Taking a First Look

Let us begin in the middle of things:

She worships lofty Tirutolaivillimankalam with its great houses, flawless jewels,
so leave her alone, women, have no hopes regarding her;
she cries, “the bright, radiant conch and discus,” she cries, “the wide lotus eyes,”
she keeps standing there, tears welling in her radiant kuvalai flower eyes, she bursts. (1)

She has entered Tirutolaivillimankalam noisy with the deep din of festivals,
so have no hopes regarding her, this girl with her sweet nectar words;
transformed, she stands speechless, crying, “lord, God of gods,”
hers mouth twisting this way and that, her eyes welling tears,
she bends, she breaks, she comes apart. (2)

This girl with her sweet poetic words has entered
Tirutolaivillimankalam with its cool panai trees and green groves on river banks,
so have no hopes regarding her;
tears flowing from her slender eyes, she raves about how
he lay upon the waves of the sea,
measured the whole earth, herded the cows. (3)

After seeing Tirutolaivillimankalam where people prosperous in
the abiding four Vedas dwell,
she’s lost all self-control, see, she’s beyond you, women;
she cries, "Lord Kaṇṭha, dark as the sea, is everything that can be learned,"
she has no modesty left, she keeps rejoicing, delighted within, she melts away.  (4)

The poor thing, she melts, her face shines, for after entering Tirutolaivasvittamankalam
you showed her the lord with the red lotus eyes, the splendid light;
starting then, her eyes have rained like clouds, she is amazed, women,
hers mind has gone inside there, she keeps on looking in that direction, worshipping.  (5)

Everywhere you see sugar cane, tall ripening paddy, and luxuriant red lotuses
at rich Tirutolaivasvittamankalam on the north bank of the cool Porunai;
after seeing this she looks nowhere but that direction, all day, every day,
and the only word in her mouth is the name of the jewel colored one, women.  (6)

Women, this great lovely peahen, this little doe, has escaped our hands,
whatever you say she hears nothing but "Tolaiivasvittamankalam;" is this the outcome of things she did before
or the magic of the cloud colored lord?
all she wants is to learn his signs, his names.  (7)

She worshipped Tirutolaivasvittamankalam on the northern bank of the Porunai
where the perfect Vedas and sacrifices and great women mingle together;
from that first day until this day, that girl with eyes dark and wide
keeps crying, "Lotus eyed one!" she weeps, she fades.  (8)

She grieves all day long, her face alarmed, tears splashing, crying, "Jewel colored one!" so even the trees pity her;
ever since she learned the name of that city all she does is join her hands in worship and say,
“Tirutolavillimankalam, home of the one who split the horse’s mouth!” (9)

Is she Pinnai born here? or Nilâ? or the Lady?
what marvel is this? she stands calling, “My tall lord!”
To hear the name of that town, to bow before
Tirutolavillimankalam
where he who came before stands, sits, dwells—that is her only
thought. (10)

In thought, word, and deed Śaṭakoṇpan of splendid Kurukūr
reached the point of calling the lord of the gods his mother and
father;
whoever masters these ten pure Tamil verses about
Tirutolavillimankalam from his venerable thousand verses
will serve Tirumāl. (11)¹

This song is about a young woman who went to visit a
temple; it is also about the other women from the village, her
neighbors, who had evidently prompted her to pay this temple
a visit. It tells us what happened to her, and what did not hap-
pen to them, as a consequence of that visit.

Though the young woman’s words are quoted, it is actu-
ally a friend of hers who does the talking. First (1–5) the friend
valiantly tries to explain to the neighbors how the young woman
is preoccupied with God, and how it is futile on their part to try
to get her to return to normal. Indeed, she claims, her plight is
all their fault, for it was they who had taken the young woman
to the temple town of Tirutolavillimankalam at festival time.
They had walked through the lovely temple precincts (environs
which are still lovely today), they had entered the temple with
her, and with her viewed the lotus-eyed lord enshrined there.
For them it was a quick, pious look, a paying of respects, after
which they could return to their homes, to normal life, quickly
settling back into their ordinary activities. But the young woman
could not forget what she had seen, she could not simply
observe and then move on. Her ordinary life came to an
abrupt halt. The women, it seems, had very much underesti-
mated the impact a temple visit could have on someone; they

1 For a discussion of the Śaṭakoṇpan legend, see: D. C. Srinivasan, trans. and ed., The
Kurukūr Poets: A Critical Anthology of Hermetic Poems of the Sanskrit Linga Purana
wrongly assumed that the young woman was more like themselves.

