CHAPTER VI

THE TRANSLATIONS
The Translations

Ramanujan has translated the 'Vacanas' of the Veerashaiva saints of 12th century A.D. and also poems by poets in Tamil. Speaking of Siva contains his translations of the vacanas and Poems of Love and War contains the translations of Tamil poetry. In between he has published a slender volume of translations of Tamil poems under the title Interior Landscape, but these poems are included in the bigger volume, Poems of Love and War.

Translation of poetry is a fine and difficult skill and the critic who approaches them has only one point of view. He wants to know whether they are successful translations or not. The expectation of the critic would be that as translations they must be both faithful to the spirit of the original work and also they should be beautiful. In many cases this expectation is not fulfilled; the translation is either too literal and therefore not creative, or if it is creative it is not faithful to the original.

Before we solve this problem we must ask a more pertinent question. Why does a poet translate poetry from a language which is not his own at all? Any translated work must be judged in the light of its purpose. As we have mentioned in the introductory chapter Ezra Pound translated poems from Italian and Chinese. His purpose was to introduce some
new elements into English poetry. To that extent Pound's translations are eminently successful. Discussions on the exact meaning of an 'ideogram' are endless and it is possible to prove that Pound did not know enough Chinese to understand the concept of an ideogram. But it cannot be gainsaid that Pound's own poetry and English poetry both gained in substance and meaning.

Pound translated poems from other languages into his own language. But the translations of Ramanujan are from Tamil and Kannada - both his languages - into English which is a foreign language. Many Indian poets have translated the Indian classics into English. Romesh Chundra Dutt has translated long passages from the Ramayan and the Mahabharat. Shilappadigaram has been translated into English by Alain Danielon and there is an English translation of Jayashankar Prasad's modern epic poem - Kamayani. From Kannada the poems of Bendre and Kuvempu have been translated into English. The purpose behind all these works, successful or unsuccessful, is to make a display of our poetic treasure to the outside world, a rebuff of our colonial mind at its best.

But P.Lal's Mahabharat and Ramanujan's works are different as translations because they have a different purpose. P.Lal, whose sensibility is essentially Indian, chooses to write in English and produce a kind of poetry which
is new to English poetry. Ramanujan translates works from Kannada and Tamil and these works are not known to the rest of the world. To introduce unknown works and prove their worth and quality is a very difficult work and the achievement of Ramanujan is indeed commendable. His two volumes of translated works, *Speaking of Siva* and *Poems of Love and War* reveal two worlds of spiritual experience and experiences of love and heroism in their entirety. The images and metaphors of the vacanas are rare in religious poetry of the rest of the world. Considered from this point of view the translations of Ramanujan are eminently successful.

The translations of Ramanujan can be examined in the light of the first purpose, that is, interpretation. The purpose of translation is to interpret what is difficult and unknown. Following are two pieces of translations of the vacanas by Basavanna:

The master of the house, is he at home, or isn't he?
Grass on the threshold, 
dirt in the house:

The master of the house, is he at home, or isn't he?
Lies in the body, 
lust in the heart:
no, the master of the house is not at home, 
our Lord of the Meeting Rivers.

You can make them talk 
if the serpent 
has stung 
them.

You can make them talk 
if they're struck 
by an evil planet.

But you can't make them talk 
if they're struck dumb 
by riches.

Yet when Poverty the magician 
enters, they'll speak 
at once,

O lord of the meeting rivers.

The first vacana expresses Basavanna's anguish at the absence of God. Basavanna always felt that he is the 'heir of the house of God', or 'maneya maga'. Basavanna's craving for a sense of belonging is a spiritual need and as long as he lived he yearned for the presence of God. This vacana ably expresses the symptoms of God's presence as well as those of his absence. But since it is the knowledge about one's own self one cannot be certain about God's presence in one's own heart. Basavanna, unlike many other Indian saints, is highly scrupulous about the reality of his experience. The
first line of the vacana expresses the doubt. 'The master of the house, is he at home, or isn't he?' But the fourth line, when he is not in doubt is a repetition of the same line. The inference is that there is no master if there is grass on the threshold and dirt in the house is a valid one. But still there might be a slight chance of these symptoms when there is a lazy master in the house. The second part of the vacana refers to the house of the devotee's body. If there are 'lies in the body and lust in the heart', what follows is 'no, the master of the house is not at home'. The doubt about the inference is fully cleared when Basavanna refers to the house of the body. This development from doubt to full assurance reveals the scrupulousness of Basavanna as a spiritual experient.

Ramanujan's translation is almost a literal one. He has not taken liberty either with the content of the poem or with its style of expression. He translates - 'Maneyolage maneyodeyaniddano illavo' as 'the master of the house, is he at home or isn't he?' The translation literally follows the syntax of the original poem. But the English phrase 'to be at home' has other connotations and the translation exploits them to express the restlessness and anxiety of the devotee. The presence of God in the heart of the devotee must make him feel perfectly at home. The external symptoms like 'grass
on the threshold' or 'lust in the heart' are not fully reliable.

The second vacana is not as lucid as the first one because Ramanujan has not been able to render the ambiguous verbs in the original.

You can make them talk
if the serpent has stung them.

The rendering here makes some sense. It is difficult to talk to a person who is stung by a serpent since he is stupefied and cannot talk. But in the original it is 'havu tindavara' which means '(persons) who are stung by a serpent' or (those) 'who have eaten a serpent', that is, miracle-mongers. This sense cannot be brought into English.

But in the second part Ramanujan's translation suddenly recovers.

But you can't make them talk
if they're struck dumb by riches.

'they are struck dumb' is not in the original. The literal translation would be 'they are possessed by the spirit of the riches'. But the phrase 'they are struck dumb' contains an
image which describes not only the proud rich but also those who are struck by the evil planet and those who are stung by a serpent. This is significant because the image of a 'magician' in the last part of the vacana unites all the previous images into a complex of meaning. The magic of poverty is, of course, a reverse kind of magic, since magic takes people away from normalcy while the magic of poverty brings them back to normalcy.

The vacana No 429 by Allama Prabhu is difficult to understand even in Kannada. The difficulty is due to an extremely condensed symbolism. The text of the vacana as translated by Ramanujan is as follows:

When the honey-bee came  
I saw the smell of flowers run.  
O what miracles:  
Where the heart went  
I saw the brain run.  

