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Book Review: *A Hundred Measures of Time: Tiruviruttam*

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devotees care more about the promises of salvation from various forms of lack and oppression than whether one deity bore a true body or not—and what constitutes a “real,” physical body in the first place (and why that matters). Indeed, the author takes us into deep theological waters, careful to understand Kṛṣṇa and Christ from within their respective theological and philosophical contexts, then doing the dangerous work of comparison of one savior-within-a system with another savior-within-a system. Most seekers are either unable to delve into such waters or are simply uninterested to do so. For such as these there

exist weightier concerns. Succor might be had—and depending on where one lives, that could be from Kṛṣṇa or Christ, or both, much to the chagrin of those eager to police the borders of orthodoxies Hindu and Christian. Still, the author has provided a valuable resource for understanding classical understandings of the person and work of Kṛṣṇa and Christ within and across religious boundaries, and he has provided a vigorous response to those who would facilely paint with brushes far too broad.

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***A Hundred Measures of Time: Tiruviruttam* By Nammalvar. Translated and introduced by Archana Venkatesan. Penguin Books India, 2014, 272 pages.**

LOVE poetry is a treasure of the ancient Tamil *cankam* (“academy”) flourished in the early centuries CE. The poetry — mapping what A. K. Ramanujan termed the “interior landscape” — is comprised, with only several exceptions, of verses in the voice of either the (unnamed) man or woman. These are usually single verses, free-standing, that speak of love, separation; they offer seeming replies to messages we have not heard, or send messages in hopes of a response from the silent beloved. This love poetry famously reminds us of the Song of Songs. Unlike the Song, though, such poems were never incorporated into a canon of religious literature, and never become the subject of mystical readings. Centuries later, though, Saiva and Vaisnava poets composed fresh poems in the old genre, but now with heightened and explicit religious meanings.

“He” is the beloved Lord, and “she” is the soul searching for that beloved, too often inexplicably absent.

The Tiruviruttam, a poem of one hundred verses in the *virutta* (*vrтта*) meter, is a stellar instance of this new religious poetry. It was composed by the Tamil saint Satakopan, known more familiarly in the Srivaisnava Hindu tradition as Nammalvar, “our saint” or “our deep mystic.” He was foremost among the twelve alvar poets of the 7th to 10th centuries. Satakopan authored four works, the most famous of which is the *Tiruvaymoli*, one hundred songs, each ten verses in length. *Tiruviruttam*, perhaps his first work, consciously and amazingly evokes the power, feeling, and uncertainties of the old *cankam* poems. It, along with the other alvar works, became the ground of a long tradition of

interpretation in the Srivaisnava traditions. These commentators and theologians are disciples of Ramanuja, the primary figure in the formation of that community theologically, textually, and ritually. They read the poetry of the alvars in light of the Upanisads, Gita, and Vedanta, the stories of the Ramayana and Mahabharata, the Visnu Purana, and each alvar's works in light of other such works. Periyavaccan Pillai (b. 1128), who commented on all 4000 verses of alvar poetry, glosses the individual words of the verses so as to elaborate the outer and inner (for others, for self) meanings of the text, as love poetry and as the secret unfolding of the love of God and self. These commentaries, nourished by the alvars' verses, open up unprecedented vistas on the Tamil and Sanskrit traditions.

All of this is fascinating, but much of this material has been nearly inaccessible to readers in the West. We must therefore be deeply grateful to Archana Venkatesan for her translation of Tiruviruttam, *A Hundred Measures of Time*. She is already widely respected for her *Secret Garland*, a translation of the works of Antal, the single female poet among the alvars. Venkatesan's reputation will only grow due to this splendid volume. Indeed, it is hard to imagine a more richly complete volume of translation and supporting materials. In addition to a lovely translation of the verses, Venkatesan sets them in the context of the *cankam* poetry. She reviews in straightforward terms what is known about Satakopan from history and hagiography, and introduces the canon of Vaisnava poetry, and Tiruviruttam's place within the canon. Her introduction speaks also to the art of translation, taking enormous care in explaining how translations come about, how and why choices made. She

notes the history of translations too, noting and charitably assessing earlier translations of the part or whole of Tiruviruttam, beginning with JSM Hooper's 1929 translation of nearly all of Tiruviruttam's verses in his *Hymns of the Alvars*; a missionary, Hooper had in mind a cultural-religious motive: to make sure that missionaries would know the literature and culture of the Tamil area, not focusing on religion in abstraction.

