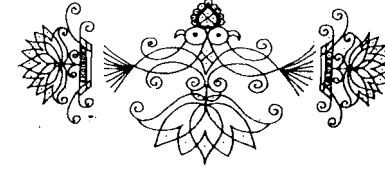


poetry; with the practice of translation as a process of structural rather than verbal mimicry; and, ultimately, with a leap of the poetic imagination.

Finally, 'From Classicism to *Bhakti*', an essay that Ramanujan co-authored with Norman Cutler, takes up the issue of how classical Tamil poetry and culture, emerging on the periphery of the epic and classical worlds of Sanskrit in north India, historically shape the subsequent poetry and culture of *bhakti*, as the latter appears in the works of the Śrī Vaiṣṇava *ālvārs*, especially Nammālvār. Taken together with the essays on the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata*, and the other three essays on classical Tamil culture included here, this essay indicates why, even in the first millennium of the common era, there can be no simple formula for 'unity' or 'diversity'—or for 'unity in diversity'—in the Indian subcontinent.

Three Hundred *Rāmāyaṇas*: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation



How many *Rāmāyaṇas*? Three hundred? Three thousand? At the end of some *Rāmāyaṇas*, a question is sometimes asked: How many *Rāmāyaṇas* have there been? And there are stories that answer the question. Here is one.

One day when Rāma was sitting on his throne, his ring fell off. When it touched the earth, it made a hole in the ground and disappeared into it. It was gone. His trusty henchman, Hanumān, was at his feet. Rāma said to Hanumān, 'Look, my ring is lost. Find it for me.'

Now Hanumān can enter any hole, no matter how tiny. He had the power to become the smallest of the small and larger than the largest thing. So he took on a tiny form and went down the hole.

He went and went and went and suddenly fell into the netherworld. There were women down there. 'Look, a tiny monkey! It's fallen from above!' Then they caught him and placed him on a platter (*thālī*). The King of Spirits (*bhūt*), who lives in the netherworld, likes to eat animals. So Hanumān was sent to him as part of his dinner, along with his vegetables. Hanumān sat on the platter, wondering what to do.

While this was going on in the netherworld, Rāma sat on his throne on the earth above. The sage Vasiṣṭha and the god Brahmā came to see him. They said to Rāma, 'We want to talk privately with you. We don't want anyone to hear what we say or interrupt it. Do we agree?'

'All right,' said Rāma, 'we'll talk.'

Then they said, 'Lay down a rule. If anyone comes in as we are talking, his head should be cut off.'

'It will be done,' said Rāma.

Who would be the most trustworthy person to guard the door? Hanumān had gone down to fetch the ring. Rāma trusted no one more than Lakṣmaṇa, so he asked Lakṣmaṇa to stand by the door. 'Don't allow anyone to enter,' he ordered.

Lakṣmaṇa was standing at the door when the sage Viśvāmitra appeared and said, 'I need to see Rāma at once. It's urgent. Tell me, where is Rāma?'

Lakṣmaṇa said, 'Don't go in now. He is talking to some people. It's important.'

'What is there that Rāma would hide from me?' said Viśvāmitra. 'I must go in, right now.'

Lakṣmaṇa said, 'I'll have to ask his permission before I can let you in.'

'Go in and ask then.'

'I can't go in till Rāma comes out. You'll have to wait.'

'If you don't go in and announce my presence, I'll burn the entire kingdom of Ayodhya with a curse,' said Viśvāmitra.

Lakṣmaṇa thought, 'If I go in now, I'll die. But if I don't go, this hot-headed man will burn down the kingdom. All the subjects, all things living in it, will die. It's better that I alone should die.'

So he went right in.

Rāma asked him, 'What's the matter?'

'Viśvāmitra is here.'

'Send him in.'

So Viśvāmitra went in. The private talk had already come to an end. Brahmā and Vasiṣṭha had come to see Rāma and say to him, 'Your work in the world of human beings is over. Your incarnation as Rāma must now be given up. Leave this body, come up, and rejoin the gods.' That's all they wanted to say.

Lakṣmaṇa said to Rāma, 'Brother, you should cut off my head.'

Rāma said, 'Why? We had nothing more to say. Nothing was left. So why should I cut off your head?'

Lakṣmaṇa said, 'You can't do that. You can't let me off because I'm your brother. There'll be a blot on Rāma's name. You didn't spare your wife. You sent her to the jungle. I must be punished. I will leave.'

Lakṣmaṇa was an avatar of Śeṣa, the serpent on whom Viṣṇu sleeps. His time was up too. He went directly to the river Sarayū and disappeared in the flowing waters.

When Lakṣmaṇa relinquished his body, Rāma summoned all his followers, Vibhiṣaṇa, Sugrīva, and others, and arranged for the coronation of his twin sons, Lava and Kuśa. Then Rāma too entered the river Sarayū.

All this while, Hanumān was in the netherworld. When he was finally taken to the King of Spirits, he kept repeating the name of Rāma. 'Rāma Rāma Rāma . . .'

Then the King of Spirits asked, 'Who are you?'

'Hanumān.'

'Hanumān? Why have you come here?'

'Rāma's ring fell into a hole. I've come to fetch it.'

The king looked around and showed him a platter. On it were thousands of rings. They were all Rāma's rings. The king brought the platter to Hanumān, set it down, and said, 'Pick out your Rāma's ring and take it.'

They were all exactly the same. 'I don't know which one it is,' said Hanumān, shaking his head.

The King of Spirits said, 'There have been as many Rāmas as there are rings on this platter. When you return to earth, you will not find Rāma. This incarnation of Rāma is now over. Whenever an incarnation of Rāma is about to be over, his ring falls down. I collect them and keep them. Now you can go.'

So Hanumān left.¹

This story is usually told to suggest that for every such Rāma there is a *Rāmāyaṇa*. The number of *Rāmāyaṇas* and the range of their influence in South and Southeast Asia over the past twenty-five hundred years or more are astonishing. Just a list of languages in which the Rāma story is found makes one gasp: Annamese, Balinese, Bengali, Cambodian, Chinese, Gujarati, Javanese, Kannada, Kashmiri, Khotanese, Laotian, Malaysian, Marathi, Oriya, Prakrit, Sanskrit, Santali, Sinhalese, Tamil, Telugu, Thai, Tibetan—to say nothing of Western languages. Through the centuries, some of these languages have hosted more than one telling of the Rāma story. Sanskrit alone contains some twenty-five or more tellings belonging to various narrative genres (epics, *kāvya*s or ornate poetic compositions, *purāṇa*s or old mythological stories, and so forth). If we add plays, dance-dramas, and other performances, in both the classical and folk traditions, the number of *Rāmāyaṇas* grows even larger. To these must be added sculpture and bas-reliefs, mask plays, puppet plays

and shadows plays, in all the many South and Southeast Asian cultures.² Camille Bulcke (1950), a student of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, counted three hundred tellings.³ It's no wonder that even as long ago as the fourteenth century, Kumāravyāsa, a Kannada poet, chose to write a *Mahābhārata*, because he heard the cosmic serpent which upholds the earth groaning under the burden of *Rāmāyaṇa* poets (*tinikidanu phaṇirāya rāmāyaṇada kavigaḷa bhāradali*). In this paper, indebted for its data to numerous previous translators and scholars, I would like to sort out for myself, and I hope for others, how these hundreds of tellings of a story in different cultures, languages, and religious traditions relate to each other: what gets translated, transplanted, transposed.

