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### **Glimpses of the Unitary Self in Sixteenth-century Tamil Literature**

Is there a "Tamil way of being human," as Val Daniels has so beautifully intimated? Is the Tamil person distinctive, in definable ways, from, say, the Telangana or the Malayali person, to say nothing of the Canadian or the Piedmontese? I am, perhaps only impressionistically and superficially, sympathetic to the notion. Life, especially the interactive world of subtle verbal and non-verbal relations, feels very different in Tenkasi and in Kollapuram. But then life anyway feels different from moment to moment. So sympathy apart, can we find some way to mark or measure difference?

I'm an old-fashioned philologist; I work on texts; decades of habit have become instinct, or perhaps it's the other way round. I look for answers in the words left behind by poets of distant centuries. You'll have to forgive me for following this well-trodden path. If I ask myself how I might begin to think about this question, I begin to wonder about issues of autonomy: are we talking about a relatively self-contained, self-driven unit, bounded off from others, more or less autonomous in thought and action, and thus an individual--or, as McKim Marriott has proposed, a "dividual", deeply porous,

constantly interpenetrated with others close or far? I wonder about issues of integration: is the Tamil person put together in some specific, patterned dynamic of growth and maturation, as in Peggy Trawick's powerful analogy between the human domain and that of, say, rice cultivation—with strong notions of ripening as softening, an inner maturation conducive to "mixing", *kalappu*, breaching external contours? And then I might brood on questions of internal economy: can we generate a culturally sensitive model of the mind? Are there certain "parts" of the self, if there is such an entity, that dominate the inner arena under particular conditions? Are there parts that are more or less accessible than others? Is a word like "part" or "function" appropriate?

But if there really is, or was, a Tamil way of being human, then it has undoubtedly evolved and changed over time. It would be good if our model could be nuanced historically. I think it's quite likely that the Tamil way of being human in the sixth century was rather different from the modes of, say, the sixteenth century. Tonight I'll be sticking mostly to the sixteenth and to a single, monumental literary text, one that has sadly gone out of circulation but was once considered the foundation of a Tamil education: this is Ativīrarāma Pāṇṭiyaṅ's *Naiṭatam*, a Tamil *mahākāvya* version of Śrīharṣa's famous Sanskrit work, the *Naiṣadhīya-carita*. The Tamil poem was composed at Tenkasi by the Pantiya king, brother to another great poet, Varatuṅkarāma Pāṇṭiyaṅ. There is good reason to believe that Tenkasi in the second half of

the sixteenth century was the site of a remarkable cultural efflorescence, a kind of Renaissance, in which we can detect—as with the Italian Renaissance of the fourteenth century—major shifts in very basic concepts and feelings, including notions about what a human being is or could be.

But how can we begin to characterize the brave new world of sixteenth-century Tenkasi? How can we be certain that we are not simply projecting our own notions onto our texts? Remember, too, that Ativīrarāma had a "parent" text with which he was profoundly engaged; and, since we are interested in the composition of the inner world of feeling and thinking, we have to keep in mind that Śrīharṣa's *Naiṣadhīya* is by far the most richly psychologized, or interiorized, of all Sanskrit *kāvya*s. In fact, this relation between the Tamil text and its prototype is not a simple matter. Even when the Tamil poet actually translates a particular verse, more or less literally, his relation to his model is in no way mechanical. It is a question of modes of internalization, of a certain conversation taking place in the space between the two intertexts. We will have to put this fascinating problem aside for now, though it calls for new ways of thinking about south Asian textualities. And still the basic question remains.

Say we want to define a sixteenth-century Tamil notion of "self." The word itself is missing. (Or we could say, following Winnicott: "Self" is a word

that knows more about us than we know about it.) What we find is the same somewhat chaotic jumble of terms for various parts and aspects of the inner person that we know from much earlier sources in Tamil: *uyir*, the life-breath or life-force; *nēñcam*, the feeling organ, situated in the breast, probably the site of *uṇarvu*, that is, consequential understanding or intuitive perception; *āvi*, a near-synonym for *uyir*, but perhaps capable of delicate differentiation in contexts of life-or-death decisions; *maṇam*, the perhaps devalued faculty of derived intellection (but also the usual source or site of desire); *cintai* or *karuttu*, both of them apparently endowed with strong cognitive elements; the metaphysical term *ātmā(n)*, relatively rare in Tamil literary texts; and a more general, very common word, *uḷlam*, the "inside" or "interiority," which also quite often seems to be linked to some kind of thinking-intellection (cf. the verb *uḷku*). There are also sub-categories of *uḷlam*, such as *uṭpulaṇ*, the inner eye, sometimes identified with the *itayam*, "heart" (Skt. *hṛdaya*: see *Naiṭatam* 3.8). Ativīrarāma has not invented a new word for "person" or "self." He happily recycles all these earlier terms. And yet, if we read attentively, we begin to notice that their semantic range has shifted quite radically away from earlier usages.

