend here to take up the conceptual consequences of these theological speculations, namely, the development of the avatar-doctrine in ancient India (some preliminary speculations are offered by P. Hacker, "Zur Entwicklung der Avatāralehre," *Weiner Zeitschrift für die Kunde Süd- und Ostasiens* 4 [1960], pp. 47–70); see also my brief remarks on p. 527. But it is clear that in Vaiṣṇava circles—along with their notions of immanent divinity, of a present god whose *vibhūtis* empower the world and yet who remains a *deus absconditus*, a god hidden by the vast powers of his *māyā* and deceit—the motif was adopted as a major component in their mythic representation of Viṣṇu's salvatory purpose. Note for example the interesting cosmogony of *MBh.* XII.337, when during Brahmā's demiurgic activity Viṣṇu reflects, "Brahmā has created all these creatures, *daityas*, *dānavas*, *gandharvas*, *rākṣasas*. . . . There are many of them on the earth, and they are powerful. They shall practice asceticism and acquire ultimate boons, and driven mad by their boons all without fail shall harass the gods, the seers, the ascetics. . . ." So [Viṣṇu] reflected, and he created many forms in order to make himself manifest [*prādhur-bhāvabhāvāyā*]: the boar, the man-lion, the dwarf, and the man [i.e., Rāma Dāsarathi]. "With these I shall slay the evil enemies of the gods" (vss. 29–36).

⁵⁶ Cf. Tripathi, op. cit., p. 35.

⁵⁷ When Indra attacks Bali he hears a divine voice that tells him, "Desist, you cannot slay Bali in combat. . . . He is superior by reason of the gift of the boon. . . . Only the Blessed One [Viṣṇu] shall be able to slay him. . . ." (*HariVa.* 64.21–25). And when the gods come to supplicate Viṣṇu, they explain, "By reason of the gift of the boon from Brahmā, [Bali] seized the whole world from us. . . . And it is said he is invulnerable to us all" (70.46–47; cf. also the remarks of Tripathi, op. cit., pp. 81 ff., especially p. 88).

⁵⁸ See *RgVeda* VI.49.13, "Three times did Viṣṇu measure out the terrestrial realms for the afflicted Manu," that is, again, man (above, n. 52); cf. Tripathi, op. cit., p. 4.

The figure of Rāma in the *Rāmāyaṇa* seems to have been conceived after the model furnished by this *mythe-cadre*.⁶¹ Neither a man nor even a “simple” god, he incorporates the two and so, in a sense, transcends them both.

When I speak of “myth” here, I am referring to a patterned representation of the world, with continuing and vital relevance to the culture, which furnishes a sort of invariable conceptual grid upon which variable and multifarious experience can be plotted and comprehended. It is this essential power imaginatively to interpret and explain reality, social no less than other aspects of reality, that seems to have gone unappreciated in previous treatments of the *Rāmāyaṇa* from the point of view of myth, which for the most part are carried out either so mechanically or reductively as to lose most claim to any meaningful heuristic value.⁶² Now, what to my mind constitutes the primary signification, the central explanatory moment, of this particular mythological map of experience as it pertains to the *Rāmāyaṇa* has so far not been truly illustrated in our survey (which has sought only to assemble the main building blocks of the myth). Just such an illustration, however, is provided in the last instance of the theme I want to look at.

What makes this final example, the tale of Dhundhumāra, so intriguing for our purposes is that,

⁶¹ As should be evident, I am primarily concerned here with a structure of thought, not a matter of literary history. None the less it is interesting and perhaps material to observe that Vālmīki knew well both the Bali and Namuci myths (see for example III.27.3, 29.28; also my note on II.5.9 and references there, and the securely attested vs., VI.47.119, “Rāghava charged at [Rāvaṇa] like Viṣṇu in a rage at the son of Virocana [Bali]. . . .”; cf. likewise the instructive simile at V.19.24: Rāma will recover Sītā the way Viṣṇu recovered Śrī with His three strides). And in fact a later rhapsode reveals the paradigm when he has Mārīca attempt to dissuade Rāvaṇa by saying, “The delight of the Raghos could slay Bali, or Namuci” (III.738*).

⁶² I refer not so much to Jacobi’s theory of the *Rāmāyaṇa* as a Vedic myth redivivus (op. cit., pp. 126–139), but rather to its present-day re-affirmation from the Dumézilian perspective (J. Puhvel, “Transposition of Myth to Saga in Indo-European Epic Narrative,” in M. Mayrhofer, et al., eds., *Antiquitates Indogermanicae: Gedenkschrift für Hermann Güntert* [Innsbruck, 1974], pp. 175–184), and the direct application to the *Rāmāyaṇa* of the *idéologie* in its pure, Procrustean form (D. Dubuisson, “Trois Thèses sur le Rāmāyaṇa,” *Annales; économies, sociétés, civilisations* 34 [1979], pp. 464–489).

besides his being an earthly king (indeed, a member of the Ikṣvāku dynasty itself, cf. *Rām.* II.102.11; 58.36), the protagonist stands in a relationship to divinity, here very clearly represented, that we shall discover to be paradigmatic for Indian kingship. Additionally, the narrative is in various ways homomorphic with the *Rāmāyaṇa*. The oldest version of it, in my opinion, is that occurring in the *Harivaṃśa* (9.46–77), but as was the case with the man-lion myth, this archaic version displays at times an elliptical character, making the presuppositions permitted only a widely-known narrative. The derivative version of the *Mahābhārata* (III.192–195) elaborates on these understatements.