VĀLMĪKI AND KAMPAṆ: TWO AHALYĀS

Obviously, these hundreds of tellings differ from one another. I have come to prefer the world *tellings* to the usual terms *versions* or *variants* because the latter terms can and typically do imply that there is an invariant, an original or *Ur*-text—usually Vālmiki's Sanskrit *Rāmāyaṇa*, the earliest and most prestigious of them all. But as we shall see, it is not always Vālmiki's narrative that is carried from one language to another.

It would be useful to make some distinctions before we begin. The tradition itself distinguishes between the Rāma story (*rāmakathā*) and texts composed by a specific person—Vālmiki, Kampaṇ, or Kṛttivāsa, for example. Though many of the latter are popularly called *Rāmāyaṇas* (like *Kamparāmāyaṇam*), few texts actually bear the title *Rāmāyaṇa*; they are given titles like *Irāmāvatāram* (The Incarnation of Rāma), *Rāmcaritmānas* (The Lake of the Acts of Rāma), *Ramakien* (The Story of Rāma) and so on. Their relations to the Rāma story as told by Vālmiki also vary. This traditional distinction between *kathā* (story) and *kāvya* (poem) parallels the French one between *sujet* and *récit*, or the English one between story and discourse (Chatman 1978). It is also analogous to the distinction between a sentence and a speech act. The story may be the same in two tellings, but the discourse may be vastly different. Even the structure and sequence of events may be the same, but the style, details, tone, and texture—and therefore the import—may be vastly different.

Here are two tellings of the 'same' episode, which occur at the same point in the sequence of the narrative. The first is from the first book (*Bālakāṇḍa*) of Vālmiki's Sanskrit *Rāmāyaṇa*; the second from the first canto (*Pālakāṇṭam*) of Kampaṇ's *Irāmāvatāram* in Tamil. Both narrate the story of Ahalyā.

THE AHALYĀ EPISODE: VĀLMĪKI

Seeing Mithilā, Janaka's white
and dazzling city, all the sages
cried out in praise, 'Wonderful!
How wonderful!'

Rāghava, sighting on the outskirts
of Mithilā an ashram, ancient,
unpeopled, and lovely, asked the sage,
'What is this holy place,

so like an ashram but without a hermit?
Master, I'd like to hear: whose was it?'
Hearing Rāghava's words, the great sage
Viśvāmitra, man of fire,

expert in words answered, 'Listen,
Rāghava, I'll tell you whose ashram
this was and how it was cursed
by a great man in anger.

It was great Gautama's, this ashram
that reminds you of heaven, worshipped
even by the gods. Long ago, with Ahalyā
he practised *tapas*⁴ here

for countless years. Once, knowing that Gautama
was away, Indra (called Thousand Eyes),
Śacī's husband, took on the likeness
of the sage, and said to Ahalyā:

"Men pursuing their desire do not wait
for the proper season, O you who
have a perfect body. Making love
with you: that's what I want.
That waist of yours is lovely."

She knew it was Indra of the Thousand Eyes
in the guise of the sage. Yet she,
wrongheaded woman, made up her mind,
excited, curious about the king
of the gods.

And then, her inner being satisfied,
she said to the god, "I'm satisfied, king
of the gods. Go quickly from here.

O giver of honour, lover, protect
yourself and me."

And Indra smiled and said to Ahalyā,

“Woman of lovely hips, I am
very content. I’ll go the way I came.”

Thus after making love, he came out
of the hut made of leaves.

And, O Rāma, as he hurried away,
nervous about Gautama and flustered,
he caught sight of Gautama coming in,
the great sage, unassailable
by gods and antigods,

empowered by his *tapas*, still wet
with the water of the river
he’d bathed in, blazing like fire,
with *kuśa* grass and kindling
in his hands.

Seeing him, the king of the gods was
terror-struck, his face drained of colour.
The sage, facing Thousand Eyes now dressed
as the sage, the one rich in virtue
and the other with none,

spoke to him in anger: “You took my form,
you fool, and did this that should never
be done. Therefore you will lose your testicles.”

At once, they fell to the ground, they fell
even as the great sage spoke

his words in anger to Thousand Eyes.

Having cursed Indra, he then cursed
Ahalyā: “You, you will dwell here
many thousands of years, eating the air,
without food, rolling in ash,

and burning invisible to all creatures.

When Rāma, unassailable son
of Daśaratha, comes to this terrible
wilderness, you will become pure,
you woman of no virtue,

you will be cleansed of lust and confusion.

Filled then with joy, you’ll wear again
your form in my presence.” And saying
this to that woman of bad conduct,
blazing Gautama abandoned

the ashram, and did his *tapas*
on a beautiful Himalayan peak,
haunt of celestial singers and
perfected beings.

Emasculated Indra then
spoke to the gods led by Agni
attended by the sages
and the celestial singers.

“I’ve only done this work on behalf
of the gods, putting great Gautama
in a rage, blocking his *tapas*.
He has emasculated me

and rejected her in anger.

Through this great outburst
of curses, I’ve robbed him
of his *tapas*. Therefore,

great gods, sages, and celestial singers,
help me, helper of the gods,
to regain my testicles.” And the gods,
led by Agni, listened to Indra

of the Hundred Sacrifices and went
with the Marut hosts
to the divine ancestors, and said,

“Some time ago, Indra, infatuated,
ravished the sage’s wife
and was then emasculated
by the sage’s curse. Indra,
king of gods, destroyer of cities,

is now angry with the gods.

This ram has testicles
but great Indra has lost his.

So take the ram’s testicles
and quickly graft them onto Indra.
A castrated ram will give you
supreme satisfaction and will be
a source of pleasure.

People who offer it
will have endless fruit.
You will give them your plenty.”
Having heard Agni’s words,

the Ancestors got together
and ripped off the ram's testicles
and applied them then to Indra
of the Thousand Eyes.

Since then, the divine Ancestors
eat these castrated rams
and Indra has the testicles
of the beast through the power
of great Gautama's *tapas*.

Come then, Rāma, to the ashram
of the holy sage and save Ahalyā
who has the beauty of a goddess.
Rāghava heard Viśvāmitra's words

and followed him into the ashram
with Lakṣmaṇa: there he saw
Ahalyā, shining with an inner light
earned through her penances,

blazing yet hidden from the eyes
of passersby, even gods and antigods.

(Sastrigal and Sastri 1958, *kāṇḍa* 1, *sargas* 47–8;
translated by David Shulman and A.K. Ramanujan)

THE AHALYĀ EPISODE: KAMPAN

They came to many-towered Mithilā
and stood outside the fortress.
On the towers were many flags.

There, high on an open field,
stood a black rock
that was once Ahalyā,

the great sage's wife who fell
because she lost her chastity,
the mark of marriage in a house. [Verse 547]

Rāma's eyes fell on the rock,
the dust of his feet
wafted on it.

Like one unconscious
coming to,
cutting through ignorance,

changing his dark carcass
for true form
as he reaches the Lord's feet,

so did she stand alive
formed and coloured
again as she once was. [548]

Rāma then asks Viśvāmitra why this lovely woman had been turned
to stone. Viśvāmitra replies:

'Listen. Once Indra,
Lord of the Diamond Axe,
waited on the absence

of Gautama, a sage all spirit,

meaning to reach out
for the lovely breast
of doe-eyed Ahalyā, his wife. [551]

Hurt by love's arrows,
hurt by the look in her eyes
that pierced him like a spear, Indra
writhed and cast about
for stratagems;

one day, overwhelmed
and mindless, he isolated
the sage; and sneaked
into the hermitage
wearing the exact body of Gautama

whose heart knew no falsehoods. [552]

Sneaking in, he joined Ahalyā;
coupled, they drank deep
of the clear new wine
of first-night weddings;

and she knew.