Take *uyir*, for example. For the sake of argument, I would like to suggest that in earlier Tamil sources, right through the end of the Chola period, we have an implicit meta-psychology-cum-anthropology organized

around the core concept of breath, the life-force that is always in movement, in and out, and that is always, perhaps by definition, a unitary force. *Uyir* flows in and out of bodies that seem to contain it but are in fact only precarious vessels for it. Moment by moment, the person breathes the entire cosmos in and out, and the cosmos itself, infused with *uyir* and moving with its rhythm, is also breathing in and out—so there will be both a transient, internal *uyir* and an external, trans-personal one. The latter is sometimes said to be creative in the out-breath and absorptive in the in-breath; this may also be true, on a lesser scale, of the internal *uyir*. God breathes out the world into some form of existence, and re-internalizes it, de-objectifying it or melting it down. Breathing is, however, much more than breath alone. In a way, it is about differential intensities of living and feeling (not thinking); and thus Tamil *uyir* has surprising connections to Advaita, that school of Indian philosophy most concerned with issues of "aliveness." The world, with its profusion of sense and texture and color, continually goes in and out, opening and closing space within the person; and there is also a profoundly interactive or interpersonal aspect to this unending rhythm. Loving, for example, is at least partly about the merging of breath. Look, for example, at what happens to Rāma and Sītā when they first catch sight of one another in Mithilā, according to Kampan's *Irāmāvatāram* (1.10.592-93):

*parukiya nokk' eṅṅum pācattāḥ piṇitt'*

*ōruvaraiy ōruvar tam uḷlam īrttalāl*  
*varicilaiy aṇṇalum vāṭka'ṇaṅkaiyum*  
*iruvarum mārip pukk' itayam ēytiṅār//*

*maruṅ'ilā naṅkaiyum vacaiyil aiyaṇum*  
*ōruṅkiyav iraṅṭ' uṭark' uyir ōṅr' āyiṅār*  
*karuṅ kaṭar paḷḷiyiṅ kalavi nīṅkip poyp*  
*pirintavar kūṭiṅār pecal veṅṭumo/*

They bound and tugged at each other's insides  
with the noose of that first hungry look,  
and thus the lord of the tightly bound bow  
and the girl with eyes deadly as swords  
entered, by turns,  
each other's heart.

The breath in two bodies—that of the girl  
with no waist and that of the boy  
without flaw— merged back into one.  
When the two lovers, once joined  
on their bed in the dark sea and then

torn apart, came together again—

was there need for words?

We have three pieces of a person's inner world: the *uḷḷam*, capable of being captured by a look from another person's eyes and thus dragged outside; the *itayam*, which can be penetrated by another person, through strong feeling and sudden desire; and the *uyir* that clearly dwarfs its bodily containers and seeks to fuse with itself, a single, rather impersonal force, the rhythmic breath of life itself. This *uyir*, we might note, tends to be intimately linked to *uṇarvu*, intuitive knowledge or understanding, or to a kind of insight not usually derived from intellection.<sup>1</sup>

Ativīrarāma also knows about the *uyir*, for him it is an internal, alive part of the person, and a rather vulnerable part at that, easily susceptible to destabilization and to death.<sup>2</sup> No one can manage without it. Somewhat surprisingly, however, *uḷḷam* now seems to be the wider, more elastic and comprehensive term. *Uḷḷam* mostly overrides the *uyir* and usually contains and rules it. Quite often this new *uḷḷam* seems to mean something akin to our notion of "mind."

Look, for example, at *Naiṭṭam* 4.29:

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<sup>1</sup> See Trawick 1990: 133-4, 273-4; examples in Shulman 2001:302-307.

<sup>2</sup> See *Naiṭṭam* 11.29, 31.

*karum puyaṅ maṛaikku' mati katir veṭṭal kairava malar pēṛātatu pol  
arump' iḷa muṛuval iḷa mulaip pokam aiya nīy ēytutark' aritāl  
virumpiṇar ākiy amararum iruntār viṇavar iṭatt' avaḷ ārvam  
purint' iṭāt' uṇatu per ēḷil ava' ṭan ulatt'iṭaip pōṛippal kāṇutiyāl*

As the night lily can't enjoy the light of her lover,  
the moon, on a night of dark clouds,  
it won't be so easy for you, Sir,  
to taste the breasts of that woman  
whose smile unfolds like a bud.  
Also, I have to tell you that the gods  
want her, too. To block any passion  
for them, I'll paint your great beauty  
in the middle of her mind—  
just watch!

This is the goose speaking to Nala before flying off to negotiate with Damayantī. He chooses his image carefully: the *kairavam* flower is uniquely suited to the Moon, as, by implication, Damayantī is to Nala; but sometimes there are cloudy nights or other impediments. To ward them off, the goose will paint (*pōṛippal*) a verbal image of Nala in Damayantī's *uḷlam*—not her

interior in a general way, and probably not even her "heart" (*itayam, maṇam*), but some part of her mental economy where she can see, visualize, imagine, fantasize, feel desire, deliberate, and make a choice: in short, her mind.<sup>3</sup>

We could easily spend the rest of this hour filling in the contours of the *uḷlam*. But let's say you agree that this term now, in Tenkasi, means something like "mind." So what? What does the concept of mind offer us for the purpose of defining personhood or self? What does the *uḷlam* actually do, and in what ways is it different from earlier context-specific usages?

Normally, I would want us to draw out a set of inductive conclusions based on individual verses. Since time is short, however, I am going to offer a tentative list of functions that seem to fit Nala's (or Ativīrarāma's) *uḷlam*.

1. First, the *uḷlam* knows how to think, in marked contrast with the *uyir*. This is not a trivial matter. There are different modes of thinking and of knowing, some more complex and far-reaching than others. If we compare the Tenkasi *uḷlam* with the inner world of the *bhakti* poet (say Māṇikkavācakar, or Cuntaramūrttināyaṇār, or Nammālvār), then the latter consistently offers self-images of fragmentation and diffusion in which the mind plays, for the most

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<sup>3</sup> For *uḷlam* in this or some closely related sense, see e.g. 4.79; 11.8, 16, 18, 19, 32.

part, an invidious role; whereas Nala scans his awareness and seems to use his mind to hold the sometimes dissonant pieces of himself together.