The aged Ikṣvāku king Bṛhadāśva (vs. 43; cf. *MBh.* III.192.4, 7; 193), having set his son Kūvalāśva on the throne, retires to the forest. The sage Uttāṅka tries to stop him, seeking the king’s protection from the *rākṣasa*⁶³ Dhundhu, who lies beneath the sands of the ocean Ujjanaka practicing austerities in order to destroy the worlds, the Thirty Gods (*MBh.* III.193.18), and Viṣṇu himself with them (195.6).⁶⁴ “For the gods cannot slay him,” Uttāṅka explains (9.53), and the *Mahābhārata* clarifies: “The gods cannot slay him, nor can *daityas* or *rākṣasas*, *nāgas*, *yakṣas* or *gandharvas*—no one, for he once received a boon from the Grandfather of the world” (III.193.19; cf. 195.1–4). The king is asked to slay the demon “for the good of the worlds,” and Uttāṅka tells him further that Viṣṇu shall augment his power by means of his own divine might, thanks to a boon the god once granted the sage (9.59; *MBh.* III.193.24–25; cf. chapter 192 for the boon itself). But the aged king, having renounced all violence, declines to do the deed himself, and directs the sage to his son. Kūvalāśva and Uttāṅka proceed to the ocean and then “The Blessed One, Lord Viṣṇu, entered into him [Kūvalāśva] with his fiery power at the direction [*niyoga*-] of Uttāṅka, and for the good of the world” (9.65 = *MBh.* III.195.12, where *śāsana*-replaces *niyoga*-). By drinking up the tidal wave⁶⁵ caused by the demon’s earthquake, and with the water putting out the fire within it, the king, “a great yogin by means of [Viṣṇu’s] yoga” (9.74; cf. *MBh.* III.195.27

⁶³ *HariVa.* 9.73, cf. vs. 54; in *MBh.* III.192.26, he is an *asura*; in 193.16, a *dānava* (cf. above, n. 29).

⁶⁴ Once every year the demon would exhale, and thereby cause an earthquake; he would spew up dust “covering the path of the sun,” accompanied with flames, sparks and smoke (*HariVa.* 9.55–57; *MBh.* III.193.21–22).

⁶⁵ In *MBh.* III.195.27c *tejaḥ* seems pretty clearly to have been corrupted from *vegam*, cf. *HariVa.* 9.74.

and 192.28), kills the volcanic Dhundhu (and so receives the name Dhundhumāra).

Once again, thus, almost as if it were obligatory, a narrative situation is designed that points up the sheer incapacity of the gods, or of any other divine or semi-divine being, to confront and overmaster evil on their own. (That the threat here is clearly geophysical is quite beside the point. The Indian epic vision of evil appears not to regard it as divisible—there are no discrete spheres of moral or ethical as opposed to natural evil, for example—but rather as forming one interlocking system.) Another being, man, is once again required, but here man's natural incapacity is emphatically demonstrated by the need for the infusion in him of Viṣṇu's power (*nārāyaṇa tejaḥ*, 9.69, *MBh.* III.195.18). Filled with the divine potency, this extraordinary new creature, the earthly king—and only he, no god or man—can protect the brahmanical world-order (represented by Uttāṅka) by destroying evil.⁶⁶

I hope that the primary thrust of these different versions of the same basic motif has now begun to make itself felt. The catalogue of the boon does not imply that the slayer can be merely a creature that has been inadvertently omitted from the list. If explicitly excluded, he must then be charged with some divine potency; if not (and this amounts to much the same thing), he must be an altogether new being, one not substantively comparable to any hitherto conceivable life-forms. In the case of Dhundhumāra and Rāma it is rather clear we are not in the presence of heroes of

the sort familiar to us from Western epic, for such heroes are men who do more than ordinary men, not more than gods. These by contrast are men who do what, for some reason, gods cannot. Not merely more than human, it seems they are in some way more than divine. Finally, what makes the adaptation of the ancient motif particularly suggestive, complex, and powerful in the *Rāmāyaṇa* is the fact that this second-order being, this divine human or mortal god, is here coupled with a socio-political representation of everyday life in traditional India: Such intermediate beings, gods who walk the earth in the form of men, are kings.