When the god came,  
I saw the temple run  

Ramanujan has provided an explanatory note to this translation. The word 'smell', he says, is the literal translation of the Sanskrit word 'vasana' which means 'smell' as well as 'latencies'. The latencies are the smell of the past lives
which do not allow the soul to be liberated. The miracle that has taken place here is that as soon as the honey-bee comes the smell of flowers runs away. The pun on the word 'vasana' is, of course, acceptable. But the problem here is that the Kannada word used by Allama is not 'vasana' but 'parimala' which means smell and there is no pun. It is not known whether Ramanujan has used another version of the same vacana where the word 'vasana' is used. But the Kannada word 'tumbi' for 'honey-bee' is richly ambiguous, because it is also the gerund form of the verb 'to be full'. To experience fullness is also the end of all experiences as the fulfilment is the death of all desire. This is truly a miracle which is reflected in the paradox of the abolition of smell when the honey-bee which is attracted by the smell comes.

The second image of heart and mind is still more difficult. The brain running where the heart went is a bit awkward in English. The original Kannada syntax is straightforward and is also ambiguous. The mind which is rational and skeptic succumbs to the pressure of the heart which is 'bhakti'. The Kannada sentence also means 'the mind ran following its own impulse'. Ramanujan in his note tells that 'heart and intellect are distinguished here' which is not acceptable.
The last image of the temple running when the god came must explain every ambiguity that the vacana has. When the god comes the temple has no business to stay although it is the temple that stays and the god who is fond of running away. The paradox of the running temple is remarkably significant since it explains the 'running smell' and 'the running brain or intellect'. The temple as it is explained by Ramanujan in his note represents the human body and therefore it contains both 'brain' and 'smell' intellect and the attachment of the past lives.

The significance of the vacana is enhanced when a close attention is paid to the relation between the images. The smell of flowers, the honey-bee, the brain, the heart, the temple and the god are all metaphors but the relation between them is metonymous. In one sense the smell contains the honey-bee, the mind contains the heart and the temple contains the god. But the ultimate reality is something contrary to the popular expectation. The contained becomes the container when we realise that not only the temple, but the whole world is contained by the god. According to another vacana by Basava-nna the world which seems to contain the god is like a mirror reflecting a huge elephant. The devotee who is a part of the world, through the complete surrender of his will and ego becomes a container of the god, in a sense greater than god.
The translation of some of these vacanas, as we have seen, has not been a success and the failure is due to the ambiguities of the original vacanas. But there is a positive aspect of this failure. Ramanujan's translations in spite of their failure to grasp the original spirit in its entirety are good poetry. Once we resist the temptation of comparing them to the original poetry, the translations have certain beauties and excellent qualities.

The wind sleeps
to the lullabies of sky.
Space drowses,
infinity gives it suck
from her breast.
The sky is silent.
The lullaby is over.
The Lord is
as if He were not.

The unity of images in this poem is striking and meaningful. The indifferent elements of nature like the wind, the sky, and the space are individualised and are coerced to accept an intimacy of relationships. Ramanujan's note to this translation explains that the vacana describes the process of enlightenment.

The wind sleeps
to lullabies of sky.
According to the note the wind here is the life-breath of the devotee and it sleeps hearing the lullabies of the sky which represents the soul of the devotee. But the intimate relation between the wind and the sky is significant by itself because it is the product of an imagination which discovers an affinity between inanimate objects. The wind and the sky are not humanised here nor is it a poetic illusion created by a trope like 'pathetic fallacy'. It is one of such innumerable revelations in Indian poetry. The second image is that of the space drowsing receiving suck from the infinity. The reality represented by this set of symbols - space being the child of infinity - is difficult to grasp but it is made easy for the reach of our understanding by the example of the first set of images, the reality of which is clear and obvious.

The third part of the vacana once again refers to the sky and its lullaby which is now over. The silence of the sky is a logical conclusion of the lullaby which is akin to silence and its purpose is to produce silence. The last part of the vacana describes the presence of the god by denying his presence. One of the vacanas by Allama Prabhu refers to the death of god. "After that I received the news of Goheshwar's death". The presence of the God to Allama is paradoxical because it is like absence. Any presence, according to Allama, is bound to dissolve into absence "That which is embodied must dissolve", says Allama in another vacana. What is not
dissolved and what continues to be present is absence.

Ramanujan's translations of the Kannada vacanas are valuable because they are creative interpretations of the vacana poetry of the Veerashaiva saints. A learned Veerashaiva scholar with the help of his knowledge of the Veerashaiva theology can interpret the symbolism and the hidden meaning of the vacanas. Ramanujan has taken help from such scholars as L. Basavaraju, as the notes reveal. But the very act of translation reveals some of the meanings which escape the notice of learned scholars. Many things are taken for granted by a scholar who belongs to the Veerashaiva religion and whose first language is Kannada. But the translations reveal clearly what is missing when you read the original. Translation is an act of transformation and therefore many things are lost and many other things are gained in this act.

These translations are important from another point of view. They indicate the kind of poetry that Ramanujan has written both in English and Kannada. The central theme of a vacana for example, is expressed in a simple statement either in the beginning of a vacana or in a conclusive statement. What follows the statement is a set of illustrative images to bring out the truth of the theme-statement and what comes before the conclusive statement is a set of fact-images which provides enough evidence to prove what the conclusive statement says.
Either the theme emerges from a group of event-images or it gives a validity to a group of images. The relation between the theme and the images is organic and fundamental. Sometimes the images themselves are a part of reality. Ramanujan's poetry both in English and Kannada has these qualities.

Some of the poems from his Second Sight like 'Watchers Questions', 'Connect', carry the influence of vacana poetry.

They would say, only the first thought is clear, the second is dim, the third is ignorant and it takes a lot of character not to call it a mystery.

The morphology of thought in these lines penetrated by a searching skepticism reminds us of the kind of thought in the vacanas of Allama. Even the imagery of the mango-grove and the 'zebra striped caterpillar' waiting for a change of season is similar to that in the vacanas. In stead of the caterpillar the vacanakaras would have used a honey-bee with a pun on the Kannada equivalent. These last lines of his poem 'Highway Stripper' look like the translation of an unwritten vacana by Devar Dasimayya.

or was it me moulting, shedding vestiges,
old investments,  
rushing forever  
towards a perfect  
coupling  
with naked nothing  
in a world  
without places?  