2. Second, the *uḷḷam* has an inside, which is to say that it has some sort of external border, however tenuous. It is a bounded entity, full of generative content, welling up continuously, and at the same time apparently, in its deeper reaches, unconstricted and spacious. We will want to explore this space.

3. Third, it has parts, some more prominent than others. I believe there is a particularly privileging of the imagination, as I will try to demonstrate in a moment. A possible hierarchy of components emerges, with *karuttu* and *maṇam*, for example, like *uyir*, subsumed within *uḷḷam*. Moreover, certain of these parts provide the mechanism for the connectivity of one *uḷḷam* to another and for the possibility that one *uḷḷam* can create novelty in another.

4. Fourth, *uḷḷam* has a pronounced tendency to doubt itself. It easily moves into the ironic. It knows itself, not perhaps in the split-off way that the *bhakti* persona naturally chooses, but in some reflexive mode that allows for an intrapsychic generative emergence of mistakes, illusions, fantasies, hallucinations, and madness. These may, in fact, in some sense constitute the dynamic core of personhood. I stress again: these extreme states, the very stuff of a love

story such as that of Nala and Damayanti, are now perceived as wholly internal to the "self" (that word again). Even possession, a particularly powerful displacement, is primarily **endogenic**. The *ullam* is capable of observing its own self-generating fantasies in action, as we will see.

5. Fifth, the *ullam*, where perception happens and is processed, makes judgements about what is and is not real (and also, but not only, about what is and is not "true"—these are not the same judgements).

6. Finally, the *ullam* is a locus for mood, as distinct from emotion/feeling.

"Mood" is a discovery. It implies the existence of a minimally integrated, distinctive person. It also implies a certain instability of internal states, a rapid transition among nuanced feelings that can be introspectively articulated in complex fusions or combinations. Perhaps more than anything else, this discovery of mood gives us the sense that we are in the presence of a proto-modern personhood.

Let's begin with this last point, probably the easiest to assimilate. If one reads through the *Naiṭatam* consecutively, trying to get a sense of it as a unified work, one slowly, but inevitably, begins to construct a profile of the two main protagonists. Of course, both of them have inherited features from earlier Nala-Damayanti texts. Nala, as I have argued elsewhere, tends to be

more absent than present, a somewhat brittle vehicle for disguise and for displaced awareness. His identity, to use an anachronistic term, is largely vested in Damayantī's recognition of him *as someone*, a human person of distinctive character. His personhood—his self, if you like—is repeatedly at stake in the dice games he plays, in the riddle contests he enters, in his desperate race from Ayodhyā to Vidaharba, in his startling mathematical skills, and so on.<sup>4</sup> Words like "integrated" or "unitary" wouldn't seem to suit him very well. At best, he oscillates between relatively extreme states of one kind or another.<sup>5</sup> But in the Tamil *Naiṭṭam*, Nala acquires an introspective, even meditative quality. Consider the following moment. On his way to the *svayaṃvara* ceremony in which Damayantī will choose her husband, Nala is stopped by Indra and three other gods; they, too, are in love with Damayantī, and they cruelly request Nala to argue their case before the woman whom he loves.

Other than you, who have conquered Love,  
for all his power, by your own  
beauty, who is there to heal  
the suffering spread by *his*  
honeyed arrows? (11.26)

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<sup>4</sup> Shulman 2001: 131-58.

<sup>5</sup> Shulman 2008.

Indra's demand is much worse, the poet tells us, than asking Nala to give up his life, *uyir*. Nala at once loses his *karuttu*, forgets who he is (*taṅṅaiyu' maṛakkum*). He cannot say no to the gods, cannot lie to them—though suddenly "lying" seems to him to lose its terror, and "truth" to expand its register. Uncertainty washes over him

*kuru maṇi mekalaik kuvaḷaik kaṇ kōlo*  
*pōru mataṅ pakaliyo pōymmai tīt' ēṅṅun*  
*tarumamo vuyir nilai taḷarntu vāṭum ēṅ*  
*marumam mīt' ūṅriya vāḷir poḷvate*

Is it her eyes (think of her bangles, think of her waist, studded with jewels), is it the arrow of hostile Desire, is it this dharmic business of lying being classed as "bad"?  
Something is eating at my life  
when I'm at my weakest, most vulnerable,  
like a sword twisted in my heart. (11.29)

Tamil poets are fond of such inner states, but Ativīrarāma has pushed the analysis farther than usual—far beyond anything in the parent-text of Śrīharṣa. He seems to see directly into Nala's mind and to listen carefully to

the words that this mind produces in an emergency. Nala wavers, protests, debates with himself, briefly turns against conventional morality and its hollow categories, hesitates again, makes silly pronouncements, and ends up complying with external constraints. Doubt colors this difficult moment, which ends in an acknowledged *aporia*: something—Nala doesn't know what it is—is eating at his life, his *uyir-nilai*. Something that is experienced in his *marumam*, his most vulnerable inner place, his guts. Do we not recognize the type? Is he so different from ourselves? Note that this Tenkasi Nala is endowed with freedom of choice and undoubted agency, clearly in evidence in the very richness of his inner monologue and in his doubt.

In passing, let me try to delineate an image of the "new" Damayantī as well. She is rather a far cry from the self-possessed heroine of the *Mahābhārata* or the *Naḷavēṅpā*. The Tenkasi Damayantī is impulsive, passionate, given to severe hallucinatory, borderline psychotic states, and rather ambivalent about the way language functions in relation to her experience. In particular, she seems to have doubts about the *śleṣa* double-entendres that are her speciality in Śrīharṣa's poem. We'll see one example of how her *uḷḷam* operates in just a moment.