THE DIVINE KING IN ANCIENT INDIA,
AND THE INTERPRETATION OF THE *RĀMĀYAṆA*

In adequately tracing the history of any idea in ancient India we face peculiar difficulties because of the limitations imposed by the almost exclusively ritual character of our earliest documents. But if the exact lines of historical development of this particular facet of "everyday life" in pre-modern India, the conception of the divine nature of the earthly king, may not always be easy to trace, and if its precise meaning and significance must remain matters of interpretation, still, in the opinion of most contemporary scholars it manifests itself too plainly for us to deny that it was an important feature of this world view from as early as the time of the Vedas.⁶⁷

There is no need to invoke what appears to be an almost invariable concomitance between authority and the supernatural in *pensée sauvage* in order to establish this, nor the sacred status of the king elsewhere in the Indo-European cultural domain.⁶⁸ In the Vedic hymns kings, or perhaps more correctly chiefs, are clearly represented as sharing certain major activities with the gods, Indra in particular, and they play as well a role of cosmic significance; they are called

⁶⁶ Very similar in conceptual design is the story of Arjuna's defeat of the Nivātakavaca demons. Having practiced austerities the demons were rewarded by Brahmā with the boon that gods, *asuras*, etc., could not kill them (*MBh.* III.169.29). Indra learned of the boon to his horror, but on questioning Brahmā was told that he, Indra himself, but in some other body, would be the cause of their death (vs. 31). The "other body" is Arjuna, his son (cf. especially III.45.15 ff.). In the same mode, it would seem, is the tale of Arjuna's destruction of the demon city Hiraṇyapūra (*MBh.* III.170). Discussing the Nivātakavaca tale in his recent book on the *Mahābhārata*, Scheuer adverts to the "familiar schema of the king-avataar delivering the gods and the worlds from the domination of *asuras*," and asserts that, "exactly like the *MBh.* as a whole, or again, the *Rāmāyaṇa*, it is but another episode in the war of the gods and *asuras*, the reconquest of the gods" (J. Scheuer, *Śiva dans le Mahābhārata* [Paris, 1982], p. 227). If this is so, one wonders why it is not the gods themselves, in propria persona, who are fighting. What is most interesting and important about the passage, of course, is the very modification of the ancient theme.

⁶⁷ See for example J. W. Spellman, *Political Theory of Ancient India* (Oxford, 1964), pp. 27, 37; J. Gonda, *Ancient Indian Kingship from the Religious Point of View* (Leiden, 1966), p. 103.

⁶⁸ On the first see Gonda, *op. cit.* (1966), p. 9; the sacral king of Indo-European antiquity is discussed in G. Dumézil, *L'Héritage indo-européen à Rome* (Brussels, 1948), pp. 19 ff., et passim, while a more detailed recent study of a particular Indo-European tradition is that of Chaney on the "Wodensprung kings" of Germanic paganism (Wm. A. Chaney, *The Cult of Kingship in Anglo-Saxon England* [Berkeley, 1970], especially pp. 7-42).

not only "half gods" (*RgVeda* IV.42.8–9), but "gods among men" (*AtharvaVeda* VI.86.3).⁶⁹ Certain additional evidence is provided by the ritual prose texts, which I shall notice below. By the time of the epics, law-books and, later, the first *purāṇas*, the documentary evidence becomes overwhelming. No purpose will be served by a long catalogue of citations; instead I wish simply to single out one representative epic text from our most important source of traditional Indian political theology, the *Rājadharma* section of the *Mahābhārata*. I translate it *in extenso*, since it offers a strikingly forthright expression of attitudes and beliefs about kingship, and in several respects seems almost a gloss on the story of the *Rāmāyaṇa*:

Were kings not to exist, no creatures anywhere could exist, and because they exist, other creatures do. Who would fail to pay them homage? Whoever bears the burdens imposed by the king, which bring happiness to all the world; whoever strives to please and benefit him, wins both this world and the next. But the man who even thinks of doing evil to the king assuredly finds affliction in this world, and at death goes to hell. Never should the king be scorned as being a mere mortal: He is great divinity existing in the form of a man [= *ManuSm.* 7.8; cf. *MBh.* XII.65.29, "A king of men is an eternal god; the gods themselves hold him in honor"]. He can take on any of five different forms, as the occasion demands: He may become Fire, the Sun, Death, Vaiśravaṇa, or Yama. [The functions of the several forms are then explained, vss. 41–47; compare the very similar verse in *Rām.* III.38.12.] One must be zealous and careful not to contradict the lord, nor grumble against him, if one hopes to acquire righteous merit. A man who acts in opposition to the king never gains happiness [cf. *Rām.* III.38.20], neither he himself nor anyone close to him—son, brother, friend. Driven onward by the wind, its charioteer, fire yet may leave something in its wake; but to the one who thwarts the king nothing whatever will be left [cf. *ManuSm.* 7.9]. All that the king owns is to be preserved as his; keep your distance from it. Taking something of his should be seen to be as fraught with terror as death itself; touch it and you perish. . . . The king is the very heart of hearts of his subjects, their foundation, refuge, and ultimate happiness. Putting their reliance in their king people without question win this world, and the world to come. (*MBh.* XII.68.37–59)