In the next verses (6–9), the friend focuses on the young woman’s current state, how since then she has lived entirely and only for God, her world occupied by a divine presence—filled with sacred memory—and yet torn apart because she wants more than she now has. Her memory is not enough, the temple image is not enough, she wants an enduring presence and immediacy; she has seen too little to be satisfied, too much to settle for less. She looks only toward the temple (6), crying out the names she heard and the divine emblems she saw there (7). She is slowly reduced to crying just one name (8), to the simplest act of worship (9).

The tenth verse of the song forms a brief third section. Here the friend, who had been trying to manage the situation, stops short, astonished as are the women. Her words stumble, reduced to questions; amazed at the extent of the young woman’s preoccupation with God, the friend begins to wonder whether the young woman is one of the lord’s three divine consorts: this unusual obsession with God is perhaps a manifestation of divinity.

The 11th verse of the song shifts to yet another level of discourse; it is a statement about the first ten verses, about the young woman and her neighbors, and about the friend who speaks of them:

In thought, word, and deed Šaṭakōpan of splendid Kurukūr reached the point of calling the lord of the gods his mother and father;

whoever masters these ten pure Tamil verses about Tirutolaivillimaṅkalam from his venerable thousand verses will serve Tirumāl.

This verse invites listeners to become part of the story they have listened to, to become intimate with the lord like the author Šaṭakōpan; to master his verses—to memorize them, recite them, understand them—and on that basis become able to enter into service of the lord, Tirumāl.
I. Some Opening Questions

Thus goes VI.5, the 5th song of the Sixth book in a very large Tamil work known as Tiruvāyāmoli, “the holy (tiru) word (molī) of mouth (vāy),” composed by a south Indian Hindu named Śaṭakōpan in the 9th century. He was the most important of the twelve saints from that time period, known as the ālvārs (i.e., “those immersed” in God) who composed songs in praise of the God Viṣṇu.

This song by Śaṭakōpan is not meant to stand alone, it has connections. In its place among 100 songs composed by Śaṭakōpan of Kurukūr as his Tiruvāyāmoli (and thereby also in relation to the larger set of devotional songs of the ālvārs known as the “Divine Text,” the Divya Prabandham), this song about Tirutolaivillimaṅkalam has been remembered, recited, used ritually, meditated on, taught, and written about by the Śrīvaishnava Hindu community of south India, over the past 1000 years, as it still is today. For a thousand years the ācāryas—revered teachers—of the Śrīvaishnava tradition dotted over each word of this song (as they did with the other 99), reverently, lovingly, passionately uncovering the deep meanings they found within it. For a thousand years devotees have listened to their ācāryas and taken the song to heart, seeking, if not to be divinely radiant like the young woman, at least (for now) to find their way to service of lord Viṣṇu, Tirumāl.

Let us listen-in on what they have to say. Tirukkurukaippirān-piḷḷān (henceforth, and more easily, Piḷḷān), the 12th century ācārya whose commentary is the earliest to come down to us, had this to say in introducing the song:

In the preceding songs the ālvār has meditated on how the Lord dwells in various holy cities, Tiruvinñakar, etc., His divine descents, His divine deeds, all His auspicious qualities, His beauty, etc. Now he expresses his delight—but also the sheer depression which comes about because he cannot achieve external union with that Lord. He expresses his feelings in the voice of the young woman. Because she desires to see the Lord in Tirutolaivillimaṅkalam, but is unable to get to do that, she is exceedingly depressed, and
so she cries out, talking about His good qualities—His beauty, etc.—His symbols and deeds, and about Tirutolaimañkalam. When her mother and relatives see this, they are afraid—"We have lost her!"—so they decide, "We must stop her from loving Him!" and entreat her friend to help out. But the friend looks at them and speaks in this song.²

Naṇciyār, a generation later, adds:

The friend understands what the young woman is thinking, and says: "After seeing Tirutolaivillimaṅkalam, from that time on she abandons everything inside and outside, excepting the glance of her Lord, Aravinda. He is her everything: her mind, her speech, her body are very much inclined toward Him." She makes them aware of how her nature has matured and says, "After showing her Tirutolaivillimanukalam as the place to enter, are you now thinking of 'saving' her? is that possible now? End your hopes in regard to her!"