There are no theological studies of Tiruviruttam in English, but Venkatesan is alert to theological openings as they appear. For instance, she highlights verses 48 and 94, the two verses that stand apart from the rest of Tiruviruttam. (Verses 95-100, however, may be something different again, a more direct mode of praise that no longer reflects the "he said" and "she said" format.) In verses 48 and 94, the poet reflects on his work as God's word, confessing, as he does again in Tiruvaymoli, that Tiruviruttam is God's song, not his. For example: "Virtuous Vedic seers / are blessed to be adorned by / your dark body your red lotus eyes your feet. / Like a blind cow mimicking the lowing herd / so it can return to the city / I repeat some words. / What else can this servant say?" (94). Here we have a most striking theology of inspiration. The Lord's beauty is the crowning glory even of those most learned in the Vedas. No elitism here. Satakopan's words signal his instinct to return home to the Lord, but since he cannot find his way, his poems are as humble and imitative as the lowing of a cow that, because it is blind, can only pretend to know that the village is near. There is much here for a theologian to ponder: learning completed in the beautiful; words as the instinctual humble sounds of those reaching their desired homes; the efficacy of

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our poor words, even when we do not really know the way home to God. Verses 48 and 94 are small lights that illumine the whole of Tiruviruttam.

Even with every help at hand, though, deciphering any given verse can be a challenge, elusive even for the specialist. Take for instance verse 76, to which Venkatesan devotes considerable attention in her introduction as her example of translation. The first part is clear, informative for those knowing the clues: “My innocent heart desires / the buds of cool lovely tulasi that adorn / the one who spread everywhere / measured the world.” He is Visnu, the one who pervades, scented by his fragrant basil (*tulasi*) and remembered for his mythic, solar spanning of the earth in three steps. She yearns not directly for him but for the flowers in his hair. But even then she is innocently grasping at what is beyond her; her simple heart must inevitably be disappointed.

The second part of verse 76 puzzles considerably more, since the poet shifts to a complicated natural dynamic: “Is it a surprise the white moon / closes the broad petals of the lovely lotus / makes the delicate ampal bloom / spreads like poison everywhere / wanting my white bangles?” What does this mean? Periyavaccanpillai (translated in part by Venkatesan) suggests that here the woman consoles her heart. The sun has gone, but the moon, though a lesser light, favors the little lily (*ampal*) over the great lotus. Satakopa Ramanujacarya, another commentator, finds here a reproach to the moon: it helps the lily to blossom, but it makes the lotus hide itself, no

longer brightened by the sun. Indeed, the moon wars even against her bangles, taking them to be its rival in radiance. If so, then the Lord is both complimented and reproached, even as her love and desperation mingle. The moon, which spreads across the world as did the radiant Lord, gives hope to those disappointed at sunset; yet too, it hurts those it shines upon. Perhaps the last part of the verse goes this way: “The bright moon reaching everywhere is like poison to my bright bracelets. Does that surprise you? After all, even as it makes the delicate lily bloom, it closes the wide petals of the lovely lotus.” Or perhaps there is no single right translation; perhaps the verse is in essence ambiguous, leaving it to the reader to determine what it means, as poem, as mystic insight.

To say that *A Hundred Measures* is as difficult as it is lovely is a compliment, for Venkatesan gives us the verses just as they are, that we might experience the puzzles of Satakopan’s love poems, one hundred times over, never finished with discovering rich literary, theological, and spiritual meanings. Venkatesan’s translation in this way has great potential for Hindu-Christian studies, and even for intra-Hindu literary study. Indeed, it might even inspire younger readers to learn Tamil and Sanskrit, and enter themselves upon the most remarkable Tamil world of the poet and commentator.

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