After we review passages like this it does indeed appear nonsense to deny that in traditional India kings—or more precisely, righteous kings—were invested with the status, the powers, all the ontological meaning and significance of divinity. But can we say securely that the author of the *Rāmāyaṇa* shared this conception? For while the important passage cited from the *Mahābhārata* seems representative for much of the epic period, it has often been noted that stony silence if not outright contradiction with respect to the king's divinity can be found elsewhere; many of the early law-books, for example, seem thoroughly indifferent or sometimes even hostile to the notion.⁷⁰

Now, it is not in the least clear that the silence encountered in the early *dharmaśāstras* should be interpreted negatively, nor that the outright denials we do meet are necessarily applicable to the period with which we are dealing. Even if these denials are contemporaneous with our text, the fact that they at the same time imply a widespread belief is something we should not ignore (and this is made explicit in a verse from the *Ayodhyākāṇḍa* discussed below). Yet determining as cogently as possible the stance of the *Rāmāyaṇa* on this issue will prove essential to support the interpretation proposed of the thematic significance of the work. Whether or not the belief was, in historical reality, already as deeply implanted as the somewhat later *Rājadharma* discourse implies, may in fact be a matter of secondary importance. At times, reading Vālmīki's poem, one gets the distinct impression that the doctrine is one in the making, and that its consolidation is a principal objective of the poem.

Although it goes without saying that in dealing with a literary text we must not expect the discursive exposition of a *śāstra*, still, even given these generic limitations, there is some evidence in the *Rāmāyaṇa* enabling us to characterize its political-theological orientation. One passage early in the *Aranyakāṇḍa*, for example, nicely expresses the bivalent nature of the earthly king. Here the seers are addressing Rāma: "As guardian of righteousness and glorious refuge of his people, a king is worthy of reverence and esteem. He is a guru who bears the staff of punishment. A king is a fourth part Indra himself, he protects his subjects, Rāghava, and so enjoys the choicest luxuries and is honored by the world" (III.1.17–18).

⁷⁰ Some of these are cited in E. W. Hopkins, "The Divinity of Kings," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 51 (1931), pp. 309–316. (note however that his translation of *Rām.* II.95.4 [p. 313] follows the imperfect text of the northern recension; on which more below).

⁶⁹ See further in Gonda, op. cit. (1966), pp. 109, 54 and n. 368).

These verses imply a divinity of a "functional" sort, referring in particular to the king's protectorship through his exercise of legitimate force, and to this I shall return shortly. A similar pronouncement occurs in Book II. Here Bharata is urging Rāma to return to the city and take up the duties of kingship, which he himself is incapable of shouldering. For, he argues, "Some say a king is but a mortal; I esteem him a god. His conduct in matters of righteousness and statecraft, it is rightly said, is beyond that of mere mortals" (II.95.4). If, as the lines seem to suggest, the notion of the divine status of the king was subject to public interrogation and denial, its existence is by the same token confirmed, and likewise its veracity for the authorial arbiter whose voice one can plainly hear speaking in these lines.

We need not, however, rest content with what might be felt to be mere inferential evidence. In Book IV the poet baldly states his view, one that harmonizes perfectly with the passage cited above from the *Mahābhārata*. The words are placed in the mouth of Rāma himself: "It is kings—make no mistake of it—who confer righteous merit, something so hard to acquire, and precious life itself. One must never harm them, never criticize, insult or oppose them. Kings are gods who walk the earth in the form of men" (IV.18.37–38).⁷¹

I want now to ask what it signifies to make this claim of divinity. What does it mean that the king is a god?

With few exceptions scholars, when not ignoring its significance altogether, have been prone to minimize the importance of divine kingship in ancient India. For one thing, it is claimed that the element of divinity inhabits the office, not the person, of the king, the point of the distinction being to prove that "oriental absolutism" in reality was constrained by a legal code

⁷¹ I would suggest further that *naradeva-*, a common word for "king," may in the *Rāmāyaṇa* carry a still vital radical signification, and indeed perhaps as a *karmadhāraya* compound ("man-god," just like *narasiṃha-*, "man-lion"; this seems to be how the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* took the compound, e.g., I.3.22), rather than *tatpuruṣa* ("god among men"; cf. Gonda, op. cit. 1966, p. 63). Thus when Hanumān says to Rāvaṇa, "There is no one in the three worlds who, having once offended Rāghava, could ever find happiness . . . Show proper respect to this man-god [*naradeva-*]; give back Jānakī" (V.49.19), it may be that we are to hear this subtle resonance in the compound, and to understand that Rāvaṇa is being given one last chance to comprehend the inherent, and inevitably fatal, limitations of his boon.