Many vacanas of Dasimayya unweave the fabric of the human body in order to ascertain the true nature of the soul which is neither male nor female. The highway stripper of Ramanujan's poem is an eccentric product of modern culture, an image of absolute freedom. The sex-craze intensified by man's consciousness of a woman's sex-experience could symbolize an unconscious spiritual drive towards a condition of the denial of all contradictions.

It is but natural that Ramanujan's Kannada poetry is more indebted to the vacana poetry than his English verse. The influence of the vacanas is best discerned in the tone of his Kannada poems and in the argumentativeness of some of his poems. Here are two Kannada poems from his second collection - Mattu Itara Padyagalu (And Other Poems):

Two eyes  
are not enough  
to see what is visible to the eyes.
What you need is
the grace of
Providence.*1
Before the talk ends
Oh Lord,
the talk-deserted one,
Why not teach
us talk?
Why not coach
us in
plain and simple
speech?
Even in matters
of love,
oblique talk
and thoughts of
propriety,
having undressed
of these
irony being shed
off
Like body
touching the body
why not touch
the mind?
One moment,
why not
show us
Oh Lord:
the nature
of emotion,
the Swa-Bhava
of Bhava.*2
The first one illustrates a simple fact and turns it into something extra-ordinary with a view to showing that truth is something very obvious and simple. The argument is the same which we find in the poem 'Second Sight', the last poem of Second Sight. The sly and implicit tone of satire gently questions the cultural perspective of a people. The vacanakaras did something similar with regard to the perspective of the established religions of our country.

The second poem is meditative and introspective. It describes the predicament described by Wallace Steevens when he describes the human condition in the prison-house of language. Strangely it is the problem which is both spiritual and epistemological with the vacanas of Allama, and incidentally with all the vacanakaras. Allama rejects the authority of language and when he has to do it in terms of language, distinguishes the word from the ordinary words. The word for him is another form of truth and the devotee has to speak through silence. The plain and simple speech of Ramanujan is like the communication of angels described by Dante. The form of Ramanujan's poem is that of a prayer. A prayer is a form of speech which tries to obtain something which one does not have. The most difficult knowledge is, of course, self-knowledge because the subject which can know an object cannot know itself. The effort to achieve something which seems impossible
II

Speaking of Siva contains Ramanujan's translations of Kannada vacanas and these, when read at a stretch, reveal a kind of poetry which is different in quality and a variety of tonal expressions, from the western religious poetry. The vacanakaras who sought to create a poetry free from all conventions of Kannada poetry created their own poetic conventions by the insistent use of language spoken by ordinary men and women. We all know by now that the so called ordinary language spoken by ordinary men and women has its own poetics, which is unconscious, yet is as much effective creatively as the systematic poetics of a classical poetry. The images employed by the vacanas - for example, the flame of camphor, a figurine of lac near the fire or love nascent in the heart of a virgin girl etc. - belong to a common stock of images contained by the idioms and proverbs of the spoken language. The appeal of this spoken methodology is completely different from that of the classical Kannada poetry because of its freshness and a difference in the world-view. All the same the vacanakaras cared less for poetic appeal than for the authenticity or spiritual experience. The authenticity of experience is an obsession with Basavanna whose vacanas abound in the images of
scrupulousness. We know, as it happens in the case of George Herbert's poetry, that even the rejection of style can itself become a style. One of the vacanas by Basavanna bears out the truth of this problem.

The crookedness of the serpent
is straight enough for the snake-whole.

The crookedness of the river
is straight enough for the sea.

And the crookedness of our Lord's men
is straight enough for our Lord:\textsuperscript{13}

What Basavanna defends here is the deviation from the norm, rejection of the accepted mode. George Herbert asks in his poem entitled 'Jordan I' - 'Does all the structure lie in a winding stair?'\textsuperscript{14} The crookedness of a winding stair for Herbert represents poetic beauty while honest religious experience expressed in the prose way is straight. Basavanna uses the words 'crooked' and 'straight' to mean 'idiosyncratic' and 'conventional'. By saying that 'crookedness of our Lord's men is straight enough for our Lord' Basavanna discovers a different category of experience and its expression from that of an established classical religion. Ultimately this 'serpent' and 'snake-hole' method becomes a norm by itself, the formalization of the lack of form.

The same is true of Cankam poetry of Tamil which Ramanujan has translated and collected under the title -
Poems of Love and War. These poems belong to the earliest phase of Tamil poetry and since they are not influenced by the poetics of the classical poetry of Sanskrit they have a unique freshness of experience and expression. They represent the spirit of several bye-ways of Indian poetry at its best. What is significant of this poetry is that, without being religious, it has a wonderful unity of thought, imagery and ethos which is so rare that even the folk-poetry of India doesn't have it. Ramanujan has written a lengthy 'Afterword' which discovers the technique, characteristic features and the values of this poetry. It is difficult to add anything to what Ramanujan has written in his 'Afterword'. Nevertheless, there are certain points suggested by Ramanujan which need further elaboration.

Writing about the theory of 'ullurai uvamam' Ramanujan explains as follows:

"A word about the theory of ullurai uvamam or insets. An inset is an implicit comparison. All explicit markers of comparison are suppressed. The Tolkappiyam says that explicit comparison belongs to worldly usage (ulakavalakku), whereas implicit metaphor belongs to poetic usage (ceyyulvalakku). There are other distinctions to be made (a) an inset is a correlation of the landscapes and their contents (karu) to the human scene (uri). (b) Unlike metaphor in ordinary language, an inset is
a structural feature within the poem; it integrates the different elements of the poem and shapes its message. (c) Unlike metaphor and simile, it often leaves out all the points of comparison and all explicit markers of comparison (e.g., "like as"); such an omission increases manyfold the power of the figure. As we have seen in the poems, image intensifies image, associations flow into each other. These "montage" and "dissolve" effects are aided by the flowing syntax of the language. (d) The inset is essentially a "metonymy", an in presentia relationship, where both terms are present, where the signifier and the signified belong to the same universe, share the same "landscape". Both are parts of one scene. Such a metonymy, rather than metaphor, is the favorite poetic figure of the classical Tamils. Metaphor implies diversity ("seeing similars in dissimilars" said Aristotle), to be unified by comparison. Poetry for the Tamils does not unify a multiverse but expresses a universe from within, speaking through any of its parts. The man belongs to the scene, the scene represents the man. Adapting a remark of Kenneth Burke's (1945:6-7) in another context, we may say, "There is implicit in the quality of a scene the quality of the action implicit in it .... one could deduce the details of the action from the details of the setting". This kind of "metonymous metaphor", based on an entire formal scheme, is a special feature of classical Tamil forms.\(^{15}\)