In a much ampler comment which builds on the earlier ones, Naṇciyār's disciple Nāmpillaḷai³ observes that here the ālvar is speaking about his own true nature and not just about the lord; he is vividly explaining the hardest thing of all, the essence of the human self. Periyavācānppillai, a contemporary of Vaṭakkutiruvitippillai and another disciple of Nāmppillai, recollects on earlier understandings of the song:

Earlier ācāryas had this to say: "In previous songs the ālvar experienced Kṛṣṇa; unable to contain that joy inside him, a desire for external union was born. But when he could not get that union, he experiences total dependence on the Lord. He expresses this in the words of the young woman."

But Bhaṭṭar had a different view: "Previously the ālvar had already experienced flawless joy, so the previous interpretation cannot explain the link of those songs with this song. Rather it is like this: just as when someone is drinking water and begins to choke, and his experience of the sweet taste is disturbed and he is afflicted, so the ālvar is describing here
how his experience of delight has been disturbed and he has become dependent on this other."

Or, perhaps: from the first verse of Tiruviruttam to this point he had never had a full experience of the Lord—but now he has one. He describes that abundant inclination toward the Lord that has arisen within him. Up to this point he had spoken about the Lord of all, whereas in this song he is speaking about himself.

Śatakōpan, they find, is himself the young woman who has lost the ability to exist separately from the lord. As they read each verse, the ācāryas elaborate such connections and meanings, always with an eye toward what all of this means for the audience of simple believers listening to their teachings. At the end of the 11th verse of VI.5 Nampillai emphasizes the song’s power; it equals that of the lord’s ancient descents (avatāra) into the world, just as it equals the ancient Sanskrit Veda, rendering it in the clear Tamil vernacular: “Just as the lord of all descended here in like form to other beings, here the Veda itself descends in their midst in Tamil form . . . For Tamil expresses the Veda’s meaning most clearly.”

Even as the song is identified as a local, Tamil work, it seems also more broadly universal. The reality of the song is meant to become the reality of the attentive listener: those who are skilled in repeating these verses will surely get to be servants of the lord, the husband of the Goddess Śrī. The song intends wider audiences, replicating and expanding its presence through a series of new ears, new voices. Recitation widens the audience, and in the audience there are those who will also come to recite and perhaps explicate the song again, adding their voices to the conversation around the young woman’s unforgetting preoccupation with her lord. Whoever can hear and speak, that is the audience for the song, and there too are those who can learn to see as she saw, by way of the song.

It is possible too, as we trace the widening conversation encircling the young woman’s cry, that the song—by itself, with the 99 other songs, with the ācāryas’ explications of it—has something to say to the real newcomer, the true outside reader, who
encounters the song in a foreign place, foreign tongue, for some reason or another: curiosity, reading, keeping busy, becoming a scholar, seeking truth, seeking God. This listener, casual or engaged, hears and possibly has something to say regarding the song. But with what practical import can such really new readers meaningfully can engage the religious worldview inscribed in the song? Indeed, can readers from outside the Śrīvaiṣṇava tradition become at least able to understand what it would mean to worship the lord who “lay upon the waves of the sea, measured the whole earth, herded the cows”? Or are the intellectual, cultural, religious distances from the song to the modern reader so great as to bar any such engaged, affective encounter?

Such questions are clearly not simple ones to answer, and even estimates of their significance must vary. Insofar as they are taken as straightforward and highly particular questions posed to individuals who must decide how to respond personally to potentially spiritual opportunities, they are not answerable here; they must be left to those individuals in their own social and (non)religious settings. It is possible, though, to ask how we read and how we handle what we have read, about what we do with what is truly new to us, and about the power of texts, religious texts in particular. We can examine how a text like Tiruvāyumoli comes laden with possibilities, how it invites the casual reader to become deeply involved in the world which opens from within the song. From looking at this song and then at the others that accompany it, the reader may in the end be invited into a kind of seeing-through-texts, wherein these words—unusual, obscure, translated, hampered—become the vehicle of substantive religious encounters.