of sovereign responsibility, allegiance to which was divinely ordained; the king himself derived no license to oppress from the divine sanction of his office.⁷² For another, kings were not the only such beings in existence. Brahmins as well—and this is admittedly the opinion of many texts—were "gods on earth." Thus, we are told, in a way comparable to no other culture, India was extremely "prolific of human gods."⁷³ In fact, as if we were in the grip of some market economy of the sacred, divinity in India is said to be "cheap."⁷⁴

Now first of all, the dichotomy between king and kingship finds little support in Indian epic texts. The notion itself is a juristic concept belonging primarily to the European medieval period,⁷⁵ which we have little warrant to transpose to South Asia in the first millennium before the common era. Moreover, aside from the fact that there is no suggestion whatever in *Rāmāyaṇa* II–VI that the divine king has any competition from a divine brahmin (the latter is simply ignored), I do not believe such a law of supply and demand is applicable in the domain of political theology; the question of quantity need have no impact whatever on the value or significance of the representation (no one calculates that in a primitive animistic cosmology the sacred is any less awful for being virtually omnipresent). This value is constituted by, and directly proportional to, the quality of being of the divine king, quite irrespective of its quantity. And the quality of his being is unique in respect of essentially two separate but related features: his function, and his origin.⁷⁶ The king is functionally a god because like a god he saves and protects; he is existentially, ontologically a god because he incorporates the divine essence.

The king, we are told in the *Rājadharmā* section of the *Mahābhārata*, is the root of the *trivarga* (XII.137.95); *dharma* itself in fact is "rooted" in the

⁷² A representative paper is that of A. Basu, "Hindu Doctrine of Divine Kingship," in *The Sacral Kingship* (Leiden, 1959), pp. 167–171. So also R. Lingat, *The Classical Law of India* (Berkeley, 1973), p. 208 and n. 7 and p. 211.

⁷³ Frazer cited in O'Flaherty, op. cit., p. 9.

⁷⁴ A. L. Basham, *The Wonder That Was India* (New York, 1954), p. 86.

⁷⁵ Magisterially traced by E. Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies* (Princeton, 1957).

⁷⁶ These were the principal categories later adopted by the authors of the *purāṇas* in their analysis of the sources of the king's authority. See U. N. Ghoshal, *A History of Indian Political Ideas* (London, 1959; corrected reprint, 1966), p. 330.

king (68.8). The exercise of kingship is thus the highest manifestation of *dharma* (56.2; cf. 63.21, 25, 64.20, 29), and the refuge of every living soul on earth (56.3). All beings depend on *dharma*, and *dharma* depends on the king (91.5). But what is the core of *rājadharma*? "The age-old *dharma* of kings consists of protection,⁷⁷ and it is this that maintains the world itself" (57.42⁷⁸; cf. 32.2). The king provides security, to brahmins and ascetics in particular (against whom evil is in the first instance almost invariably represented as manifesting itself, precisely as in the third book of the *Rāmāyana*). This is a "gift of life" (cf. *Rām.* IV.18.37, cited above, p. 524), equal to no other, and by means of it alone the entire brahmanical order and the sacrificial cult by which it sustains the universe are preserved.

While the king fills other roles in addition to his protective one and is as a consequence regarded as substantively identical to various divine powers,⁷⁹ it is his beneficent provision of welfare—in the widest sense of the term—that remains his pre-eminent trait. Now the god that increasingly in Indian religious history discharges this soteriological function, and whose substance is later said to be fused with that of the earthly king, is Viṣṇu. For although Viṣṇu does not himself occupy the position of king in the Indian pantheon—that is held by Indra—he has a unique functional role in the preservation of the cosmos that proved to be a far more compelling political-theological determinant. From the time of the earliest strata of the *RgVeda* and with growing frequency thereafter, what Viṣṇu pre-eminently does is aid suffering mankind by reasserting and re-establishing the righteous brahmanical organization of society.⁸⁰

This "parity of functions" at an early date entailed an equivalence of being. One highly suggestive testimony from such a period is to be found in the *Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa* (a branch of the Vedic tradition, it is worth noting, with which Vālmīki appears to have peculiar affinities).⁸¹ During the royal consecration ceremony, we are told, the king "takes the [three] strides of Viṣṇu, he becomes Viṣṇu himself and thereby triumphs over all these worlds" (*TaiBr.* I.7.4.4).⁸² In the epic period the texts become even more numerous and explicit. We have observed how Dhundhumāra was able to execute his protective activities only by absorbing the power of Viṣṇu. This relationship of substantive identity between king and divinity becomes more widely generalized in what is perhaps the single most important expository text on the origin of kingship in the epics, the birth of Pṛthu, the first righteous king (*MBh.* XII.59).