Metonymy is a favourite trope of the Indian folk-poetry while metaphor based on similarity of disparate elements is employed by the classical poetry in Sanskrit. For example,
a woman in a Kannada folk-poem admonishes a village vagabond with a blue turban who is standing in the flowing midwaters of a stream, to keep away from the water lest the water be contaminated if its flow is checked. Another poem presents a dialogue between a husband and his wife. It can be roughly translated like this:

"I have fried the ripe bitter gourd in oil
Just see how it tastes, my love,
And just see what happens if
you bring another wife:"

"I am not a merchant prince,
Not rich enough to bring another wife,
Hard labour is my wealth".

The fried bitter gourd in this poem and the blue turban in the previous poem are not metaphors. They are metonymic since they belong to the personae. The taste of the ripe bitter gourd depends upon the temperament of the person who eats, if he doesn't like it, he will have to suffer the consequence of eating it. Again these images are part and parcel of the personality of the characters in the poem.

The special feature of the Tamil Cankam poetry is that it has combined the elements of the folk as well as those of classical poetry. The love poems belonging to the 'akam' tradition have the intensity of folk poetry but that intensity is strictly formalized and also depersonalised as it happens.
with the Indian classical poetry. Ramanujan in his 'Afterword' has examined this situation critically, although he has not mentioned the debt of this poetry to folk-poetry and the classical poetry. The poems which have been translated here have retained the special qualities of Cankam poetry and have been able to add something really valuable to English poetry.

Three on Bangles

What She Said

Friend, his seas swell and roar
making conch shells whirl on the sands.
But fishermen ply their little wooden boats
unafraid of the cold lash of the waves.

Look, my bangles
slip loose as he leaves,
grow tight as he returns,
and they give me away.

What Her Girl Friend Said
to him.

Your sands are furrowed
by the movements
of right-spiralled coches.
The glitter of their pearls
cuts the dark.

But, tell me,
are these any good,
these white bangles you've brought,
filed from the shells of that sea?
What He Said

My love whose bangles
glitter, jingle,
as she chases crabs,

Suddenly stands shy,
head lowered,

hair hiding her face:

but only till the misery of evening
passes, when she'll give me

the full pleasure
of her breasts.17

Ammuvanar
Ainkurunuru 192,193,197.

These three poems describe a delicate love-affair of a woman with a man who hails from the sea coast. The first four lines of the first poem describe the area from which the lover comes. The region inspires one to adventure. The little wooden boats of the fishermen are unafraid of the cold lashing waves. The woman is attracted by the spirit of adventure which her lover inherits from the region. The next four lines describe the woman's response to his love in exaggerated terms. Her bangles slip loose as he leaves and grow tight as he returns. This sudden emaciation and growing fat are symptoms of her great love for him. This detail is not realistic nor is it meant to be one. The feeling of love which is abstract is presented in concrete physical response.
The second poem is a monologue of the woman's girlfriend to her lover who has come from the sea coast in order to meet his love. The girlfriend describes again his region. The sands on the sea shore are furrowed by the movements of right-spiralled conches and the glitter of their pearls is so great that it can remove the darkness. The mention of the right-spiralled conches is particularly significant since they are believed to be auspicious. The glitter of the pearls suggests the love and beauty of the lover which alone can expel the darkness of suffering. But the question that she asks at the end is an ambiguous one. The white bangles which he has brought filed from the shells of that sea are fragile and therefore they can be broken any time. It is a question which includes a warning to him that he must take care of her and never get separated from her. The image of bangles in the first poem is further developed here so that the woman becomes her bangles. The white bangles filed from the shells belong to the region of the lover and the logic of the metonymy is that the woman also belongs to him and his region. She becomes a part of that region.

The third poem is spoken by the lover who now describes his love. The woman, now married, chases the crabs on the sea shore and when she chases them her bangles glitter and jingle. The lustre and the music of these bangles are her
qualities, qualities of her happiness. The glitter and the jingle are means of communication too. The bangles speak to the lover and he understands. He knows that her shyness and silence are temporary. When the misery of the evening passes she would give him the full pleasure of her breasts.

What is interesting in this cluster of poems is that the image of bangles is neither decorative nor is it symbolic. The image narrates a full history of meanings. The bangles either 'slip loose' or 'grow tight'. The use of transitory verb denotes that the qualities of the woman are transferred to the bangles. The pangs of separation and the joy of union have such an effect on her bodily frame that it affects the bangles too. The image of a slipping bangle has a long history of use in Indian poetry, the most famous use of it is in Kalidas's famous poem Meghadutam. The image, as it is already suggested, is further developed in the second poem. The bangles which the lover brings are filed from the shells of the sea. These bangles, although fragile, are works of art since they are filed from the shells. The wildness of the first love - suggested by the wild response of the woman in the first poem - is tamed and turned into an artistic work. That is why the bangles in the last poem simply glitter and jingle which are subtle means of communication. The wild lover has become a wife now, and both of them are domesticated. She now can wait until it becomes dark and then to give him the
full pleasure of her breasts.

Here is another poem which exploits the meaning of metonymy fully:

What She Said
to her friend

The colors on the elephant's body
shine, as he grazes
with his herd
on bamboo shoots,
breaking down branches;
then, in thirst,
he goes to a watering place,
kills a crouching tiger
poised for attack.
Pouring rains
clean the tusks, wash down the blood on their tips,
as he walks slowly along slopes
of jagged rocks.
He's arrogant
after finishing off a vicious enemy,
and with six-legged bees making lute-music
over the juices of his lust
he mounts his female,
then goes to sleep
in our man's banana groves.