Yet unable
to put aside what was not hers,
she dallied in her joy,
but the sage did not tarry,
he came back, a very Śiva
with three eyes in his head. [553]

Gautama, who used no arrows
from bows, could use more inescapable
powers of curse and blessing.

When he arrived, Ahalyā stood there,
stunned, bearing the shame of a deed
that will not end in this endless world.

Indra shook in terror,
started to move away
in the likeness of a cat. [554]

Eyes dropping fire, Gautama
saw what was done,
and his words flew
like the burning arrows
at your hand:

"May you be covered
by the vaginas
of a thousand women!"
In the twinkle of an eye
they came and covered him. [555]

Covered with shame,
laughingstock of the world,
Indra left.

The sage turned
to his tender wife
and cursed:

"O bought woman!
May you turn to stone!"
and she fell at once

a rough thing
of black rock. [556]

Yet as she fell she begged:
"To bear and forgive wrongs
is also the way of elders.
O Śiva-like lord of mine,
set some limit to your curse!"

So he said: "Rāma
will come, wearing garlands that bring
the hum of bees with them.
When the dust of his feet falls on you,
you will be released from the body of stone." [557]

The immortals looked at their king
and came down at once to Gautama
in a delegation led by Brahmā
and begged of Gautama to relent.

Gautama's mind had changed
and cooled. He changed
the marks on Indra to a thousand eyes
and the gods went back to their worlds,
while she lay there, a thing of stone. [558]

That was the way it was.
From now on, no more misery,
only release, for all things
in this world.

O cloud-dark lord

who battled with that ogress,
black as soot, I saw there
the virtue of your hands
and here the virtue of your feet.' [559]⁵

Let me rapidly suggest a few differences between the two tellings. In Vālmiki, Indra seduces a willing Ahalyā. In Kampan, Ahalyā realises she is doing wrong but cannot let go of the forbidden joy; the poem has also suggested earlier that her sage-husband is all spirit, details which together add a certain psychological subtlety to the seduction. Indra tries to steal away in the shape of a cat, clearly a folklore motif (also found, for example, in the *Kathāsaritsāgara*, an eleventh-century Sanskrit compendium of folktales; see Tawney 1927). He is cursed with a thousand vaginas which are later changed into eyes, and Ahalyā is changed into frigid stone. The poetic justice wreaked on both offenders is fitted to their wrongdoing. Indra bears the mark of what he lusted for, while Ahalyā is rendered incapable of responding to anything. These motifs, not found in Vālmiki, are attested in South Indian folklore and other southern Rāma stories, inscriptions and earlier Tamil poems, as well as in non-Tamil sources. Kampan, here and elsewhere, not only makes full use of his predecessor Vālmiki's materials but folds in many regional folk traditions. It is often through him that they then become part of other *Rāmāyaṇas*.

In technique, Kampan is also more dramatic than Vālmiki. Rāma's feet transmute the black stone into Ahalyā first; only afterwards is her story told. The black stone standing on a high place, waiting for

Rāma, is itself a very effective, vivid symbol. Ahalyā's revival, her waking from cold stone to fleshly human warmth, becomes an occasion for a moving *bhakti* (devotional) meditation on the soul waking to its form in god.

Finally, the Ahalyā episode is related to previous episodes in the poem such as that in which Rāma destroys the demoness Tāṭakā. There he was the destroyer of evil, the bringer of sterility and the ashes of death to his enemies. Here, as the reviver of Ahalyā, he is a cloud-dark god of fertility. Throughout Kampan's poem, Rāma is a Tamil hero, a generous giver and a ruthless destroyer of foes. And the *bhakti* vision makes the release of Ahalyā from her rock-bound sin a paradigm of Rāma's incarnatory mission to release all souls from world-bound misery.

In Vālmīki, Rāma's character is not that of a god but of a god-man who has to live within the limits of a human form with all its vicissitudes. Some argue that the references to Rāma's divinity and his incarnation for the purpose of destroying Rāvaṇa, and the first and last books of the epic, in which Rāma is clearly described as a god with such a mission, are later additions.⁶ Be that as it may, in Kampan he is clearly a god. Hence a passage like the above is dense with religious feeling and theological images. Kampan, writing in the twelfth century, composed his poem under the influence of Tamil *bhakti*. He had for his master Nammālvār (ninth century?), the most eminent of the Śrī Vaiṣṇava saints. So, for Kampan, Rāma is a god who is on a mission to root out evil, sustain the good and bring release to all living beings. The encounter with Ahalyā is only the first in a series, ending with Rāma's encounter with Rāvaṇa the demon himself. For Nammālvār, Rāma is a saviour of *all* beings, from the lowly grass to the great gods:

BY RĀMA'S GRACE

Why would anyone want
to learn anything but Rāma?

Beginning with the low grass
and the creeping ant
with nothing
whatever.

he took everything in his city,
everything moving,
everything still,

he took everything,
everything born
of the lord
of four faces,

he took them all
to the very best of states.

Nammālvār 7.5.1 (Ramanujan 1981, 47)

Kampan's epic poem enacts in detail and with passion Nammālvār's vision of Rāma.

Thus the Ahalyā episode is essentially the same, but the weave, the texture, the colours are very different. Part of the aesthetic pleasure in the later poet's telling derives from its artistic use of its predecessor's work, from ringing changes on it. To some extent all later *Rāmāyaṇas* play on the knowledge of previous tellings: they are meta-*Rāmāyaṇas*. I cannot resist repeating my favourite example. In several of the later *Rāmāyaṇas* (such as the *Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa*, sixteenth century), when Rāma is exiled, he does not want Sītā to go with him into the forest. Sītā argues with him. At first she uses the usual arguments: she is his wife, she should share his sufferings, exile herself in his exile and so on. When he still resists the idea, she is furious. She bursts out, 'Countless *Rāmāyaṇas* have been composed before this. Do you know of one where Sītā doesn't go with Rāma to the forest?' That clinches the argument, and she goes with him (*Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa* 2.4.77-8; see Nath 1913, 39). And as nothing in India occurs uniquely, even this motif appears in more than one *Rāmāyaṇa*.

Now the Tamil *Rāmāyaṇa* of Kampan generates its own offspring, its own special sphere of influence. Read in Telugu characters in Telugu country, played as drama in the Malayalam area as part of temple ritual, it is also an important link in the transmission of the Rāma story to Southeast Asia. It has been convincingly shown that the eighteenth-century Thai *Ramakien* owes much to the Tamil epic. For instance, the names of many characters in the Thai work are not Sanskrit names, but clearly Tamil names (for example, *R̥śyaśṛṅga* in Sanskrit but *Kalaikkōṭu* in Tamil, the latter borrowed into Thai). Tulsi's Hindi *Rāmcaritmānas* and the Malaysian *Hikayat Seri Ram* too owe many details to the Kampan poem (Singaravelu 1968).