Once created the king vows righteousness, promises to protect "the earthly brahmins" and preserve the brahmanical social order (59.109–114). The gods perform his consecration (59.120), and thereupon

The eternal Viṣṇu himself established the law that no one was ever to transgress against the king. And by means of his ascetic power the Blessed Viṣṇu entered into the king, so that the world would bow in homage to the gods of men [= kings], like very gods . . . For why should the world stand at the bidding of a king—who is no different from them in his body [*ātmanā*; or, "in himself"] or in his sense-powers—were it not for this quality of divinity?⁸³ His merit exhausted and coming to earth from heaven a king is born, one who

⁸¹ Discussed at some length in the introduction to my forthcoming translation of the *Ayodhyākāṇḍa*.

⁸² Cf. also Gonda, *op. cit.* (1969), pp. 58–59, 164–165. It is irrelevant that Rāma is not yet a consecrated king, nor is his status really ambiguous. Not only do Rāma's sandals occupy the throne of Kosala, but he is regarded as king throughout his forest exile, in fact, as "king" or "master" of all the world" (cf. III.11.27, 28.10, 35.13, 48.4, 5, 14; V.32.27; for further remarks, see the Introduction to my forthcoming translation of the *Aranyakāṇḍa*.

⁸³ Cf. 59.6–12: "His hands and head and neck, his intellect and senses, his sperm and bone and marrow, his flesh and blood, are like any other man's; like any other man he feels joy and sorrow . . . like any other man is born, and dies. Why then does this one rule over all the earth? . . . It must be no insignificant reason that all the world bows before one man, as before a god" (a passage reminiscent of *Richard II* [III.ii.174 ff.]).

⁷⁷ Gonda in fact finds the semantic value "protect" to be a radical signification of I-E *rēg* (J. Gonda, "Semantisches zu *idg. rēg*- 'König' und *zur* Wurzel *reǵ*- ('sich aus)strecken,'" *Kuhn's Zeitschrift* 73 [1956], pp. 151–167 [= *Selected Studies, Vol. I: Indo-European Linguistics* (Leiden, 1975), pp. 415–431]).

⁷⁸ A verse perhaps by Bhargava (= Vālmīki ?); cf. the variants noted in the critical apparatus on vs. 40a.

⁷⁹ See *MBh.* XIII.68.40 quoted above, p. 523, and the references noted there.

⁸⁰ It is beyond the province of this essay to attempt a detailed demonstration here. Note that we have already seen this to be the case in the myth of the dwarf incarnation (above, p. 520 and n. 58). See also Tripathi, *op. cit.*, pp. 1–26, and Gonda, *op. cit.* (1969), pp. 164 ff., where much of the pertinent data is made available.

is obedient to the claims of [southern MSS, "skilled in"] the correct uses of political power. Endowed then with the greatness of Viṣṇu on this earth, he becomes endowed with intelligence and attains greatness. No one transgresses against the law established by the gods. All stand at the bidding of one, and conform to his behavior.⁸⁴ And that is why the wise of this earth have forever declared that gods and gods of men are equal.

The existential identification of the earthly king and Viṣṇu becomes so thorough-going that by the time of the earliest *purāṇas* we are told, "Every emperor, in every cosmic age both past and future, is born on earth with a portion of Viṣṇu within him."⁸⁵ The reality of the representation is brought home to the contemporary reader when, at the end of the great play of Viśākhadatta's, the *Mudrārākṣasa*, the poet addresses his patron. In this eulogy he asserts that Viṣṇu, who once took on the form of a boar to save the earth, has now assumed the form of this king, Candragupta.⁸⁶ One could cite texts by the score, proliferating as they do in the epic and post-epic period, that affirm and elaborate on the essential unity of the earthly king and Viṣṇu. Perhaps its most pointed expression, however, is found in one of the more important Vaiṣṇava sectarian works, the *Ahīrbudhnyā Saṃhitā*, which may be taken as broadly representative of the medieval viewpoint:

The king is the ultimate being, a lord consisting of [parts of] all the gods. He is the locus of the effective energy of Viṣṇu [*kriyāśakter vaiṣṇavyāḥ*], he consists of the Blessed One Himself. The Lord God created the king long ago, emitting him from His own head; consecrated on the head, therefore, the king is placed far above all other creatures. The king is twice so great as a brahman, and his praises are sung in the Vedas and *śāstras*. The fool who in delusion hates the king, hates Hari; the man who in delusion hates Hari, hates Lakṣmī; and the foolish hater of Lakṣmī is lost

⁸⁴ I read this line with the southern recension; the doctrine that all follow the actions of a king is an old one, see *Rām.* II.101.9 and my note there.

⁸⁵ *VāyuP.* 57.72.