We have time, at most, for only three more examples. I want to begin with an example of the newly conceptualized imaginative faculty. Then we will

look at a short passage about (shared) fantasy in relation to the whole person. And I will conclude with a striking verse that examines the mind's perceptual judgements about what is real and that, in effect, draws us a picture, or a working model, of the mind in action. We can then try to outline a few tentative conclusions.

Here is 4.32 (just three verses away from our earlier example of *ārvam*, intense desire, in the *uḷlam*). Nala is speaking to the goose, who has just finished a rather inventive, detailed verbal portrait of Damayantī in the hopes of arousing Nala's desire for her:

*vēṇṇakait tuvar vāy aṇaṅkēḷil palarum viḷampiṇar niṇ mōḷi yavaḷ ēṇ  
kaṇṇ ētirppattāḷ polu' mēyt tuṇaiyār karuttiṇār kāṇṭale kāṇṭa'  
naṇṇi muṇ roṇṇum pōruḷu' nuṇṇiya'te' nāṭutark 'ariyalā mukattir  
paṇṇiya nokka' nokkunarkk' aḷaku payappatai yaṇṇi ver' uḷato*

Many have spoken of her white smile, her mouth  
red as coral, her overpowering  
beauty, but your words have almost placed her  
before my very eyes. Seeing through  
the mind of one's friend is really

seeing. Eyes that barely see  
what's right in front of them,  
especially something very fine,  
are only there to impart beauty  
to the seer's face.

This is one of those verses where Ativīrarāma has taken a thought directly from Śrīharṣa and developed it in somewhat surprising ways. Let us look at the rather arcane but highly polished Sanskrit verse in question (2.55):

*akhilam viduṣām an-āvilam suhṛdā ca sva-hṛdā ca paśyatām/  
savidhe 'pi na-sūkṣma-sākṣiṇī vadanâlaṅkṛti-mātram akṣiṇī//*

Everything is lucidly perceived  
by those who see through the heart  
of a friend. The two eyes that sit on our face,  
that can't detect anything fine,  
no matter how close it comes,  
are only there for ornament.

Nala, perhaps for the first time, but certainly not for the last time, in these two texts, privileges an inner vision over the object-driven, physical act of vision. The goose, by masterful description in language, has made Damayanī present to him. There is an interesting question about the singularity and specificity of this vision and how it is articulated—but we will have to put it aside. What is clear is that *kāṇṭal*, "seeing,"<sup>6</sup> is at its best when enabled or mediated by what is going on in the mind of a close companion, *tuṇai* (or friend, *suḥrd*, in the Sanskrit). But the two texts differ slightly, in my view significantly, when it comes to what exactly the companion's mind is supposed to do. For Śrīharṣa, it seems to me a matter of feeling, something transpiring literally in the heart (*svaḥrdā*). For Ativīrarāma, the critical word is *karuttiṇāi*, "[seeing through] the mind"—but *karuttu* here seems to mean not merely "thought" or "mind" in a general way but rather the much more crisply defined faculty of the imagination. When someone close to you imagines something, you, too, can perceive it, perhaps by virtue of the empathic closeness you feel with that person. In short, seeing is believing (the Tamil commentary glosses this interactive process as *nampikkai*, "belief," made evident by the imagination), but seeing is not looking at an external object; it is, rather, a matter of co-imagining.

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. *Maṇimekalai* 27.9.

Then there is the point about the relative incapacity, even uselessness, of our eyes. The test of real perception is what we do with subtlety. Our eyes aren't much good at discerning fine nuances—perhaps the single most important attribute of anything real—even if the fine object is brought very close. The major commentator Nārāyaṇa, addressing Śrīharṣa's verse, says: "Eyes can't even perceive the kohl applied to their edges or their own redness, and so on, so how can they grasp something that is more remote?" On the other hand, the imagination—at least as it is conceived in sixteenth-century Tenkasi—seems perfectly suited precisely for this purpose. The imaginative faculty, we might conclude, is entirely predicated on subtlety and fineness; also, perhaps, as I have already hinted, on singularity.

There is, it seems, an intuitive flash of emotional insight that comes into play when a friend describes something (as Nārāyaṇa says in his gloss). The Tenkasi epistemology takes this notion a step farther, toward the interactive imagination that can make something seem real to us. "Real," even more than "true." Here, again, is the Tamil commentator: our eyes are no more than an ornament for someone who sees with the help of his friend's imagination. The latter is what makes something real. There is also, incidentally, a variant reading for the middle of the verse: *naṇṇi muṟ roṇṇum pōru! uḷam piriyi' nāṭutark' ariya vāṇ mukattir paṇṇiya nokkam*, "if your mind moves away from what is right in front of it, then the eyes in your face [are only an ornament]."

Our commentator thinks this is an inferior reading, very much opposed to the sense of the Sanskrit original. I agree. Still, even in this variant we see the clear superiority of the mind, capable of undermining direct physical perception and reducing the eyes (once again) to useless ornaments. In either case, what we see stands in a somewhat oblique, and inferior, relation to what we imagine.