Such possibilities must be located according to who is seeking them, and we shall have to move consciously back and forth, in and out of religious environs as we proceed, noticing how religious and academic perspectives variably overlap, diverge, conflict, totally miss one another. Still, a common starting point is the attentiveness to the value of language that most of us share today. The Śrīvaiṣṇavas of south India, like many Christians and members of other religious communities, think that no one in this life can simply and directly see—have an unmediated experience
of—God. The religious person ends up talking boldly of things he or she does not know, drawing blindly, in the dark. Yet, at the same time, such words mark both one’s distance from some higher goal—God, whatever—and the path by which that distance can be overcome. Words make proximate what they obscure; understanding them, (re)voicing them, one begins to see through them: they are limited, and they are windows.

But there is a long way to travel before we are ready to say more on the possibility of such verbal insights. We must first become familiar with the words themselves. We shall first have to examine Tiruvāyimoli as carefully as possible, as the context where songs like VI.5 belong, in order to see the opportunities this text has opened and the demands it has placed on its readers. This we shall do by attention to Tiruvāyimoli itself (chapter 2), and by attention to the particular, exemplary fashion in which it has been used by the Śrīvaiśnava community (chapters 3 and 4). Only then, with the spectrum of possibilities of both text and tradition before us, can we attempt to locate ourselves, experimentally rephrasing what we know, what we have read, with whom, who we are, in relation to these songs (chapter 5).

In the remainder of this chapter there are some exploratory inquiries to be carried out as we assess the problems before us and the resources available to us when we read Tiruvāyimoli and posit that there can be religious significance in doing so. In section two, we review first the text and its contexts—when have we read enough? In sections three and four, we look for the author in his text and listen-in on the community which read and passed the songs down—with whom are we to read? In section five, we uncover some of the resources and expectations we ourselves bring to our reading—who are we, most of us outsiders to that community who yet venture to read these songs, to converse with these ācāryas, to see through these songs? Let us take up these points consecutively.

II. Getting Inside Tiruvāyimoli

Let us first pay closer attention to what it means to understand a song, such as the one with which we started, about the young
woman who visited Tirutolaivillimāṇkalam. This is a song that presents itself well; it has a story to tell and a point to make. One can get quite far by reading the song and following out the implications of what it says—and even further if one listens-in on what the ācāryas had to say about it.

Yet as we have noted, this song is not meant to be read separately. It is only one among a hundred songs in Tiruvāyumoli, a large text in the Tamil language, dedicated to lord Viṣṇu, and composed by a person named Śaṭākōpaṇ (or Māran), known more familiarly as Nammālvār—our saint, our ālvār—in the Śrīvaiṣṇava tradition. His songs offer many different perspectives on Viṣṇu—as manifest in transcendent glory, as creating, controlling and destroying the universe, as present in various descents (avataras, especially as Kṛṣṇa, Rāma and Vāmana the dwarf), at holy places such as Tiruvеrṇkaṭam (more commonly referred to as Tirupati), Kurukūr (the present day Ālvārtirunagārī), Śrīvilliputtur and Śrīrangam, and as dwelling within every person. The songs also represent different personae in relation to Viṣṇu: the humble devotee, the lover from the beginning intermingled with the lord, the young woman in love with her absent lover, the visionary seeing devotees on their way to heaven, the thinker who wonders whether even “Viṣṇu” is a good word to indicate the transcendent Viṣṇu. In some songs it is this lord who is addressed, in others the community of devotees, in others the unheeding people of the world; in some, the poet appears as if speaking largely to himself (yet so as to be overheard in his soliloquy). Almost none among the 100 songs can be said to be entirely simple and straightforward: themes are combined and intertwined, played off against one another over and over; even at verse one, we are always already in the midst of a religious discourse that is part remembered, part expected, part happening even as one hears of it. Yet Tiruvāyumoli is also narrowly fixed in its form, almost entirely predictable. It is comprised of 1102 verses divided into 100 songs of 11 verses each, and the 11th verse of each song is always a kind of secondary reflection on the first ten.