Thus obviously transplantations take place through several routes. In some languages the word for tea is derived from a northern Chinese dialect and in others from a southern dialect; thus some languages, like

English and French, have some form of the word *tea*, while others, like Hindi and Russian, have some form of the word *chā(y)*. Similarly, the Rāma story seems to have travelled along three routes, according to Santosh Desai: 'By land, the northern route took the story from the Punjab and Kashmir into China, Tibet, and East Turkestan; by sea, the southern route carried the story from Gujarat and South India into Java, Sumatra, and Malaya; and again by land, the eastern route delivered the story from Bengal into Burma, Thailand, and Laos. Vietnam and Cambodia obtained their stories partly from Java and partly from India via the eastern route' (Desai 1970, 5).

JAIN TELLINGS

When we enter the world of Jain tellings, the Rāma story no longer carries Hindu values. Indeed the Jain texts express the feeling that the Hindus, especially the brahmans, have maligned Rāvaṇa, made him into a villain. Here is a set of questions that a Jain text begins by asking: 'How can monkeys vanquish the powerful *rākṣasa* warriors like Rāvaṇa? How can noble men and Jain worthies like Rāvaṇa eat flesh and drink blood? How can Kumbhakarna sleep through six months of the year, and never wake up even though boiling oil was poured into his ears, elephants were made to trample over him, and war trumpets and conches blown around him? They also say that Rāvaṇa captured Indra and dragged him handcuffed into Lanka. Who can do that to Indra? All this looks a bit fantastic and extreme. They are lies and contrary to reason.' With these questions in mind King Śreṇika goes to sage Gautama to have him tell the true story and clear his doubts. Gautama says to him, 'I'll tell you what Jain wise men say. Rāvaṇa is not a demon, he is not a cannibal and a flesh eater. Wrong-thinking poetasters and fools tell these lies.' He then begins to tell his own version of the story (Chandra 1970, 234). Obviously, the Jain *Rāmāyana* of Vimalasūri, called *Paumacariya* (Prakrit for the Sanskrit *Padma-carita*), knows its Vālmiki and proceeds to correct its errors and Hindu extravagances. Like other Jain *purāṇas*, this too is a *pratipurāṇa*, an anti- or counter-*purāṇa*. The prefix *prati-*, meaning 'anti-' or 'counter-', is a favourite Jain affix.

Vimalasūri the Jain opens the story not with Rāma's genealogy and greatness, but with Rāvaṇa's. Rāvaṇa is one of the sixty-three leaders or *śalākāpuruṣas* of the Jain tradition. He is noble, learned, earns all his magical powers and weapons through austerities (*tapas*), and is a devotee of Jain masters. To please one of them, he even takes a vow that

he will not touch any unwilling woman. In one memorable incident, he lays siege to an impregnable fort. The queen of that kingdom is in love with him and sends him her messenger; he uses her knowledge of the fort to breach it and defeat the king. But, as soon as he conquers it, he returns the kingdom to the king and advises the queen to return to her husband. Later, he is shaken to his roots when he hears from soothsayers that he will meet his end through a woman, Sītā. It is such a Rāvaṇa who falls in love with Sītā's beauty, abducts her, tries to win her favours in vain, watches himself fall, and finally dies on the battlefield. In these tellings, he is a great man undone by a passion that he has vowed against but that he cannot resist. In another tradition of the Jain *Rāmāyaṇas*, Sītā is his daughter, although he does not know it: the dice of tragedy are loaded against him further by this oedipal situation. I shall say more about Sītā's birth in the next section.

In fact, to our modern eyes, this Rāvaṇa is a tragic figure; we are moved to admiration and pity for Rāvaṇa when the Jains tell the story. I should mention one more motif: according to the Jain way of thinking, a pair of antagonists, Vāsudeva and Prativāsudeva—a hero and an antihero, almost like self and Other—are destined to fight in life after life. Lakṣmaṇa and Rāvaṇa are the eighth incarnations of this pair. They are born in age after age, meet each other in battle after many vicissitudes, and in every encounter Vāsudeva inevitably kills his counterpart, his *prati*. Rāvaṇa learns at the end that Lakṣmaṇa is such a Vāsudeva come to take his life. Still, overcoming his despair after a last unsuccessful attempt at peace, he faces his destined enemy in battle with his most powerful magic weapons. When finally he hurls his discus (*cakra*), it doesn't work for him. Recognising Lakṣmaṇa as a Vāsudeva, it does not behead him but gives itself over to his hand. Thus Lakṣmaṇa slays Rāvaṇa with his own cherished weapon.

Here Rāma does not even kill Rāvaṇa, as he does in the Hindu *Rāmāyaṇas*. For Rāma is an evolved Jain soul who has conquered his passions; this is his last birth, so he is loath to kill anything. It is left to Lakṣmaṇa, who goes to hell while Rāma finds release (*kaivalya*).

One hardly need add that the *Paumacariya* is filled with references to Jain places of pilgrimage, stories about Jain monks, and Jain homilies and legends. Furthermore, since the Jains consider themselves rationalists—unlike the Hindus, who, according to them, are given to exorbitant and often bloodthirsty fancies and rituals—they systematically avoid episodes involving miraculous births (Rāma and his brothers are born in the normal way), blood sacrifices, and the like. They even

rationalise the conception of Rāvaṇa as the Ten-headed Demon. When he was born, his mother was given a necklace of nine gems, which she put around his neck. She saw his face reflected in them ninefold and so called him Daśamukha, or the Ten-faced One. The monkeys too are not monkeys but a clan of celestials (*vidyādharas*) actually related to Rāvaṇa and his family through their great grandfathers. They have monkeys as emblems on their flags: hence the name Vānaras or 'monkeys'.

FROM WRITTEN TO ORAL

Let's look at one of the South Indian folk *Rāmāyaṇas*. In these, the story usually occurs in bits and pieces. For instance, in Kannada, we are given separate narrative poems on Sītā's birth, her wedding, her chastity test, her exile, the birth of Lava and Kuśa, their war with their father Rāma, and so on. But we do have one complete telling of the Rāma story by traditional bards (*tambūri dāsaiyyas*), sung with a refrain repeated every two lines by a chorus. For the following discussion, I am indebted to the transcription by Rāmē Gowḍa, P.K. Rājaśēkara and S. Basavaiah (1973).

This folk narrative, sung by an Untouchable bard, opens with Rāvaṇa (here called Ravaḷa) and his queen Maṇḍodari. They are unhappy and childless. So Rāvaṇa or Ravaḷa goes to the forest, performs all sorts of self-mortifications like rolling on the ground till blood runs from his back, and meets a *jōgi*, or holy mendicant, who is none other than Śiva. Śiva gives him a magic mango and asks him how he would share it with his wife. Ravaḷa says, 'Of course, I'll give her the sweet flesh of the fruit and I'll lick the mango seed.' The *jōgi* is skeptical. He says to Ravaḷa, 'You say one thing to me. You have poison in your belly. You're giving me butter to eat, but you mean something else. If you lie to me, you'll eat the fruit of your actions yourself.' Ravaḷa has one thing in his dreams and another in his waking world, says the poet. When he brings the mango home, with all sorts of flowers and incense for the ceremonial *pūjā*, Maṇḍodari is very happy. After a ritual *pūjā* and prayers to Śiva, Ravaḷa is ready to share the mango. But he thinks, 'If I give her the fruit, I'll be hungry, she'll be full,' and quickly gobbles up the flesh of the fruit, giving her only the seed to lick. When she throws it in the yard, it sprouts and grows into a tall mango tree. Meanwhile, Ravaḷa himself becomes pregnant, his pregnancy advancing a month each day.