So here is one tentative conclusion: a person sees, interactively, by virtue of an active imagination attuned to subtleties. Seeing is not, of course, all there is to it. The *ullam* will have to process what the inner eye shows it. It, the *ullam*, also seems to know where imagination ends and something else begins. But the critical point rests on the complex, interpersonal process of truly seeing and knowing. Nala cannot see Damayantī directly (at this point), just as the eye cannot really see even something quite close; Nala can only imagine her by imagining his friend's imagination of her. There are, apparently, degrees of imaginative force. You have to go through the intimate other's imagination—perhaps through several such receding frames—but you can do this because, as we know from the earlier discussion, you are breathing the same air as the other, in and out. You and your friend belong to a single, living, resonant cosmos connected through the fine tissue of many distinctive imaginations. This way of understanding perception also, incidentally, explains why what the imagination sees is objective, not in the

Kantian sense of discretely contoured substances but in the sense that the imagined object is shared, consequential, and thus real. It rides the same rhythmic breath. Damayantī's image—her unique face, eyes, hair, breasts, waist, and feet—exists and is, in fact, moving into Nala, breathed in, as it were, into some reservoir of personal being where it can deepen, grow, and perhaps later re-emerge outward to connect with, or superimpose itself upon, the living presence of Damayantī herself—as we will see. All this depends upon the particular way the goose has chosen to depict her verbally, thereby activating Nala's *karuttu* via his (the goose's) own vision.

But note the profound difference from the earlier, somewhat simpler *uyir*-based anthropology. The internal breathing in and out is no longer isomorphic with the external breathing. It is no longer a matter of the cosmic imagination recycling itself over and over, so that everyone is, in effect, breathing in the same cosmos. Now the internal breath moves in accord with its own imagination as nurtured or motivated by the resonant imagination of the friend. Somehow, here, there is an autonomy to the person that regulates the transition, so that what comes from outside and what comes from inside create something else, something new, that is connected to the imagining other and therefore real (indeed, far more real than a direct perception). We could also describe this process as an opening into depth, a resonant internal depth—but remember that the outside is also deep if it is breathing in and out.

Indeed, the cosmos out there adjusts itself to your creative act: Damayantī's image exists, it is moving into you and back out of you—which is the only way you have or hold it—because through your friend you are able to imagine it, in all its singularity. Without this friend, you are blind. One could say much the same thing about the necessary presence of the poet.<sup>7</sup>

This entire process seems to be rather ordinary, a normative, everyday, moment-by-moment experience. But what about more extreme mental states—say love-madness, or possession, or delusion? Much of the *Naiṭatam* is given over to exploring such states. Here is one striking example.

Nala has been infiltrated into the women's quarters of the palace where Damayantī lives. No one can see him, thanks to the gods' magic. He undergoes some unsettling experiences as he makes his way through the courtyard. He brushes against women, glimpses them in states of dishabille; they see his reflection on various surfaces, his footprints on the ground, their own hovering reflections off the jewels he wears. For his part, he sees an infinite series of Damayantīs, the hallucinatory, obsessive products of his mind—what is called *uruvēḷittorram*, an externalization of an inner vision. Damayantī, too, thinks she sees him everywhere. The stage is now set for a meeting.

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<sup>7</sup> I want to thank Don Handelman for extensive discussion of these points.

In the midst of all these women, Nala stumbles upon Damayantī herself—but he fails to recognize her because of the endless Damayantīs that fill his mind (11.59). She's just like all the others. She is holding a garland, and of course she can't see Nala in front of her; but she does see an imaginary Nala, who is so real to her that she casts the garland around his neck, anticipating her bridegroom-choice that still lies ahead. As it happens, this garland actually falls around the neck of the real Nala—and at once disappears from sight, since everything that touches him becomes invisible. Clearly, something rather remarkable has happened, and both of the lovers try to think it through:

*uruvēḷiyāka yān kaṇṭav oṅṅutal*  
*maru malar mālikai vaṇaintat' eṅ eṅav*  
*aracaṇum eṅṅinān avaluñ cūṭṭiya*  
*tēriyal kāṅkilaṅ eṅa tērumāntāḷ aro* (11.61)

*muruk'avil kuḷaliṅā' ṭaṇaiyum muṅṅ uṅum*  
*uruvēḷiy eṅav irai uvantu pulliṅāṅ*  
*arivaiyum aṅṅavār' eṅṅiy āṅk' ētir*  
*puravalaṅ mārp' uṅap pulliṅāḷ aro* (11.62)

*cōll' arum iṅpa' mītūrāt tonṛalum*  
*pullu viṭṭ' avvuruppōlivu nokkiṅāṅ*  
*mēll iyal avvuru viḷiyiṛ kāṅkurāt'*  
*allal urr' aṅi vaḷaiy aṅkai nīkkiṅāḷ (11.63)*

*karun taṭaṅ kaṅṅiyaik kaiyiṛ pulliyum*  
*pōrunṭiyav uruvēliy eṅṅru pokki nall*  
*arun taṅam pēṛr' iḷantāril aiyaṅum*  
*varunti vēn tuyarōṭu mati mayāṅkiṅāṅ (11.65)*

"This garland came from a woman  
whom I saw—as an illusion!"  
That's what *he* thought while  
*she* lost sight of the garland  
and was bewildered.

He happily embraced her—the all-too-familiar  
delusion. She clung to his chest, thinking  
that was as it was.

Indescribable ecstasy welled up.

He let go of her, staring

at the brilliant vision.

She, grieved that she could see

no form, gently withdrew

her bangled arms.

Though he had held the dark-eyed woman

in his arms, he had let her go,

for to him she was illusion.

Now sorrow tortured him

like a man who has found great wealth

only to lose it.