Friend,

comforting me once, you said lovingly,
"The man is just right
for your rank and nature".
Sweet words those, bless you,
they've come true:
garlands smell on him
like nectar to people who crave it,
his chest's embrace so tight
there's no place
even for the waist of a bee,
and love
is tireless still
as on the very first day.

Kapilar
Akananuru 332.

The first part of the poem which is only the description of an elephant grazing, drinking, killing a tiger and then mounting its female serves as a background to the love-affair of a woman. The elephant, after love making goes to sleep in the banana groves of her lover and husband. The central theme of the poem is, of course, the tireless love of her lover which is still as it was on the very first day. The lover is a part of the scene which includes the arrogant elephant and its love-play. Only the first four or five lines describe the act of the love-making of the lover. 'His chest's embrace is so tight that there is no place even for the waist of a bee'. The image of the waist of a bee must recall 'the six-legged bees making lute-music' to the magnificent act of love of the elephant. The bees attracted by the elephant's
juice of lust must be hovering round the elephant while the man-lover's embrace is so tight that there is no place even for the waist of a bee. This carefully constructed piece of hyperbole has a poetic purpose, the exaltation of the human love and also 'the rank and nature' of the lover. In this way the relation between the two scenes is both metaphorical and metonymic. But what is interesting is that there are elements of contrast as well as similarity in both the scenes. The elephant is strong, arrogant and intoxicated like the human lover. But at the same time the elephant gets exhausted and goes to sleep in the banana grove. The human lover, on the other hand, is tireless. This relationship of similarity and contrast creates a world of complex significance. The animal qualities of the elephant are translated into human qualities. The strength of a lion is only strength and has only one meaning. But the same strength in a man, in association with the other human qualities, becomes human and gets a human meaning. The woman who describes her man and his love does not use the same details of the elephant's love-affair. The elephant who goes to sleep in the man's banana grove is still an elephant and is a part of the background. The status of the object of comparison and that of the object compared is allowed to get disturbed. Both the metaphor and the metonymy are not allowed to transgress their limits. The detailed description of the activities of the elephant gives it an independent status and
a large size which is larger than that of a metaphor. The juxtaposition of these two pictures enhances the meaning of human love. The poem, it seems, is interested in revealing the symbiosis contained by the world of metaphor.

There is not much difference between akam poetry and puram poetry with regard to their tone and imagery and as Ramanujan has pointed out in his 'Afterword' the two genres complement one another, the reason being that these genres are created by the same poets. Nevertheless there is some difference which is significant and therefore worth considering. The love-poetry which belongs to the akam genre deals with men and women who do not have a definite identity although the love-poetry deals with particular experiences which are personal and intimate. The puram poetry, which is in one sense public poetry, deals with historical characters, kings and chieftains. Ramanujan observes about this poetry as follows:

"One sees a certain epic quality in the puram anthologies: in the cycles of poems on Pari’s great career, his legendary extravagant gesture of leaving his chariot for a poor creeper to train itself on, his self-sufficient hill later ravaged by enemies, his two daughters left in the care of his poet-friend Kapilar, who sees past glory and present wreckage; or in the episodes (not included in this book) of Kopperuncolan fasting unto death, facing north, surrounded by henchmen, and sending for his poet-friend — who arrives from his faraway home several
days late, in time only to mourn his great friend's 
ruin; or the cycle of poems about the unknown 
warriors. In those one feels the power and pathos 
of the puram poems, so different in tone and signifi­
cance from the poignant, humane akam, yet composed 
often by the same poets. 19.

The important phrase in this passage is, of course, 
'epic quality'. Ramanujan tells further that,

Kailashpathy and others feel that many puram poems 
must have been fragments of a lost epic. But the 
single poems are too well formed and artistically 
climaxed to be fragments. 20.

On the other hand Ramanujan thinks that all these poems which 
had developed over centuries seem to have waited for a Tamil 
Homer who never arrived. Whether these poems are fragments 
of a lost epic or parts of an unwritten epic, what is certain 
is that they have a certain epic quality. For the critical 
consideration of this epic quality I have selected the cycle 
of poems on Pari's great career. Ramanujan's note on Pari's 
great career is as follows:

"Pari's generosity was legendary: once when he saw 
a jasmine creeper trailing on the ground, he left his 
chariot there so that the creeper could grow on it. 
Though he was only a chieftain, he withstood the 
continual sieges of three kings (Cera, Cola, Pantiya); 
he finally lost his hill and his life to them (p.145)."
After his death, his friend Kapilar found suitable husbands for Pari's daughters (p. 146)²¹.  

What we have here is a tragic tale of the chieftain Pari. Pari's personality has certain noble characteristics which can be found in the mythical characters like Karna. But these are all heroic qualities and extremely individualistic. Pari is heroic, courageous, friendly and also tender and compassionate, a character which would remind one of the famous Sanskrit phrase—'lokottara'—'one who is above the average'. Pari is a ruler of a hilly region called Parampu and he defended it heroically against the continual sieges of the three kings—Cera, Cola and Pantiya.

The cycle of poems on Pari consists in all or eight poems. The first poem describes Pari's Parampu hill which is a quiet place. It is suggested that the hill is already under a siege by the armies of the three kings already mentioned. The poem says that it is difficult to capture that hill.

Even if you have elephants tied to every tree there, and chariots standing in every field, you will never take the hill. He will not give in to the sword²².
Pari appears to be an epic hero. He is single like his hill and even the armies of the three kings cannot defeat him. An epic hero is one who is undaunted, even by an adversary who is stronger. But even this strong hero has a weakness for music. The bard at the end says that he can give both hill and country if you approach him with music. The same idea is expressed in the next poem while describing Pari's hill. The third poem is purely elegiac. The two daughters of Pari lament his death on a white moonlit night. The next five poems describe the Parampu hill after the death of Pari. The present status of the hill is a sad reminder of the past glory which could never be recaptured. The bard who once was a great friend of Pari bids farewell to the hill in gratefulness. He goes in search of men who are fit to marry the daughters of Pari. In spite of Pari's death life of the world continues but it has now lost that meaning which it had acquired during the life of Pari.