Tiruvāyumoli is also woven together and in a circle, by means of what is known as antāti (“the end-to-beginning” style): the
last word of each verse is always the first of the next, the last in X.10.11 being the first in I.1.1. When the Śrīvaiṣṇavas build an entire world within the boundaries established by the songs, they have been invited to do so by Tiruvāyurvedi, ever turning-in upon itself, recollecting everything within its circle of songs. As far as possible, we too will seek to contain our analysis within that circle, testing where we can reach within those confines.

Of course, a decision to work within the confines of the text is itself a kind of fiction, one which stands at odds with legitimate concerns about context, history, distance, etc. At the beginning of this book we must account for choosing a limited focus, what we think we gain and lose in paying little direct attention to the broader context of Tiruvāyurvedi in history, culture, and literature. It is certainly not true that Tiruvāyurvedi lacks context or does not need any. It was composed against the background of a rich religious and cultural tradition in the Tamil area, which was also already open to northern, Sanskrit influence. It was composed when other Vaiṣṇava and Śaiva texts—dedicated respectively to Viṣṇu and Śiva—were being composed, and one can find without too much difficulty other songs by other authors about the same temples and myths and religious values of which Śaṭākōpan sings.⁶

There are obvious candidates which provide directly relevant context for Tiruvāyurvedi—beginning with the three other works attributed to Śaṭākōpan, Tiruviruttam, Tiruvāciriyaṁ, Periyatiruvantāti; and then the other works of the Divya Prabandham. Some of these works are likely to have been composed earlier than Tiruvāyurvedi and therefore might conceivably be influences on it, while others at least suggest illuminating comparisons. Parallel Śaiva devotional songs have many of the same literary and devotional motifs. Older Tamil works survive from the four or five centuries before Tiruvāyurvedi, ranging from the love (akam) and war (puram) poetry of the cankam period to Paripātal as well as certain songs in Cilappatikāram. Nor can one ignore Sanskrit works, such as the Mahābhārata, the Viṣṇu Purāṇa and Rāmāyaṇa, in which the myths and narratives to which Śaṭākōpan refers are elaborated. These aid us in specifying the meaning of Tiruvāyurvedi, and may have aided Śaṭākōpan
as well. To know about these varied works will surely help us to understand Tiruvāymulī better, so that we can assess more surely the choices Śaṭakōpan had before him in deciding what to use, and how, in composing Tiruvāymulī. Not to know the wider context surely threatens to distort our reading.⁷

Even as we acknowledge the importance of paying attention to all the relevant details of context, we must assess carefully what we can and cannot do at the present stage of scholarly inquiry. For one thing, there are considerable difficulties to be faced in understanding these other older and contemporary works before reference to them will aid us in understanding Tiruvāymulī. They are often large and complex, and many of them, particularly in Tamil, have not yet been studied carefully by modern scholars. Most of them are in fact less well understood than Tiruvāymulī, which has profited from the fact of the large commentarial tradition around it and from a variety of modern studies.⁸ Moreover, when one does try to specify relevant connections, it is striking that contextual studies often remain inconclusive or insufficient to establish definite historical connections or literary influences such as would pin down the inherited and original features of Śaṭakōpan’s achievement. Beyond the kind of generalities I have already hinted at—“older and contemporary works are important”—there is very little in the way of direct evidence which indicates that Śaṭakōpan, strikingly original in his re-use of available resources, actually borrowed from any actual source, or actually knew of any of the other works one might think he should have known about. Given this situation, much remains tentative, and many questions are left open for later resolution.

But a final, basic point is that Seeing through Texts is an impatient book. Though informed by a concern for the wider context, it represents a theological project which does not wait upon the completion of the relevant research by other scholars. Although very much open to improvement and correction, its premise is that we can get quite far by learning to think, imagine, and desire within the world bounded by the songs of Tiruvāymulī. Just as it would be unfortunate to jump to conclusions, it would be unfortunate to postpone serious consider-
ation of the text as a literary whole until that future date when
the context is exactly understood. This study takes the swifter
path, engaging Tiruvāyūmoli as an integral literary document
possessed of its own dynamics as a work of literature, with its
own style of interaction with its readers. None of which features
can be ignored merely in favor of understanding its compo-
nents in relation to components of other earlier and contempo-
rary texts.