In one day, it was a month, O Śiva.
In the second, it was the second month,
and cravings began for him, O Śiva.
How shall I show my face to the world of men, O Śiva.

On the third day, it was the third month,
How shall I show my face to the world, O Śiva.
On the fourth day, it was the fourth month.
How can I bear this, O Śiva.
Five days, and it was five months,
O lord, you've given me trouble, O Śiva
I can't bear it, I can't bear it, O Śiva
How will I live, cries Ravaḷa in misery.
Six days, and he is six months gone, O mother,
in seven days it was seven months.
O what shame, Ravaḷa in his seventh month,
and soon came the eighth, O Śiva
Ravaḷa was in his ninth full month.
When he was round and ready, she's born, the dear,
Sītā is born through his nose.
When he sneezes, Sītamma is born.
And Ravaḷa names her Sītamma.

(Gowda et al. 1973, 150-1; my translation)

In Kannada, the word *sītā* means 'he sneezed': he calls her Sītā because she is born from a sneeze. Her name is thus given a Kannada folk etymology, as in the Sanskrit texts it has a Sanskrit one: there she is named Sītā because King Janaka finds her in a furrow (*sītā*). Then Ravaḷa goes to astrologers, who tell him he is being punished for not keeping his word to Śiva and for eating the flesh of the fruit instead of giving it to his wife. They advise him to feed and dress the child, and leave her some place where she will be found and brought up by some couple. He puts her in a box and leaves her in Janaka's field.

It is only after this story of Sītā's birth that the poet sings of the birth and adventures of Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa. Then comes a long section on Sītā's marriage contest, where Ravaḷa appears and is humiliated when he falls under the heavy bow he has to lift. Rāma lifts it and marries Sītā. After that she is abducted by Ravaḷa. Rāma lays siege to Lanka with his monkey allies, and (in a brief section) recovers Sītā and is crowned king. The poet then returns to the theme of Sītā's trials. She is slandered and exiled, but gives birth to twins who grow up to be warriors. They tie up Rāma's sacrificial horse, defeat the armies sent to guard the horse and finally unite their parents, this time for good.

One sees here not only a different texture and emphasis: the teller is everywhere eager to return to Sītā—her life, her birth, her adoption, her wedding, her abduction and recovery. Whole sections, equal in length to those on Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa's birth, exile and war against Rāvaṇa, are

devoted to her banishment, pregnancy and reunion with her husband. Furthermore, her abnormal birth as the daughter born directly to the male Rāvaṇa brings to the story a new range of suggestions: the male envy of womb and childbirth, which is a frequent theme in Indian literature, and an Indian oedipal theme of fathers pursuing daughters and, in this case, a daughter causing the death of her incestuous father (see chap. 22, 'The Indian Oedipus', below). The motif of Sītā as Rāvaṇa's daughter is not unknown elsewhere. It occurs in one tradition of the Jain stories (for example, in the *Vasudevahiṃḍi*) and in folk traditions of Kannada and Telugu, as well as in several Southeast Asian *Rāmāyaṇas*. In some, Rāvaṇa in his lusty youth molests a young woman, who vows vengeance and is reborn as his daughter to destroy him. Thus the oral traditions seem to partake of yet another set of themes unknown in Vālmiki.

A SOUTHEAST ASIAN EXAMPLE

When we go outside India to Southeast Asia, we meet with a variety of tellings of the Rāma story in Tibet, Thailand, Burma, Laos, Cambodia, Malaysia, Java and Indonesia. Here we shall look at only one example, the Thai *Ramakirti*. According to Santosh Desai, nothing else of Hindu origin has affected the tone of Thai life more than the Rāma story (Desai 1980, 63).⁷ The bas-reliefs and paintings on the walls of their Buddhist temples, the plays enacted in town and village, their ballets—all of them rework the Rāma story. In succession several kings with the name 'King Rama' wrote *Rāmāyaṇa* episodes in Thai: King Rama I composed a telling of the *Rāmāyaṇa* in fifty thousand verses, Rama II composed new episodes for dance, and Rama VI added another set of episodes, most taken from Vālmiki. Places in Thailand, such as Lopburi (Sanskrit Lavapuri), Khidkin (Sanskrit Kiṣkindhā), and Ayuthia (Sanskrit Ayodhyā) with its ruins of Khmer and Thai art, are associated with Rāma legends.

The Thai *Ramakirti* (Rāma's glory) or *Ramakien* (Rāma's story) opens with an account of the origins of the three kinds of characters in the story, the human, the demonic, and the simian. The second part describes the brothers' first encounters with the demons, Rāma's marriage and banishment, the abduction of Sītā, and Rāma's meeting with the monkey clan. It also describes the preparations for the war, Hanumān's visit to Lanka and his burning of it, the building of the bridge, the siege of Lanka, the fall of Rāvaṇa, and Rāma's reunion with Sītā. The third part describes an insurrection in Lanka, which Rāma deposes his two youngest brothers to quell. This part also describes the banishment of Sītā, the birth of her

sons, their war with Rāma, Sītā's descent into the earth, and the appearance of the gods to reunite Rāma and Sītā. Though many incidents look the same as they do in Vālmiki, many things look different as well. For instance, as in the South India folk *Rāmāyaṇas* (as also in some Jain, Bengali and Kāshmiri ones), the banishment of Sītā is given a dramatic new rationale. The daughter of Śūrpaṇakhā (the demoness whom Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa had mutilated years earlier in the forest) is waiting in the wings to take revenge on Sītā, whom she views as finally responsible for her mother's disfigurement. She comes to Ayodhya, enters Sītā's service as a maid, and induces her to draw a picture of Rāvaṇa. The drawing is rendered indelible (in some tellings, it comes to life in her bedroom) and forces itself on Rāma's attention. In a jealous rage, he orders Sītā killed. The compassionate Lakṣmaṇa leaves her alive in the forest, though, and brings back the heart of a deer as witness to the execution.

The reunion between Rāma and Sītā is also different. When Rāma finds out she is still alive, he recalls Sītā to his palace by sending her word that he is dead. She rushes to see him but flies into a rage when she finds she has been tricked. So, in a fit of helpless anger, she calls upon Mother Earth to take her. Hanumān is sent to subterranean regions to bring her back, but she refuses to return. It takes the power of Śiva to reunite them.

Again as in the Jain instances and the South Indian folk poems, the account of Sītā's birth is different from that given in Vālmiki. When Daśaratha performs his sacrifice, he receives a rice ball, not the rice porridge (*pāyasa*) mentioned in Vālmiki. A crow steals some of the rice and takes it to Rāvaṇa's wife, who eats it and gives birth to Sītā. A prophecy that his daughter will cause his death makes Rāvaṇa throw Sītā into the sea, where the sea goddess protects her and takes her to Janaka.

Furthermore, though Rāma is an incarnation of Viṣṇu, in Thailand he is subordinate to Śiva. By and large he is seen as a human hero, and the *Ramakirti* is not regarded as a religious work or even as an exemplary work on which men and women may pattern themselves. The Thais enjoy most the sections about the abduction of Sītā and the war. Partings and reunions, which are the heart of the Hindu *Rāmāyaṇas*, are not as important as the excitement and the details of war, the techniques, the fabulous weapons. The *Yuddhakāṇḍa* or the War Book is more elaborate than in any other telling, whereas it is of minor importance in the Kannada folk telling. Desai says this Thai emphasis on war is significant: early Thai history is full of wars; their concern was survival. The focus in the *Ramakien* is not on family values and spirituality. Thai audiences are more fond of Hanumān than of Rāma. Neither celibate nor devout, as in the Hindu

Rāmāyaṇa, here Hanumān is quite a ladies' man, who doesn't at all mind looking into the bedrooms of Lanka and doesn't consider seeing another man's sleeping wife anything immoral, as Vālmiki's or Kampan's Hanumān does.