The story of Pari, tragic as it certainly is, doesn't express the same vision as a tragedy expresses. Pari who was noble and heroic doesn't fall because he had a weakness for music and art. Pari created a world of values and this world of values is expressed through the description of Parampu hill. In the second poem of this cycle both Parampu and Pari become synonymous. In a sense the world becomes the man who inhabits that world. The hill was prosperous because Pari's sceptre
was just. We do not know the details of Pari's downfall. The three kings who had attacked Pari's kingdom might have been equally just. What is certain is as long as Pari lived the world owned by him had meaning. The bard cherishes that meaning in his memory and constructs a lyrical narrative on the basis of that memory. The narrative deliberately misses certain steps and cherishes those moments of heroic glory which ought to be remembered. One doubts whether these perfect poems could be developed into a sustained Homeric epic. The impression that one gets is that we must be thankful to certain situations of human history when both man and the world of space and time together create a world of meaning. The poems do not try to explain either the presence of values or their absence, they simply celebrate them.

III

Poems of Love and War contains a short section of religious poems which, of course, are qualitatively different from the Kannada vacanas by Veerashaiva saints. The purpose of including these four poems addressed to two gods, Murukan and Tirumala (Vishnu), is to show the development of Tamil poetry which at the time of the Pallavas underwent a change in terms of content and form. Here is what Ramanujan has to say about this significant change:
Then came the Pallavas (c.A.D.500-900), and with them Tamil had to come to terms with courtly Sanskrit and everything it represented. This creative meeting led to a new religious consciousness called bhakti, new uses for akam and puram motifs in religious thinking and in making poems about gods. The Tamil sense of the sacred, immanent in particular things and places, led soon to the building of temples. Now a god was the king, and the wandering saints were His bards, the temple was His palace (koyil). From the sixth century on, the country was swept by the Nayanmars and the Alvars, devotees of Siva and Visnu. Gods and poet-saints had replaced the Noble Ones, the heroes and their bards.

The chief concern of the Veerashaiva saints was also bhakti but it was certainly not associated with the 'courtly Sanskrit, but it was the opposite of Sanskrit. Now a god was the king, and the wandering saints his bards, the temple was His palace'. What is meant here is that the regal metaphor is put to a different use, to mean something else. A god becomes a king and he is so powerful that the real kingship is debunked. We are told and even now the people believe that Lord Anant Padmanabha is the king of the city of Tiruvanantpuram (Trivandrum) and there are many such cities in India like Benaras and Ujjain. All the same the metaphor of kingship is still central to poetry and poetry fully exploited the ambiguity of this metaphor. The image of god...
in the Kannada vacanas does not have this regal splendour, in fact, the 'nonimage' or the God becomes his and even this image is being shattered by some of the vacanas by Allama.

The Tamil religious poems, on the other hand, continue to use the regal metaphor by spiritualizing it. God is a king but a king with a difference. The image of Vishnu in the long poem 'Tirumala' which is subdivided into five poems, celebrates the acts and exploits of Vishnu and the style is definitely heroic. Vishnu is depicted as a creator, and as the power which sustains and also as a destroyer. God has the power of life and death but unlike the earthly kings he is also above the mortal history.

You're like all that
and also like all else, and beyond²⁴.

The literal and the symbolic get merged into the complex metaphor, the transcendental extending the scope and value of the actual, because the actual is only a metaphor standing for something else. What is interesting in this is the interanimation of the metaphor and the thing it signifies. If a god is presented as a king, either a king can become a god and wield divine powers (which fortunately is not the case with our bhakti poetry) or the distant and transcendental god becomes physical and intimate. The comprehension of the
unknown divine becomes easy through concrete and intimate metaphors.

The form of the god in this poem is not only immanent but also comprehensive and the poem tries to give an elaborate description of this form. The relation between the god and his brothers and consort is taken for granted, yet mysterious. The god is both younger and older than his brother and the god appears in a state of neither-nor and he shows his excellence in any state. What is interesting from the point of view of the structure of the poem is that nature of comprehending the god affects the form of the poem. If the greatness - the Sanskrit 'mahima' - is infinite then the form of the poem which describes the greatness should also be endless. Most of the poems belonging to the bhakti tradition have this open form. The poem, as it is, consists of five short poems, each poem describing the appearance, acts and exploits of the god. But the scope of the poem is immense and it can accommodate other poems also. The poet has stopped at five because he must have thought that it is enough to give a suggestion to the god's infinite which cannot be exhausted at all.

There is another poem addressed to the same god, which is shorter but complete. This poem also depicts the greatness of the god but in a different way. The form of the previous poem is expansive trying to accommodate many diverse
points related to the form and the nature of the god. But this poem reverses the process and tries to locate the god in his quintessential aspect. 'In fire, you are the heat'. Heat is the quintessential element of fire without which there cannot be any fire. In the same way the scent is the quintessential element of flowers. The poem by using these images also tries to sift the subtle from the gross. Nevertheless, the distinction between the subtle and the gross is only for the convenience of understanding because the whole is made up of both the subtle and the gross. The god is, as the last lines say -

Everything, you are everything,
the sense, the substance, of everything.

Again, the relation between the subtle and the gross goes on varying as the poem repeats the pairs of images. For example, 'In flowers, you are the scent', is not the same as 'Among stones you are the diamond'. The scent is the essential part of the flower, but the diamond is only the best among stones. The relation between the images is not one but many, and each relation throws light on the variety of relationships between the god and the world.

The poem belongs to the Sanskrit tradition of bhakti poetry not only because it is subtle and suggestive but it draws mainly on Chapter X of the Bhagavad Gita in which the god
is described in the same way. "I sustain the world in many ways through the manifestation of myself in the form of beauty, excellence and strength." The list of images in the Bhagavad Gita is quite exhaustive and comprehensive enough to cover the entire universe. God is both immanent and transcendental and this fact, according to the Gita, is the meaning of god. Both Chapters X and XI of the Gita show two ways of comprehending the double nature of god. The poem 'Tirumala' is the Tamil version of the Sanskrit way of presenting the immanence of the god.

The other two poems in this section of religious poetry are addressed to Murukan, the god of love, valour and fertility. Originally Murukan was a non-Aryan god, later accommodated in the Hindu pantheon as the son of Lord Shiva and Parvati. But Murukan in Tamil region has retained his non-Aryan identity of a tribal god. Both the poems celebrate the worship of this god and the way this god is worshipped speaks eloquently about the cultural values of the people who worship him. Murukan is a tribal god and the people who worship him belong to a tribe that exuberantly expresses its love for cockfight, drinking, dancing and music. They are intimately related to their god whose authenticity is never questioned. Here is an image of the tribal girl worshipping her god:
"Where the daughter of the hill tribe
sounds Murukan's favorite instruments
and offers worship to Murukan
till He arrives
and comes into her
to terrify enemies and deniers."