Nala's first thought is that a totally real, concrete garland has been given to him by a woman who, he is quite sure, is an illusion. Note that he knows very well that his mind has gone wild, that he is seeing things under the pressure of impossible desire (doubly impossible now—for not only is Damayantī not with him, but he is also committed to persuading her to marry one of the gods instead of himself). Damayantī, like Nala, is perfectly aware that her mind is generating images of her absent beloved; what she can't understand is how the garland she cast on one of these images could suddenly disappear into thin air. For our purposes, the key point is that both lovers seem to think of

their own minds as bounded, individualized entities that naturally, in certain circumstances, will give birth to illusions. Moreover, these illusions can, in theory, be distinguished from non-illusory reality. The ability to know that you are hallucinating, however compelling the delusion might seem, implies a theory of mind or consciousness as in some sense integrated, active, and whole.

But now comes a further surprise. Nala happily (*uvantu*) embraces the *uruvēli* delusion. Why not? He thinks he knows what he is doing. He also has a specific, possibly rather positive relation to his apparently self-generated, interior image of his beloved. (We might keep in mind that this inner image was originally nurtured and made concrete by the friendly imagination of the goose.) He thus thinks he is embracing an internal, imaginary person, in effect a part of himself, which he has projected outside. Damayantī has her own parallel or complementary conclusion. She, too, embraces the image. But the poet's phrasing is ambiguous. She thinks "that was as it was," *aṅṅavār' eṅṅi*. This could mean that she simply reproduces, on her own terms, the chain of thought that Nala has just produced. But our nineteenth-century commentator thinks otherwise: *tamayantiy āṅṅava! naṅṅaṅ uṅṅmaiṅ eṅṅr' uṅṅi pulliṅā! eṅṅruṅ kōṅka*, "Thinking that [this] Nala was real, Damayantī embraced him." I think this way of reading the verse is persuasive and very much in line with the whole tenor of the passage and with the *Naiṅṅatam's* implicit meta-psychology.

Damayantī cannot see Nala with her eyes, though he is right beside her; but she sees the inner image with so overpowering an intensity that she trusts it more than she trusts her own eyes. All this fits well with the verse we just read about the vivifying power of the imagination, especially an interactive imagination, and its superiority over purely physical perception.

Put more generally, these verses allow us to trace a continuum that stretches from actual external perception via the mental act of the imagination to abnormal states of possession, hallucination, and delusion, with various gradations along the way. All these states are internal to the mind, which has both an inside and an outside. A strong notion of hierarchized levels of knowledge accompanies this discovery. There are things that we know, there are things that we think we know (but may not be sure), and there are things that we know we know. Sometimes we also know without knowing that we know. Look at the final verse in this short section. Nala is still convinced that he is embracing an illusion (this despite the indescribable ecstasy welling up), so he lets her go and is at once overcome by sadness, "like a man who has found great wealth only to lose it." On some level, he knows he has lost something real. This last verse, incidentally, is an innovation of Ativīrārāma's vis-à-vis the Śrīharṣa original. A rather modern-sounding irony infuses the sad statement of our poet.

We thus have an interesting symmetrical (complementary) inversion. Nala sees the real Damayantī but thinks she is unreal. She sees empty space before her, filled with what she knows to be her own mental image, and thinks the latter is real. Note the language of "real" versus "unreal," in contrast with "true" and "untrue." *Uṅmai* can have either meaning. For reasons I can't elaborate here, I would want to argue that the contextual distinction between these two registers is a diagnostic feature of the late-medieval or early-modern discussions of the mind in south India. Within the ongoing debate about the mind and its powers, the reality (and not merely the truth) of the imagination as an active, creative, and ultimately very personal force with effects outside itself is a major theme. I tried earlier to say something about the objective status of an imagined subject and the metaphysics of breath and deep innerness that explain it.

Nala lets go of the real Damayantī but goes on staring at her *pōlivu*—the radiant vision that he thinks has been produced by his mind. We, on the other hand, outside the text, know the *pōlivu* to belong to the real person. In terms of a more general theory of the imagination, we are very close at this point to a notion of "real" (that is, existentially demanding) fiction. Such a notion depends upon gradations of knowledge and their distribution over the standard set of poet, characters, and readers. In the new epistemic regime, we, the readers, generally have privileged access to a wider kind of knowing

than that available to the characters and even, in some cases, to the poet, who is often lost in his own fictions. This differentiation in modes of awareness seems to be intrinsic to the notion of a relatively unified person as well.

If there were time, I would want to show you how Ativīrarāman has transformed this passage as a whole. To put the matter very simply: where Śrīharṣa offers us a subtle psychology predicated on the notion that for a meaningful embrace to take place between two lovers, their two mental illusions of one another must also (first) embrace,<sup>8</sup> Ativīrarāman takes us in the direction of two well-defined, autonomous individuals, each with his or her own perspectivism built into their perceptions, who complement one another in both the images and the ideas they project outward into space. As I have said, this external space is only too happy to confirm the projection. For our

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<sup>8</sup>Look at *Naiṣadhīya* 6.51:

*anyonyam anyatavad īkṣamāṇau parasparenādhyuṣite 'pi deśe/  
āliṅgitâlīka-parasparântas tathyam mithas tau pariṣasvajāte//*

They kept seeing one another  
as if they were elsewhere,  
though together they occupied one  
shared space.  
And while their two fantasies,  
false, mutual, and internal,  
gripped one another,  
these two people  
truly embraced.

part, we, the readers or listeners, know perfectly well that the embrace is entirely real. We know it through the intimate words of the poet, as if whispered in our ears.