Rāvaṇa too is different here. The *Ramakirtī* admires Rāvaṇa's resourcefulness and learning; his abduction of Sītā is seen as an act of love and is viewed with sympathy. The Thais are moved by Rāvaṇa's sacrifice of family, kingdom and life itself for the sake of a woman. His dying words later provide the theme of a famous love poem of the nineteenth century, an inscription of a Wat of Bangkok (Desai 1980, 85). Unlike Vālmiki's characters, the Thai ones are a fallible, human mixture of good and evil. The fall of Rāvaṇa here makes one sad. It is not an occasion for unambiguous rejoicing, as it is in Vālmiki.

PATTERNS OF DIFFERENCE

Thus, not only do we have one story told by Vālmiki in Sanskrit, we have a variety of Rāma tales told by others, with radical differences among them. Let me outline a few of the differences we have not yet encountered. For instance, in Sanskrit and in the other Indian languages, there are two endings to the story. One ends with the return of Rāma and Sītā to Ayodhya, their capital, to be crowned king and queen of the ideal kingdom. In another ending, often considered a later addition in Vālmiki and in Kampan, Rāma hears Sītā slandered as a woman who lived in Rāvaṇa's grove, and in the name of his reputation as a king (we would call it credibility, I suppose) he banishes her to the forest, where she gives birth to twins. They grow up in Vālmiki's hermitage, learn the *Rāmāyaṇa* as well as the arts of war from him, win a war over Rāma's army, and in a poignant scene sing the *Rāmāyaṇa* to their own father when he doesn't quite know who they are. Each of these two endings gives the whole work a different cast. The first one celebrates the return of the royal exiles and rounds out the tale with reunion, coronation and peace. In the second one, their happiness is brief, and they are separated again, making separation of loved ones (*vipralambha*) the central mood of the whole work. It can even be called tragic, for Sītā finally cannot bear it any more and enters a fissure in the earth, the mother from whom she had originally come—as we saw earlier, her name means 'furrow', which is where she was originally found by Janaka. It also enacts, in the rise of Sītā from the furrow and her return to the earth, a shadow of a Proserpine-like myth, a vegetation cycle: Sītā is like the seed and Rāma with his cloud-dark body the rain:

Rāvaṇa in the south is the Pluto-like abductor into dark regions (the south is the abode of death); Sītā reappears in purity and glory for a brief period before she returns again to the earth. Such a myth, while it should not be blatantly pressed into some rigid allegory, resonates in the shadows of the tale in many details. Note the many references to fertility and rain. Rāma's opposition to Śiva-like ascetic figures (made explicit by Kampan in the Ahalyā story), his ancestor bringing the river Ganges into the plains of the kingdom to water and revive the ashes of the dead. Relevant also is the story of Rśyaśṛṅga, the sexually naive ascetic who is seduced by the beauty of a woman and thereby brings rain to Lomapāda's kingdom, and who later officiates at the ritual which fills Daśaratha's queens' wombs with children. Such a mythic groundswell also makes us hear other tones in the continual references to nature, the potent presence of birds and animals as the devoted friends of Rāma in his search for his Sītā. Birds and monkeys are a real presence and a poetic necessity in the Vālmiki *Rāmāyaṇa*, as much as they are excrescences in the Jain view. With each ending, different effects of the story are highlighted, and the whole telling alters its poetic stance.

One could say similar things about the different beginnings. Vālmiki opens with a frame story about Vālmiki himself. He sees a hunter aim an arrow and kill one of a happy pair of love-birds. The female circles its dead mate and cries over it. The scene so moves the poet and sage Vālmiki that he curses the hunter. A moment later, he realises that his curse has taken the form of a line of verse—in a famous play on words, the rhythm of his grief (*śoka*) has given rise to a metrical form (*śloka*). He decides to write the whole epic of Rāma's adventures in that metre. This incident becomes, in later poetics, the parable of all poetic utterance: out of the stress of natural feeling (*bhāva*), an artistic form has to be found or fashioned, a form which will generalise and capture the essence (*rasa*) of that feeling. This incident at the beginning of Vālmiki gives the work an aesthetic self-awareness. One may go further: the incident of the death of a bird and the separation of loved ones becomes a leitmotif for this telling of the Rāma story. One notes a certain rhythmic recurrence of an animal killed at many of the critical moments: when Daśaratha shoots an arrow to kill what he thinks is an elephant but instead kills a young ascetic filling his pitcher with water (making noises like an elephant drinking at a water hole), he earns a curse that later leads to the exile of Rāma and the separation of father and son. When Rāma pursues a magical golden deer (really a demon in disguise) and kills it, with its last breath it calls out to Lakṣmaṇa in Rāma's voice, which in turn leads to his leaving Sītā

unprotected; this allows Rāvaṇa to abduct Sītā. Even as Rāvaṇa carries her off, he is opposed by an ancient bird which he slays with his sword. Furthermore, the death of the bird, in the opening section, and the cry of the surviving mate set the tone for the many separations throughout the work, of brother and brother, mothers and fathers and sons, wives and husbands.

Thus the opening sections of each major work set into motion the harmonics of the whole poem, presaging themes and a pattern of images. Kampan's Tamil text begins very differently. One can convey it best by citing a few stanzas.

THE RIVER

The cloud, wearing white
on white like Śiva
making beautiful the sky
on his way from the sea
grew dark

as the face of the Lord
who wears with pride
on his right the Goddess
of the scented breasts. [2]

Mistaking the Himalayan dawn
for a range of gold,
the clouds let down chains
and chains of gleaming rain.

They pour like a generous giver
giving all he has,
remembering and reckoning
all he has. [15]

It floods, it runs over
its continents like the fame
of a great king, upright,
infallible, reigning by the Laws
under cool royal umbrellas. [16]

Concubines caressing
their lovers' hair, their lovers'
bodies, their lovers' limbs,

take away whole hills
of wealth yet keep little
in their spendthrift hands

as they move on: so too
the waters flow from the peaks
to the valleys,

beginning high and reaching low. [17]

The flood carrying all before it
like merchants, caravans
loaded with gold, pearls,
peacock feathers and rows
of white tusk and fragrant woods. [18]

Bending to a curve, the river,
surface coloured by petals,
gold yellow pollen, honey,
the ochre flow of elephant lust,
looked much like a rainbow. [19]

Ravaging hillsides, uprooting trees,
covered with fallen leaves all over,
the waters came,

like a monkey clan
facing restless seas
looking for a bridge. [20]

Thick-faced proud elephants
ranged with foaming cavalier horses
filling the air with the noise of war,

raising banners,
the flood rushes
as for a battle with the sea. [22]

Stream of numberless kings
in the line of the Sun,
continuous in virtue:

the river branches into deltas,
mother's milk to all lives
on the salt sea-surrounded land. [23]

Scattering a robber camp on the hills
with a rain of arrows,

the scared women beating their bellies
and gathering bow and arrow as they run,

the waters assault villages
like the armies of a king. [25]