These lines present an intimate picture of the communal
life of the tribesmen communicating with their god through the
musical instruments which they love. "The daughter of the hill-
tribe offers worship to Murukan till He arrives and comes into
her". Murukan's arrival and his entrance into the being of a
tribal girl creates a unique situation of spiritual experience.
The worshipper's love is so much overpowering that the god
must come as a lover and satisfy the bhakti of the devotee
which is as indomitable as the sexual urge. The situation
follows a simple moral law, that every desire must have its
fulfilment which is the cause of all suffering, which creates
its own hell. Conceptually there is no gap between desire
and fulfilment in heaven. The concluding lines of the first
poem on Murukan clearly define the state of heavenly bliss:

There
the suppliants offer worship,
ask and ask
as if to ask is to be given already.

The second poem on 'Murukan, the Red One' describes
the shaman of Murukan. The possessed shaman decorates himself
to receive the god and the tribesmen who are his followers imitate him in all detail. Men and women are decorated in different ways but the difference is not from person to person. The purpose of this communal decoration is to be one with the shaman who represents them all. All the tribesmen behave like one person and are merged into the personality of the shaman who is 'the Red One himself'. The merging of oneself into another has a spiritual purpose of approaching the god through the shaman. The shaman is also an expert actor and he imitates the god as the followers imitate him. The shaman puts on every item of the god's costume so that the spirit of the god emerges through the items.

his hands large
as drumheads
hold gently
several soft-shouldered
fawnlike women;

he gives them proper places
and he dances
on the hill: 29

The picture of the god is complete and alive with divine activities. What is important here is the aesthetique of this profound ritual. The actor who imitates the god becomes the god himself and his becoming the god, in a sense, is also the worship or god. The devotees of Lord Mallari of Devarṣūḍ in Karnataka also worship the god in the same way.
The double aspect of the spirit of this devotion has the advantage of covering both the material and spiritual aspect of the devotion. The visible items of Murukan's costume, for example, like a coat of mail, a banner of cock, musical instruments etc. create the complete aspect of Murukan through invocation. It is interesting to note that this poem which describes this unique worship is also a kind of worship in terms of words. That is why the poem asserts at the end,

and all such things happen
because
of His being
there.
And not only there.

Ramanujan in his notes says that these lines "contain the quintessence of bhakti". These lines clearly define the immanence and also the transcendence of the god. But this is also the quintessence of Indian aesthetics. The folk-theatre in India believes in communicating the art experience by living and enacting it. The actor who plays the god and the spectator who sees him on the stage are both rewarded, and the nature of this experience is profoundly communal.

There is a relation between these two poems and Ramanujan's independent poem, 'Prayers to Lord Murugan' included in his collection Relations. Dr. M. K. Naik while commenting on this poem says that this poem:
"raises by its thematic implications a serious probe into spiritual concerns, but is actually seen to be confined to the surface irony of the contrast between the present and the past."\(^{32}\).

Chirantan Kulashreshtha calls it "a poetic sequence offering a contemporary version of the celebrated 5th century Tamil poem 'Tirumurukarrupptai'" and also observes that the poem achieves "a tentative and hesitant, though unmistakably affirmative groping towards inner reality."\(^{33}\). These two contrasting observations are a bit misleading. Only Kulashreshtha discovers a relation between this poem and the earlier Tamil poems translated by Ramanujan but he fails to explore the significant aspects of this relation. Ramanujan being a brahmin is not a devotee of Murugan and because of his English education and alienation is not a devotee of Vishnu either. Therefore, 'Prayers to Lord Murugan' cannot be a straightforward prayer to Lord Murugan. But at the same time because of its close relation with the Tamil poems, it is also not a satire of the Indian religiosity. These prayers are not non-prayers but they are prayers and something more than prayers.

'Prayers to Lord Murugan' actually consists of eleven prayers, each differing from the other in its emotional quality and tone. The first prayer is simply an invocation since the poem knows that the god can arrive and he is a god of arrivals.
The prayer retains the memory of the god's 'arrival' mentioned in the Tamil poem. The images of the cock-fight, banner dances on the three hills are also from the Tamil poem. Only the last image glowing orange banners among blue trumpet flowers and the shade of the trees that are waiting for lightening are different. 'Trees waiting for the lightening' introduce a sinister note by recalling sudden and spectacular death.

The second prayer describes the features of the god and in English the description lends a surrealistic air to the god's appearance. The fact that the god with 'six unforeseen faces' is not embarrassed is a piece of information that puts decorum to shame. The god with twelve eyes 'made eyes at only one woman' is also another such piece of information. No Indian poet would discover the irony beneath this knowledge. The irony is meant to check effectively the evocative power of the images which, more than the words can, exercise their influence.

The rest of the prayers are all requests to the god since he is a god of fertility, joy, youth, beauty, love and war. Each request brings out the shortcomings, wants and deficiencies of the person who prays. An Indian prayer is a kind of confession to the god. "I am sin, a sinful act, my heart filled with sin and I am born of sin" — states a
Sanskrit prayer, probably by Shankaracharya. The images in these prayers bring out the characteristic drawbacks of the Indian social life. The last prayer which says,

Lord of lost travellers,
find us. Hunt us down.

Lord of answers,
cure us at once of prayers. 

is profoundly ironical. It is a prayer to get cured of prayers, because praying has become a disease of the soul.

But the poem gains in importance and significance when we study it in juxtaposition with the Tamil poems. We have seen the obvious similarities between them and also we have seen how much the poem is indebted to the original Tamil poems. But the situation of this poem is not as simple as it looks. Apart from the similarities the differences in the poem are also important not because the poem deviates from the original for the sake of originality of meaning, or for its ironical implications, but to the fact that the differences are due to the act of translation. For example, we can consider these lines from the first prayer:
The imagery belongs to the original Tamil poems. Men and women dance on the hills as in the original poems. But the garlands on the chests of men and the hands of women moving like chariot wheels begin to behave differently in this poem. The implication is that the dancing men and women become chariots of Lord Murugan and the relation between the god and devotees is like the relation between the chariot and the charioteer. The image is so dynamic that it effectively concretizes the arrival of the god through and into the devotees who go on dancing until the god arrives. The images get subtly translated into something new and creative.