Awareness of the broader context provides a note of cau-
tion to accompany this study. We will try not to discover unique-
ness where it is not actually to be found, nor to make too much
of features that may turn out, in fact, to be rather common.
Conversely, we will highlight what seems unusual and rare,
and also what is missing, such as what one might have ex-
pected to find in a work like Tiruvāyūmoli but does not. Still, our
major concern is to be something like an ālvar, immersed in the
songs; we shall suggest the manner and implications of this
gradual immersion in chapter 2.9

III. Pondering the Author: Sifting the Multiple Contexts

The opportunities and risks of a focus on the text as given to us
rather than on the resources exterior to it which enable us to
dissect it become all the more clear when we consider the text in
relation to the most important contextual factor, its author,
Śaṭṭakōpan. How ought we to take into account his intentions in
composing the songs? Who was Śaṭṭakōpan, what ought we know
about him, when is the narrative “I” truly the voice of the au-
thor? If we focus our attention on Śaṭṭakōpan, are we better able
to understand Tiruvāyūmoli? If we resist the appealing but vague
category of experience, how are we to read what is before us
and yet find the author in that reading?

The problems related to an understanding of the author
are of course complex, and many of them have to do with litera-
ture in general: problems regarding authors in general, autho-
rial intention in any kind of writing, the inscription of self in
writing, the existence of authors behind texts, etc. Such larger
concerns cannot be resolved here, but we must at least keep in mind the caution against naiveté to which they exhort us. Let us review what we know about the author Śaṭakōpan from his songs and from the Śrīvaiṣṇava tradition; I will show how these resources together confirm our instinct to interpret the text as an integral whole.

1. Locating Śaṭakōpan Historically

Insofar as research can make a contextual, historical contribution, we must concede that the materials available for this research are minimal, insufficient for the construction of a reliable and comprehensive biography of Śaṭakōpan. However, some minimal specifications are possible. The basic historical sketch has been given numerous times, most recently and competently by G. Damodaran (1978) and F. Hardy (1979); I will borrow from their accounts in rehearsing the main lines of the story of Śaṭakōpan.10

Śaṭakōpan probably lived in the 9th century CE, though some scholars have placed him as much as two centuries earlier,11 in Kurukūr deep in south India, in Tamil Nadu. His real name was probably Māraṇa—perhaps his grandfather’s name, perhaps a name given in honor of the king in whose court his father may have served. It was probably only later he was given the honorific name “Śaṭakōpan,” which is explained variously in relation to his power to destroy ignorance.12 Damodaran suggests that the relative inaccessibility of some of the hill temples of which Śaṭakōpan sings may indicate that he was from the hill country of modern Kerala, to the west of Tamil Nadu. The elegance and sophistication of his compositions and the inclusion in them of a significant number of Sanskrit words suggest that Śaṭakōpan was a well-educated person. There is not much else to add to this scant account that is of direct importance to how we read the songs.

2. Finding Śaṭakōpan in his Songs

As we delve more attentively into the songs themselves, other kinds of useful information come to the fore, particularly re-
garding the construction of Śaṭṭakōpan as a spiritual figure. To begin with, the 11th verses which conclude each song—perhaps Śaṭṭakōpan’s own verses, a kind of reflection on his own songs, perhaps the work of a very early redactor—and are vivid and ample in the spiritual characterization of Śaṭṭakōpan they offer; they set the tone for how he was to be remembered in later generations. According to these verses, for example, Śaṭṭakōpan is the one:

"who lives by the grace of Māl, astonished and crying repeatedly, ‘Māl, wondrous lord, great wondrous one!”’ (I.5.11);

who spoke “about how he desired the lord Kaṇṇan, God of gods, who stands the very highest,” (I.9.11);

who possessed “an insatiable love for the Cause of all things without exception, the light,” (II.1.11);

"who knows that there is no other way to rise than Kaṇṇan’s bright lotus feet, (IV.3.11);

"who thought only about reaching the holy feet of Nārāyaṇa, Keśava, the highest light,” (IV.9.11);

"who daily has only one thought, ‘Our refuge is the feet of the lord on the snake,’” (V.10.11);