Stealing milk and buttermilk,
guzzling on warm ghee and butter
straight from the pots on the ropes,
leaning the *marutam* tree on the *kuruntam*,
carrying away the clothes and bracelets
of goatherd girls at water games,
like Kṛṣṇa dancing
on the spotted snake,
the waters are naughty. [26]

Turning forest into slope,
field into wilderness,
seashore into fertile land,
changing boundaries,
exchanging landscapes,
the reckless waters
roared on like the pasts
that hurry close on the heels
of lives. [28]

Born of Himalayan stone
and mingling with the seas,
it spreads, ceaselessly various,
one and many at once,
like that Original
even the measureless Vedas
cannot measure with words. [30]

Through pollen-dripping groves,
clumps of champak,
lotus pools,
water places with new sands,
flowering fields cross-fenced
with creepers,
like a life filling
and emptying
a variety of bodies,
the river flows on. [31]⁸

This passage is unique to Kampan; it is not found in Vālmiki. It describes the waters as they are gathered by clouds from the seas and

come down in rain and flow as floods of the Sarayū river down to Ayodhya, the capital of Rāma's kingdom. Through it, Kampan introduces all his themes and emphases, even his characters, his concern with fertility themes (implicit in Vālmiki), the whole dynasty of Rāma's ancestors, and his vision of *bhakti* through the *Rāmāyaṇa*.

Note the variety of themes introduced through the similes and allusions, each aspect of the water symbolising an aspect of the *Rāmāyaṇa* story itself and representing a portion of the *Rāmāyaṇa* universe (for example, monkeys), picking up as it goes along characteristic Tamil traditions not to be found anywhere else, like the five landscapes of classical Tamil poetry. The emphasis on water itself, the source of life and fertility, is also an explicit part of the Tamil literary tradition. The *Kural*—the so-called Bible of the Tamils, a didactic work on the ends and means of the good life—opens with a passage on God and follows it up immediately with a great ode in celebration of the rains (*Tirukkural* 2).

Another point of difference among *Rāmāyaṇas* is the intensity of focus on a major character. Vālmiki focuses on Rāma and his history in his opening sections; Vimalasūri's Jain *Rāmāyaṇa* and the Thai epic focus not on Rāma but on the genealogy and adventures of Rāvaṇa; the Kannada village telling focuses on Sītā, her birth, her wedding, her trials. Some later extensions like the *Adbhuta Rāmāyaṇa* and the Tamil story of *Śatakanṭharāvaṇa* even give Sītā a heroic character: when the ten-headed Rāvaṇa is killed, another appears with a hundred heads: Rāma cannot handle this new menace, so it is Sītā who goes to war and slays the new demon (see Shulman 1979). The Santals, a tribe known for their extensive oral traditions, even conceive of Sītā as unfaithful—to the shock and horror of any Hindu bred on Vālmiki or Kampan, she is seduced both by Rāvaṇa and by Lakṣmaṇa. In Southeast Asian texts, as we saw earlier, Hanumān is not the celibate devotee with a monkey face but a ladies' man who figures in many love episodes. In Kampan and Tulsī, Rāma is a god; in the Jain texts, he is only an evolved Jain man who is in his last birth and so does not even kill Rāvaṇa. In the latter, Rāvaṇa is a noble hero fated by his karma to fall for Sītā and bring death upon himself, while he is in other texts an overweening demon. Thus in the conception of every major character there are radical differences, so different indeed that one conception is quite abhorrent to those who hold another. We may add to these many more: elaborations on the reason why Sītā is banished, the miraculous creation of Sītā's second son and the final reunion of Rāma and Sītā. Every one of these occurs in more than one text, in more

than one textual community (Hindu, Jain or Buddhist), in more than one region.

Now, is there a common core to the Rāma stories, except the most skeletal set of relations like that of Rāma, his brother, his wife and the antagonist Rāvaṇa who abducts her? Are the stories bound together only by certain family resemblances, as Wittgenstein might say? Or is it like Aristotle's jack-knife? When the philosopher asked an old carpenter how long he had had his knife, the latter said, 'Oh, I've had it for thirty years. I've changed the blade a few times and the handle a few times, but it's the same knife.' Some shadow of a relational structure claims the name of *Rāmāyaṇa* for all these tellings, but on a closer look one is not necessarily all that like another. Like a collection of people with the same proper name, they make a class in name alone.

THOUGHTS ON TRANSLATION

That may be too extreme a way of putting it. Let me back up and say it differently, in a way that covers more adequately the differences between the texts and their relations to each other, for they *are* related. One might think of them as a series of translations clustering around one or another in a family of texts: a number of them cluster around Vālmiki, another set around the Jain Vimalasūri, and so on.

Or these translation-relations between texts could be thought of in Peircean terms, at least in three ways.⁹

Where Text 1 and Text 2 have a geometrical resemblance to each other, as one triangle to another (whatever the angles, sizes, or colours of the lines), we call such a relation *iconic*. In the West, we generally expect translations to be 'faithful', i.e., iconic. Thus, when Chapman translates Homer, he not only preserves basic textual features such as characters, imagery and order of incidents, but tries to reproduce a hexameter and retain the same number of lines as in the original Greek—only the language is English and the idiom Elizabethan. When Kampan retells Vālmiki's *Rāmāyaṇa* in Tamil, he is largely faithful in keeping to the order and sequence of episodes, the structural relations between the characters of father, son, brothers, wives, friends, and enemies. But the iconicity is limited to such structural relations. His work is much longer than Vālmiki's, for example, and it is composed in more than twenty different kinds of Tamil metres, while Vālmiki's is mostly in the *śloka* metre.

Very often, although Text 2 stands in an iconic relationship to Text 1

in terms of basic elements such as plot, it is filled with local detail, folklore, poetic traditions, imagery, and so forth—as in Kampan's telling or that of the Bengali Kṛtīvāsa. In the Bengali *Rāmāyaṇa*, Rāma's wedding is very much a Bengali wedding, with Bengali customs and Bengali cuisine (Sen 1920). We may call such a text *indexical*: the text is embedded in a locale, a context, refers to it, even signifies it, and would not make much sense without it. Here, one may say, the *Rāmāyaṇa* is not merely a set of individual texts, but a genre with a variety of instances.

Now and then, as we have seen, Text 2 uses the plot and characters and names of Text 1 minimally and uses them to say entirely new things, often in an effort to subvert the predecessor by producing a counter-text. We may call such a translation *symbolic*. The word *translation* itself here acquires a somewhat mathematical sense, of mapping a structure of relations onto another plane or another symbolic system. When this happens, the Rāma story has become almost a second language of the whole culture area, a shared core of names, characters, incidents, and motifs, with a narrative language in which Text 1 can say one thing and Text 2 something else, even the exact opposite. Vālmiki's Hindu and Vimalasūri's Jain texts in India—or the Thai *Ramakirti* in Southeast Asia—are such symbolic translations of each other.

One must not forget that to some extent all translations, even the so-called faithful iconic ones, inevitably have all three kinds of elements. When Goldman (1984–) and his group of scholars produce a modern translation of Vālmiki's *Rāmāyaṇa*, they are iconic in the transliteration of Sanskrit names, the number and sequence of verses, the order of the episodes, and so forth. But they are also indexical, in that the translation is in English idiom and comes equipped with introductions and explanatory footnotes, which inevitably contain twentieth-century attitudes and misprisions; and symbolic, in that they cannot avoid conveying through this translation modern understandings proper to their reading of the text. But the proportions between the three kinds of relations differ vastly between Kampan and Goldman. And we accordingly read them for different reasons and with different aesthetic expectations. We read the scholarly modern English translation largely to gain a sense of the original Vālmiki, and we consider it successful to the extent that it resembles the original. We read Kampan to read Kampan, and we judge him on his own terms—not by his resemblance to Vālmiki but, if anything, by the extent that he differs from Vālmiki. In the one, we rejoice in the similarity; in the other, we cherish and savour the differences.