I want to look at one last example, which happens to be taken from an introductory section of the *Naiṭatam*—it is the first verse of the *Nakarappaṭalam* (though part of this verse recurs, to interesting effect, in 4.8). As is well known, these opening verses of a *mahākāvya* are thought to encapsulate major thematic or conceptual concerns that will emerge later in the text. A whole anthropology is implicit in this complex, overdetermined, captivating poem:

*kuṭa vaḷaik kulam vayir' uḷaint' iṇa maṇi kōḷikkum*  
*maṭuvil vāṇakar uruvu kāṭṭiyatu poṇ matil cūḷ*  
*kaṭi kōṇ mānakar an niḷal katuviṭāt' akaṇṇa*  
*puṭai kō' ṇīr nakar uṭutt' alai pōṇku per akaḷi (2.1)*

In a pool teeming with pearls  
spilled in pain from the wombs of conch  
swollen as pots, you can see  
the great city circled by walls,  
a perfect image of the Heavenly City.

And the water that is not swallowed up  
by that image is the moat,  
ruffled by waves, that surrounds  
that city.

The "great city" is Māvintanakaram, Nala's city, probably something like Tenkasi. Outside the walls there is a pool (*maṭu*) that catches the reflection of the whole city, which thus looks to the beholder like the true form (*uruvu*) of Amarāvātī, the city of the gods, brought down to earth. But this reflection takes up only part of the expanse of the pool. The left-over watery surface is just that—a liquid, shimmering mass. Or is it? Maybe it, too, reflects something, for example the moat surrounding Māvintanakaram, in which case we have water revealing water: the same eye that takes note of the moat circling the city, outside, sees this same liquid expanse in the peripheral part of the pond, the part not occupied with the city's reflection. Another possibility, the first that comes to the commentator's mind, is that the Heavenly City, Amarāvātī, must have a moat around it, too, and that it is that celestial body of water that is, as it were, visible in the pond's periphery. In this case, since the core image is, after all, that of Nala's mundane city + moat, we would have water (of the pond) reflecting water (of that city's moat) that is as if reflecting yet more water (of the moat in heaven)—a triple vision that includes a double superimposition. A vertical axis, imaginative and figural (Amarāvātī

descends to earth in the pool), transects the horizontal axis of immediate, physical reflection (Māvintanakaram in the same pool). In a way, this vertical axis displaces the horizontal one.

The *Naiṣadhīya* is, famously, a book of reflections and shadow images (*chāyā*); Nala himself is a kind of mirror-image, perhaps of the god of love, Manmatha (among others), and we all remember that four mirror-images of Nala turn up at the critical moment of the *svayaṃvara*.<sup>9</sup> We might think of the entire text as an extended meditation on the metaphysics of mirrors. Something of this fascination with reflected images carries over into Ativīrarāma's text.<sup>10</sup> Yet it seems that we are being offered a new theory of reflections, one strongly linked to the Tenkasi epistemic world of which I've been speaking. What can we extrapolate from the way this verse formulates the dynamics of mirrors?

Caravaṇappērumālaiyar aptly tells us that mirror surface and reflection are mutually exclusive. When you look at your face in the mirror, the image takes up a certain space; beyond or around that space, you see the mirror itself. Similarly, when you look in the pond at Māvintanakar, you see a reflection—identified by an imaginative leap (*utprekṣā*) with Amarāvati—and all around it, the reflecting surface itself. On the other hand, this reflecting

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<sup>9</sup> See Malamoud, in press; Maya Tevet Dayan 2008.

<sup>10</sup> *E.g.* 3.15.

surface, as we have just seen, may itself be multi-layered, a palimpsest of limpid and largely coincident images. There is a certain thickness or depth to the mirror. The one-to-one reflection that we see on the surface may, in fact, be the most superficial perception of all. Better to look deep inside. What is more, that surface reflection somewhat aggressively swallows up or seizes (*katuvu*)<sup>11</sup> much of the available space. In a way, one might prefer to look beyond, outside, the reflection; that part of the radiant surface that is not preyed upon by the image may actually be the more promising element, the richest in potential being and, for that matter, the more real. There is something irreducible about the watery remnant with its waves washing over the edges of the reflection.

Let's not forget that it is the mind that brings the Heavenly City into play. Some imaginative move, probably existing *a priori*, seizes upon the surface reflection and uses it to project the inner vision outward. A boundary has been crossed. Actually, what is physically perceived is the water of the pond and, in part, the reflection of the earthly city—that and the rest of the pond-mirror. How easy it is to forget that Amarāvātī is nowhere near. Once the imaginative projection has been articulated and externalized, it more or less takes over.

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<sup>11</sup> *Katuvu* also means "to reflect."

But we have failed to pay attention to the opening line of the poem. This pond is filled with pearls that are swept away by the waves, or cast on to the shore, or that somehow rise to the surface, or that can be sifted and examined and ultimately polished—all these are possible meanings for Tamil *kōḷi*. You can take your pick. These pearls are all born from conches, one of the standard sources for pearls in Indian literature (along with the joints of the bamboo, the temples of elephants, etc.). The conch grows the pearl inside itself, just like any other pregnancy, and gives birth to it in pain. But we are talking about reflections and coming to the surface. It seems that the seemingly innocent metaphor is, as usual, deliberate and expressive. This is how mirrors give birth to reflections. The process may have rather little to do with the external object waiting to be reflected; indeed, this object is probably both secondary to and later than the germinating process inside the mirror. The reflection predates its object. The reflection is held, complete, inside before it emerges in pain.