"who has reached the point of calling the lord of the gods his mother and father, by thought, word, and deed,” (VI.5.11);

"who was the sort to see that nothing here nor there can exist without holy Māl,” (VII.9.11);

"whose mind is purely for the pure one, who thinks, ‘there is no other refuge after knowing the pure one,’” (VII.10.11);

"who grieved about parting from him of whom the lovely, decorated cowherd women cry out in the evening unable to live apart from him,” (IX.9.11);
“who is crowned with the grace of the tall one,” (X.5.11);

“who has destroyed desire and gained release, who calls on Aran and Ayan and Ari who encompasses and fulfils desire,” (X.10.11).14

His songs are

“composed in awe,” (VII.7.11),

“uttered from knowledge,” (VII.8.11),

“a work of humble service,” (IV.1.11, X.1.11, V.6.11, etc.)

And so on. Such characterizations contribute to a spiritual biography—Śatakopan as the paradigm of full, perfect devotion—not a historical one. Yet they are important, primary responses to the energy and passion of the songs, and they suggest how the tradition will think of him, how he functions in relation to his songs.

It is reasonable to move beyond the eleventh verses to the body of the songs themselves, to fill out this literary and spiritual portrayal of Śatakopan, extrapolating from the verses to their author. The tradition has done this fairly liberally; the acaryas work with the hypothesis that everything in the songs marks some moment in the alvár’s inner journey. This verse, in the young woman’s voice,

“My rice for eating, my water for drinking, my betel for chewing, my lord Kaññan!”

she keeps crying, tears flooding her eyes; when she searches for his city, abundant in his excellence, in all the earth,

Kolur is surely the place my young doe will enter. (VI.7.1)

was taken by Nañcïyar to indicate that the alvár neither ate nor drank, but depended on the lord alone: “His nature was such that he could not for a moment endure separation from the lord, he who from his birth had the lord as his sustenance, etc.”15 In introducing 1.10.8,
When I hear someone say, “Nārāyaṇa our Treasure,” 
tears flood my eyes, I search for him; 
how amazing, day and night he never stops favoring me, 
my master, young master, he never leaves me.  (I.10.8)

Nampīḷḷai offers this fascinating anecdote, one of just several 
which tell us something about Śaṭakōpan “outside” his songs:

The āḻvār thought, “Up to now we have erred in thinking 
and speaking; now we must put all this aside and go to a 
place where His qualities are not celebrated.” So he lay 
down near a ruined wall, covering his head. But just then a 
man came along carrying a heavy bundle; as he put it down 
he sighed, ‘Śrīmān Nārāyaṇa!’ When the āḻvār heard these 
words he was astonished that his senses were so inclined 
toward what he heard.  (I.10.8)

Apart from such individual verses read autobiographically—as 
verses in the Psalms have been read to indicate events in the life 
of King David—there are some entire songs which seem par-
ticularly to invite autobiographical interpretation. Several 
seem prompted by visits to particular temples which Śaṭakōpan 
appears to have known in detail,

Flocks of herons daily feeding in the flowering marshes, 
when you see the lord with the berry-red lips and discus in his 
hand, 
the lord who lives in Tiruvaṉvaṇṭūr where fine rice ripens tall— 
worship him, tell him of this sinner’s love.  (VI.1.1)

Some seem to presume his encounters with devotees,

This alone suits my eye: 
the people of Vaikuṇṭha’s lord are established everywhere in this 
world by their marvels, but they do one thing only; 

have no doubt, there is no escape, even if you are born demons 
or ungodly folk:

they will kill you, sirs, overturning this age.  (V.2.5)

or his encounters with worldly types,
Skilled singers of such fine songs,
why do you put aside the lord of our heaven-dwellers
who shows the path to travel from age to age, many ages without end,
just to sing of others hardly worth thinking of? (III.9.3)

or his sudden realization of some aspect of God’s grace,

In that time when I did not know you, you made me love your service,
in the midst of my unknowing confusion, you made me your servant;
disguised as a dwarf, you asked, “Three steps of earth, great Bali,”
you tricked him unawares,
and now you’ve mingled inside my self. (II.3.3)

or his vision of the faithful on their way to Heaven,

The people of the heavenly worlds worship, they pour out incense and a fine rain of flowers
before the people who belong to him who once measured the earth;
silent sages along both sides cheer them on, “Come higher!”
they step forward saying, “This is the road to Vaikuṇṭha!” (X.9.3)

These verses are lovely and memorable; yet the difference between the “I” in the songs and the “I” of the author cannot be overlooked; the effect is not so much to establish the identity or history of the author as to infuse the songs with the values of first-person recollection: the depiction of “I” is one more tool at the composer’s disposal.