One may go further and say that the cultural area in which *Rāmāyaṇas*

are endemic has a pool of signifiers (like a gene pool), signifiers that include plots, characters, names, geography, incidents, and relationships. Oral, written, and performance traditions, phrases, proverbs, and even sneers carry allusions to the Rāma story. When someone is carrying on, you say, 'What's this *Rāmāyaṇa* now? Enough.' In Tamil, a narrow room is called a *kiṣkindhā*; a proverb about a dim-witted person says, 'After hearing the *Rāmāyaṇa* all night, he asks how Rāma is related to Sītā'; in a Bengali arithmetic textbook, children are asked to figure the dimensions of what is left of a wall that Hanumān built, after he has broken down part of it in mischief. And to these must be added marriage songs, narrative poems, place legends, temple myths, paintings, sculpture, and the many performing arts.

These various texts not only relate to prior texts directly, to borrow or refute, but they relate to each other through this common code or common pool. Every author, if one may hazard a metaphor, dips into it and brings out a unique crystallization, a new text with a unique texture and a fresh context. The great texts rework the small ones, for 'lions are made of sheep,' as Valéry said. And sheep are made of lions, too: a folk legend says that Hanumān wrote the original *Rāmāyaṇa* on a mountain-top, after the great war, and scattered the manuscript; it was many times larger than what we have now. Vālmiki is said to have captured only a fragment of it.¹⁰ In this sense, no text is original, yet no telling is a mere retelling—and the story has no closure, although it may be enclosed in a text. In India and in Southeast Asia, no one ever reads the *Rāmāyaṇa* or the *Mahābhārata* for the first time. The stories are there, 'always already'.

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOU LISTEN

This essay opened with a folktale about the many *Rāmāyaṇas*. Before we close, it may be appropriate to tell another tale about Hanumān and Rāma's ring. But this story is about the power of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, about what happens when you really listen to this potent story. Even a fool cannot resist it; he is entranced and caught up in the action. The listener can no longer bear to be a bystander but feels compelled to enter the world of the epic: the line between fiction and reality is erased.

A villager who had no sense of culture and no interest in it was married to a woman who was very cultured. She tried various ways to cultivate his taste for the higher things in life but he just wasn't interested.

One day a great reciter of that grand epic the *Rāmāyaṇa* came to the village. Every evening he would sing, recite, and explain the verses of the

epic. The whole village went to this one-man performance as if it were a rare feast.

The woman who was married to the uncultured dolt tried to interest him in the performance. She nagged him and nagged him, trying to force him to go and listen. This time, he grumbled as usual but decided to humour her. So he went in the evening and sat at the back. It was an all-night performance, and he just couldn't keep awake. He slept through the night. Early in the morning, when a canto had ended and the reciter sang the closing verses for the day, sweets were distributed according to custom. Someone put some sweets into the mouth of the sleeping man. He woke up soon after and went home. His wife was delighted that her husband had stayed through the night and asked him eagerly how he enjoyed the *Rāmāyaṇa*. He said, 'It was very sweet.' The wife was happy to hear it.

The next day too his wife insisted on his listening to the epic. So he went to the enclosure where the reciter was performing, sat against a wall, and before long fell fast asleep. The place was crowded and a young boy sat on his shoulder, made himself comfortable, and listened open-mouthed to the fascinating story. In the morning, when the night's portion of the story came to an end, everyone got up and so did the husband. The boy had left earlier, but the man felt aches and pains from the weight he had borne all night. When he went home and his wife asked him eagerly how it was, he said, 'It got heavier and heavier by morning.' The wife said, 'That's the way the story is.' She was happy that her husband was at last beginning to feel the emotions and the greatness of the epic.

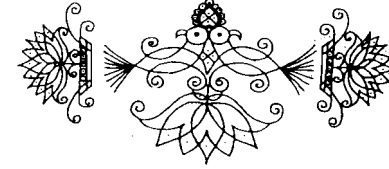
On the third day, he sat at the edge of the crowd and was so sleepy that he lay down on the floor and even snored. Early in the morning, a dog came that way and pissed into his mouth a little before he woke up and went home. When his wife asked him how it was, he moved his mouth this way and that, made a face and said, 'Terrible. It was so salty.' His wife knew something was wrong. She asked him what exactly was happening and didn't let up till he finally told her how he had been sleeping through the performance every night.

On the fourth day, his wife went with him, sat him down in the very first row, and told him sternly that he should keep awake no matter what might happen. So he sat dutifully in the front row and began to listen. Very soon, he was caught up in the adventures and the characters of the great epic story. On that day, the reciter was enchanting the audience with a description of how Hanumān the monkey had to leap across the ocean to take Rāma's signet ring to Sītā. When Hanumān was leaping across the

ocean, the signet ring slipped from his hand and fell into the ocean. Hanumān didn't know what to do. He had to get the ring back quickly and take it to Sītā in the demon's kingdom. While he was wringing his hands, the husband who was listening with rapt attention in the first row said, 'Hanumān, don't worry. I'll get it for you.' Then he jumped up and dived into the ocean, found the ring on the ocean floor, brought it back, and gave it to Hanumān.

Everyone was astonished. They thought this man was someone special, really blessed by Rāma and Hanumān. Ever since, he has been respected in the village as a wise elder, and he has also behaved like one. That's what happens when you really listen to a story, especially to the *Rāmāyaṇa*.¹¹

Repetition in the *Mahābhārata*



I

No Hindu ever reads the *Mahābhārata* for the first time. And when he does get to read it, he doesn't usually read it in Sanskrit. As one such native, I know the Hindu epics, not as a Sanskritist (which I am not), but through Kannada and Tamil, mostly through the oral traditions. I've heard bits and pieces of it in a tailor's shop where a pundit used to regale us with *Mahābhārata* stories and large sections of a sixteenth-century Kannada text; from brahman cooks in the house; from an older boy who loved to keep us spellbound with it (and the Kannada *Arabian Nights* which he was reading in the Oriental Library) after cricket, in the evenings, under a large *neem* tree in a wealthy engineer's compound; from a somewhat bored algebra teacher who switched from the binomial theorem to the problems of Draupadī and her five husbands. Then there were professional bards who 'did the Harikathā Kālakṣepam', redeeming the time with holy tales (and not always holy ones). They were invited into a neighbourhood by a group or a wealthy man, and they would recite, sing and tell the *Mahābhārata* in sections night after night, usually under a temporary canopy (*paṇḍāl*) lit by petromax lanterns, with a floating audience sitting on rugs on the street and on the verandas of houses that lined the street now turned into a makeshift auditorium. They sang songs in several languages, told folktales, sometimes danced, quoted Sanskrit tags as well as the daily newspaper, and made the *Mahābhārata* entertaining, didactic and relevant to the listener's present.

The *Mahābhārata* provides materials and allusions to every artistic genre—from plays to proverbs, from folk performances to movies and TV. Indeed, the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa* have appeared as serials, week after week in popular Tamil weeklies. C. Rajagopalachari, the veteran statesman, who was dedicated to bringing traditional wisdom