I want to suggest that this whole set of interlocking images, in their specific logical organization, shows us one possible picture of the *uḷḷam*, that inner space that more and more coincides with the mind and that is, in sixteenth-century Tenkasi, the true site of the imagination. By implication, a verse like this also speaks to the analytical profile of the person in his or her more creative aspect. The *uḷḷam* is primarily a domain of limpid depth. It can,

of course, be churned up by various internal, endogenic forces such as thought and desire. It generates pearl-like images that may come to the surface and even take over that surface. Imagination drives this unending process. "Reflections"—that is, imaginative projections, rich in existential potential—are conceived, held and nurtured inside. Giving birth to them exacts a cost. They never exhaust the rich resources of the depth. Moreover, the pool—that is, the depth of *ullam*—is not passive. It can also **not reflect**. That is the degree of real autonomy for any person. External reflections may enter into this deep reservoir, may even swallow up a portion of its surface; such reflections come in with the breath and are then breathed out. Or the pool may swallow them and make them disappear. In any case, the pool never gives itself over completely to its reflections. Something here speaks to the capacity of the human being to create worlds inside himself or herself without exhausting the left-over potential of non-reflective being, and also to breathe these worlds out into an elastic cosmos, which may then reflect them back inside.

The generative *ullam* we are observing is at once bounded, or autonomous, and infinitely creative. You will by now not be surprised to hear that, in my understanding, the "pearl-like" reflections in the pool are always singular and tend also to be highly individual. The notion of singularity should include possible shifts in the terms of their internal composition, that is, in the

relations among their component parts or among further, perhaps superimposed or interlocking reflections. Indeed, the *ullam* is often preoccupied precisely with mapping out these relations, which may underlie experiences such as falling in love or choosing the right word or trying to decide what is real. Each reflection, whether internally generated from the depths of the reservoir or originating outside, involutes differently. Once alive in the mind, these reflections for the most part no longer actually reflect anything; nor do they represent. They are, however, the stuff of what we see.

## Conclusion

In the old days, the *uyir* was almost enough, the essential core of the personality. Life, in the *uyir*-based model, is a struggle between processes of hardening, encrusting, or crystallizing into form and countervailing processes of melting down, softening, mixing, loving, understanding. As I have already said, this struggle comes down to a question of differential levels of "aliveness." The Śaiva Siddhânta formalizes the same tension in patterns driven by epistemic concerns—what we might call issues of self-awareness, first and foremost, but also the corresponding linguistic acts that move the *uyir* along either of the two vectors, for example by using the words "yes" or (preferably) "no."

A more complex paradigm of innerness emerges from Tamil *bhakti* literature. Here the elements comprising the inner person tend to be at war with one another. Māṇikkavācakar defines the word "I" (*nāṇ*) as *irumpiṇ pāvai*, an iron doll; he thinks of his *nēñcam* as a corpse (*piṇam*).<sup>12</sup> What part of him is truly alive? The *uyir*, once again. But this *uyir* may have rather little of the empirical personality attached to it. The latter has, in the best scenario, melted down, thereby allowing contact with god. Moreover, the warring parts of the inner person are rather loosely integrated in these poems. Personhood rests, in a way, on experiences of being overpowered (*āṭkōlluta*), on the one hand, or of agonizing in a rich and nuanced series of emotional states, with their precise linguistic counterparts, on the other. Tamil, like Greek, has a remarkable semantic profusion when it comes to states of mental suffering.

By the mid-sixteenth century, a new paradigm has emerged. The old terms are still very much in use, but they now mean something quite different. I have concentrated tonight on the *uḷlam*, but we would find in the *Naiṭatam* no less interesting new usages of *maṇam*, *uṇarvu*, *aṇpu*, *pāvaṇai*, and so on. A meta-psychology, implicit in everything that the characters say to one another and to themselves, presupposes a relatively self-aware, quite singular individual who knows his or her mind as a unitary entity capable of generating

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<sup>12</sup> *Tiruvācakam* 5.22,32.

from within a striking range of images—from straightforward (devalued) seeing that is outwardly directed to a hypertrophied imaginative vision that may spill over into hallucination and compelling fantasies. This individual is also given to self-doubt, irony, and rapid shifts of mood. I have argued that the imagination serves as the primary index of this re-organized person, as his or her defining feature, and that this imaginative faculty is understood as active, creative, heavily inter-subjective, and probably superior, in more ways than one, to external perception. It is also linked to fresh discussions of the question of what is real and, in the context of this question, to a strong notion of fiction. Such a person inhabits a cosmos far more complex than anything that came before. It is a cosmos that is more specifically infinite in range because of the singular imaginations at work upon and within it. The Tamil cosmos was probably always a domain of vast potentiality and endless configurations, but as such it was also relatively undifferentiated; whereas now it is permeated by all these singularities, each creating its own versions of itself that it breathes out into the world. These versions also interact with each other, enabling imaginative process in the other, generating novelty in the other. It is no wonder that, faced with this explosion of difference, the Tamil poets and poeticsians are now fascinated by the question of what is or is not real.

I wouldn't hesitate to characterize the complex Tenkasi person who emerges at this time by a word like "modern." To understand this person more fully, however, we have to look beyond Tenkasi to contemporaneous developments in Kerala and in Telugu literary production, since both these cultural worlds impinged on the southern Tamil country in important ways. Indeed, there is surely something wrong about limiting the discussion to the area bounded by Tamil speech; Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, Kannada, south Indian Sanskrit—by this period, all these belong to a single culture of many local variants. So perhaps my point of departure was also wrong. Still, I would want to check our conclusions against Tamil texts like Muttutāṅṭavar's *padams* and Tāyumāṅavar's passionate poems. So far, we have made only a small beginning.

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