⁸⁶ *Mudrārā.* 7.19. Whether or not this refers to the Gupta emperor, Candragupta II (c. A.D. 400); whether or not we should instead accept the variant "Avantivarman," are questions beside the point I wish to make at present. It is the unequivocal identification with Viṣṇu of an historical king that is so arresting and intriguing.

to all *dharma*, is driven from all worlds, excluded by all the gods, and exists for evermore in blinding, bottomless darkness. But the wise man who seeks earthly and heavenly prosperity will esteem the king, the supreme deity [*adhidaivata*] of all worlds. (*AhīrbuS.* 16.14–19)

One important dimension of the divine king given prominence in this passage is his character as spiritual redeemer (though this is not necessarily, as here presented, a function of his identification with Viṣṇu in particular). Not as an intercessor with the gods but directly is the king said to secure the spiritual welfare of his people. He is the "guru of the world to come;" if one shows him contempt all one's religious works prove fruitless (*MBh.* XII.65.28). He is, according to a passage already cited, "the very heart of hearts of his subjects . . . Putting their reliance in their king people win this world and the world to come" (*MBh.* XII.68.59, above, p. 523).

What we have here to do with is not some organized cult of king-worship in the strict sense—kings in India did not often usurp the position of the gods in the sacrificial rites—but rather a spiritual function, symmetrical with and finally indistinguishable from his social function, which the king exercises, apparently by reason of his divine substance. And though it is not necessary to argue the matter out here in detail, I would suggest that it may be precisely this liberating spiritual power commanded by the king that underpins much of the action of the third book of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, specifically the structurally comparable narratives of Śarabhaṅga and Śabarī, Jaṭāyuh, Virādha, and Kabandha, all of whom Rāma, "the one to whom all creatures pay homage,"⁸⁷ frees from the misery of this world by direct intervention, or by his mere presence.

Thus, clearly from the time of the *Mahābhārata* onwards (though with high probability it reverts to a considerably greater antiquity), we encounter a widespread and prominent formulation of the nature of the king that characterizes him as a "deity in the form of a man," a being in which, as one recent authority put it, "mankind and divinity actually meet and combine."⁸⁸ On these grounds alone we might be justified

⁸⁷ *sarvabhūtanamaskṛtam* (III.69.20). The phrase, which is thoroughly authenticated text-critically, is used elsewhere in epic literature only of Brahmā and Śiva.

⁸⁸ Gonda, *op. cit.* (1966), p. 54. A particularly revealing instance of the reinforcement of this dominant ideology of kingship is found in the *Arthaśāstra*: Intelligence agents are to

in concluding that the divinity of the hero of the *Rāmāyaṇa* must have been a central feature of the poem from the beginning. The morphology of the boon-motif likewise strongly suggests this (as strongly, that is, as any literary motif can make such implications within the aesthetic limitations it sets itself).⁸⁹ For as we saw, the mythologeme inevitably necessitates some transcendent fusion of existential categories. Indeed, the extraordinary synthesis here of the numinous and the human—the divine man who is king of men, the human god—may perhaps best be viewed as the *Rāmāyaṇa*'s innovative contribution to an old and venerable mythopoetic tradition, and a particularly brilliant contribution, tapping as it does into what was likely to have been a vital reservoir of everyday representations and beliefs concerning kingship.

In the course of time, however, what I take to have been a conception of the divine king basic to the story of Rāma was affected by two important factors. The first was the association—initially perhaps simply as a result of their functional identity—of specifically the god Viṣṇu with the earthly king. The second was the development in Vaiṣṇava theological circles of the theory of the avatar, a doctrine of vast absorptive, syncretistic force, which views every manifestation of divine power as giving testimony to the omnipotence and immanence of Viṣṇu. The former—according to the formula *nāviṣṇuḥ pṛthivīpatiḥ*,⁹⁰ “No king exists without [or perhaps better, “is not”] Viṣṇu”—provided a sufficient condition for the eventual thorough identification of King Rāma with Viṣṇu,⁹¹ and the latter—according to the formula stated in the *Harivaṃśa*, *nāsty āścaryam avaiṣṇavam*, “No miraculous power but that it comes from Viṣṇu” (113.75)—provided a

encourage the belief among the people that kings occupy the position of Indra and Yama; to scorn them is to invite divine punishment, etc. (I.13.5 ff.).

⁸⁹ The traditional interpretation explains these limitations, not as aesthetic, but in a sense as logical. If it were emphatically expressed—if Rāma himself were shown to know—that he is a “divine mortal,” the terms of the boon would not, in fact, be honored. I discuss this traditional exegesis in detail in “*ātmanaṃ mānuṣaṃ manye: Dharmākūtam* on the Divinity of Rāma” (*Journal of the Oriental Institute*, Baroda, in press).

⁹⁰ For the proverb see Kataka on *Rām*. II.5.1; Ḍhuṅḍhirāja on *Mudrārā*. 7.19; cf. P. V. Kane, *History of Dharmasāstra* (Poona, 1962–1975), Vol. III, pp. 24–25.