Four songs (III.9, IV.5, VII.9, X.7) gain particular prominence because they appear to express Śaṭakōpan’s self-identity directly, as the speaker turns explicitly to a consideration of his own craft and articulates his self-understanding of his art.16 III.9, already cited, portrays what one bard has to say to other bards. In each verse, in one way or another, the speaker insists that he sings only of the lord and that those who do otherwise are to be criticized: “These lords think of themselves as something spe-
cial; they esteem their riches as true wealth—why should I sing of them?" (2); “others hardly worth thinking of” (3); “frail men” (4); “You’ll get no rewards to keep, by wearing out your mouths praising the glories of wealth: it’s like digging around in a dung heap!” (5); “there are no real benefactors in this world. But even if you praise your own favorite god with sweet songs, you still reach holy Mâl with the bright, radiant hair” (6); “So what words can I mouth about foolish people?” (8); “I am not one to mouth the praise of men” (9). We have here a strong public voice; in some loose sense at least, Śaṭākōpan seems to be a member of a “poets’ guild.” He has peers to argue with, he is not alone.

IV.5, VII.9 and X.7 reflect on the experience of inspiration, and the involvement of the lord in the composition of these songs in his honor. IV.5 reiterates, in a kind of refrain, the speaker’s amazement that he has been allowed to undertake the precious task of offering songs to the lord, by the lord’s grace. His words, the garland he offers to the lord, are totally satisfying to himself, and amazingly marked by the kind of intimate union he seeks. These verses are indicative of the song’s direction:

The unfalling one who dwells within the bounds of undying joy,
excellence undying, flower eyes, lord of heaven-dwellers,
I praise him with garlands of songs undying through time,
I come near him, I dwell within the bounds of undying joy.

To those who come near him in worship, the lord comes near,
and makes their deeds go away;
his the lovely feathered eagle, his the war discus,
my tongue praises him with garlands of song and I come near him;
but I cannot understand how he’s made my self his self.

The lord shows us the right way, the lofty lord of the immortals,
the one who spreads out all things, my lord;
I praise him, weaving a garland of words, I have reached the state of rejoicing every day,
my deeds and diseases become ashes before the wind. (IV.5.3–5)
Subsequent verses similarly weave together praise and self-reflection: "...I praise him with garlands of songs with proper words, I get inside him: from now on can there ever be anything difficult for me?" (6); "...it’s my destiny to weave garlands of fine words about him: what then could I lack?" (7); "...is anyone in the wide heavens equal to me who can compose such garlands of words?" (8); "...I have threaded this radiant Tamil about him, cloud of joy for his servants." (10) These testimonies naturally encourage us to look on Tīrūvāymoḷi from the perspective of its author; though in the middle of this garland woven beginning to end, they succeed in getting us to look again at the whole, in terms of what it might have meant to Śaṭakōpan.

We hear most clearly of the divine origins of Śaṭakōpan’s intensely personal songs in VII.9, which announces the unity of divine and human voices, as the poet meditates on how his words are, at the same time, really divine words:

_He has uplifted me for all time, day after day he has already made me himself;
Now he sings himself through me in sweet Tamil,
my lord, my First One, the abiding light: what can I say about him?_

_What can I say about him?
Become one with my sweet life, he sings in me these sweet songs which I sing in my own words,
he now praises himself in his own words, my marvellous one,
the First One who in three forms sings ahead of me._

_He does not sing his song about himself by the sweet songs of the best singers
but now joyfully he becomes one with me and through me sings fine songs about himself: Vaikuṇṭha’s lord._ (VII.9.1, 2, 6)

Operative here are both a sense of divine intervention—every word is God’s—and the speaker’s conscious assent to this process—his words are all the richer because they are not merely his and because he knows this. The lord speaks, the text is in-