⁹¹ This point was first made, though quite sketchily, by Hopkins (op. cit. [1931], pp. 313–314).

necessary one. These factors so fundamentally conditioned the transmission of the poem that today it cannot be proved on textual grounds that the composer of the monumental *Rāmāyaṇa*, from which all versions and recensions of the work derive, was ignorant of or indifferent to the equation of Rāma and Viṣṇu. Text-critically and indeed in several other important narratological and aesthetic respects, it appears to be an integral feature of the poem.⁹²

However, our judgment on what seems to have been the appropriation of the text by early Vaiṣṇavism—and on this I wish to lay great stress—has finally little or no bearing on the question of the divine status of Rāma as it must originally have been conceived, nor on our interpretation of the monumental *Rāmāyaṇa*, which accordingly is obliged to view this status as a constitutive and determinative feature of the poem. How would such a perception affect our interpretation of the poem in a more global sense? I would like to conclude this essay by suggesting some of the major lines of enquiry.

We have looked already at the passage in which, in order to convince Rāma to return to Ayodhyā, Bharata argued that while some people think a king but a mortal, “I esteem him a god. His conduct in matters of righteousness and statecraft, it is rightly said, is beyond that of mere mortals.” This verse is important over and above the surface message it transmits, for it encapsulates, I believe, much of the essential meaning of the first “movement” of the poem. The *Ayodhyā-kāṇḍa* is a profound study in the righteousness of the king and his authority. Rāma's possession of these attributes (which ironically makes it impossible for him to go back to Ayodhyā, thereby turning Bharata's argument against the young prince himself), is such as only a divine being might command. This is precisely the case with his protective and punitive activities, the exercise of legitimate force, which forms the subject of Book III and the rest of the poem. And as I argue out elsewhere,⁹³ it is this attempt to explain the “divine” power of the king in both realms of *dharma* and *artha* (or *daṇḍa*) that may constitute the unifying principle of the entire poem, which for so long has been thought, quite erroneously I believe, to be “composed of two utterly different and distinct parts.”⁹⁴

⁹² I hope to demonstrate this in a companion piece viewing the problem from the vantage point of textual criticism.

⁹³ Introduction to my translation of the *Aranyakāṇḍa*.

⁹⁴ Jacobi, op. cit., p. 126; following him A. B. Keith, *A History of Sanskrit Literature* (Oxford, 1920), p. 43, and virtually all of modern critical thinking about the text.

But if the solution to Rāvaṇa's boon is provided only by this intermediate being, this "god who walks the earth in the form of a man," then whereas Rāma's powers are "divine," he must nevertheless remain, "in some measure, a man,"⁹⁵ with respect to both his emotional universe and his own imperfect self-knowledge. This may help to explain one of the most dramatic deviations in the poem from the ideal of the divine king, Rāma's violent—in fact, "unrighteous"—madness at discovering the loss of Sītā (III. 58 ff.).⁹⁶ And it is certainly something we must bear in mind when considering the motivation of the hero throughout the poem.

One particularly interesting aspect of the divine plan is of course Rāma's ignorance of it. His behavior in protecting the sages of Daṇḍaka wilderness (which

⁹⁵ VII. App. I #10.28; cited by Hopkins as well (op. cit. [1931], p. 312). Compare also Lakṣmaṇa's words quoted above, pp. 512–13.

⁹⁶ Here the traditional interpretation, in my view, disappoints; the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, for example, understands the scene as a cautionary tale on the dangers of excessive emotional attachment (IX.10.11; Nīlakaṇṭha Dīkṣita echoes the sentiment, cf. *Rāmāyaṇasārasaṅgraharaghuvīrastava*, vs. 17, referring to the comparable scene at the shore of the ocean, VI.14), though this is its general understanding of the *rāmāvatāra* (cf. V.19.5–6).

provokes the hostility of the *rākṣasas*, setting in motion the rest of the action of the tale), is his own free choice, a righteous and heroic king's response to violence and evil, and one that he did not know could not fail in its purpose. The audience knows this, however, first, because the poet has taken such pains to enlighten us about the plan; second, because Rāma's true nature irresistibly emerges from the letter and logic of the narrative, and lastly, by reason of the pattern of expectation its thematic organization generates. Thus, when near the end of the sixth book Rāma asserts, "I, a man, have overcome the adversity brought on by fate . . . What a man could do, Sītā, all that he could do, I have done" (VI.103.5, 13), the irony, which pervades so much of the poem, becomes almost palpable.

If the power of a reading is measured by the amount of text it is able to resuscitate into complex meaningfulness, then a "mythic" reading of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, deriving in part from the Indian tradition, in part from the conspicuous political-theological interests of the work (and carried out far more systematically than has been possible here), may prove to be a strong one. For whatever other concerns it may have, Vālmīki's epic seems in the first instance to offer an extended meditation on kingship, and not least on the king's mysterious nature and activity as a "consubstantial" godman.