The meaning of translation in the usual sense is translation from one language into another and it is also usual to judge the quality of translation by seeing how far the translated piece is faithful to the original. We are now fully aware of the difficulties of the mechanics of translation because our awareness of language has been steadily increasing and is getting more and more sophisticated. There are critics who do prefer transcreations to faithful translations.
But translation need not be always verbal. The act of metamorphoses is also a kind of translation and must be considered seriously. Bully Bottom in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* gets transformed into a donkey by the trick of Puck's juice and his friend exclaims, "Bully Bottom, you are translated."³⁷ The word 'translation' here is used in a comic sense. But when Helen tells Hermia that she would learn her tricks in her effort of wooing Demetrius, she says -

"Were the world mine, Demetrius being baited
The rest I would give to be to you translated."³⁸

Helena would like to be transformed into Hermia because she knows that Hermia is loved by Demetrius and she loves him. The desire of Helena then is two-fold. She desires the love of Demetrius and in order to achieve it she desires the tricks of Hermia's beauty. This desire to become another which can be called mimetic desire is infectious. A line or two earlier in the same passage Helena does say that "sickness is catching."³⁹ In the same way the act of translation is born out of this mimetic desire. As far as Helena is concerned the love of Demetrius for Hermia is an absolute and Helena's effort is to reach that absolute, imitate and become that absolute. The same mimetic desire works behind the process of translation. That is why we always want to judge a work of translation by seeing how far it is faithful to the original.
In this sense Ramanujan's translations from Kannada and Tamil works are also born out of this mimetic desire. Ramanujan's own poetry has gained in depth and significance by the influence of the poetry which he has chosen to translate into English. But when we come across a poem like "Prayers to Lord Murugan" we have to reexamine the act of translation since it tries to become a creative act. It does not mean that "Prayers to Lord Murugan" is a transcreation. It is not. The poem is an original poem as much as the other poems, both in English and Kannada. But the imagination which has given shape to the poem is that of translation. What the poem does is to use a given framework - that of prayer - and working contrary to its spirit. The explicit statement at the end of the poem "cure us at once of our prayers" - proves the point. The ambiguity of this statement itself is a prayer. The prayer is a kind of 'parodia sacra' based on the other languagedness for its nuances of feeling. What is meant by parody here is not a form of linguistic imitation for the sake of laughter, 'Prayers to Lord Murugan' is a serious poem, as much serious as the original Tamil poems but the purpose and direction of the poem is quite different.

The phrase 'other languagedness', which Bakhtin has used has been purposely used here to indicate the area of bilingual sensibility in which Ramanujan's imagination works. Ramanujan's poetry in English is as much a product of English
and American poetic traditions as a product of Indian poetic traditions. He is an Indian poet not because he uses his Indian experience in terms of imagery and landscape, but because he uses those forms of expression invented by the Indian, especially Kannada and Tamil poets. There are many instances of parodying in his Kannada poetry. There are also serious attempts of transforming the modes of expression. For example, there are a couple of Kannada poems in his first collection - Hokkulalli Hoovilla (No Lotus in the Navel) describing the cycle of seasons. Many Indian poets in the past - both classical and folk - have described the seasons in a form that is conventional and stylized. Ramanujan's poems on the other hand use a different mode of describing the seasons and the mode is Japanese. But the bunch of poems is called 'Ritu Samhar' (A cycle of Seasons) a conventional phrase in Sanskrit. This phrase raises some expectations in the mind of the Kannada reader and the poem successfully frustrates these expectations by presenting something quite different. The result is a frustration as well as fulfilment of a different kind.

What is working in all this complex process of Ramanujan's ability to translate not merely in terms of words but also in terms of modes, forms and conventions is something quite unexpected. The result is a new awareness or reality and a new mode of comprehending and presenting reality which is very ably put forward by Bakhtin.
"One who creates a direct word -- whether epic, tragic or lyric - deals only with the subject whose praises he sings, or represents, or expresses, and he does so in his own language that is perceived as the sole and fully adequate tool for realising the world's direct, objectivized meaning. This meaning and the objects and themes that compose it are inseparable from the straightforward language of the person who creates it the objects and themes are born and grow to maturity in this language, and in the national myth and the national tradition that permeate this language. The position and tendency of the parodic-travestying consciousness is, however, completely different: it, too, is oriented toward the object - but toward another's word as well, a parodied word about the object that in the process becomes itself an image. Thus it created that distance between language and reality we mentioned earlier. Language is transformed from the absolute dogma it had been within the narrow framework of a sealed-off and impermeable monoglossia into a working hypothesis for comprehending and expressing reality."

IV

There is one more aspect of Ramanujan's translations that needs to be considered in some depth. This aspect is not technical but moral in the sense that it is concerned with the moral responsibility of the artist with his own work. Ramanujan has translated many ancient poetic works from Tamil and
Kannada. These works are either highly erotic — Tamil Cankam poetry — or intensely religious — the vacanas of Veerashaiva saints or the songs of Alwars. Ramanujan's own poetry, both in English and Kannada, has none of these qualities of emotion and the attitudes to life. The poetry of Ramanujan shares the twentieth century world-view and its pattern of emotion and feeling is highly complex. It rejects the simple grammar of either eroticism or religious devotion. We have already seen it in the analysis of the poem "The Difference" in Second Sight.

But the question why Ramanujan chose to translate this kind of Indian poetry remains unanswered. We can easily avoid answering it taking advantage of a poet's freedom to choose the themes of his poetry or to translate the poetry that he likes. It is true that Ramanujan as a poet-critic admires the economy of poetic expression of the ancient poetry of love and devotion. But the question still haunts us. Can the relationship between the poet and the poetry that he chooses to translate be as simple as to be explained away in mere technical terms? How can the poet translate the poetry from one language into another without being affected by that poetry especially when the work of translation is so successful as that of Ramanujan?

The last poem in his third collection of Kannada poems - Kunto Bille provides some satisfactory explanation of
this problem. The poem is entitled "Samsaya Bhakti" (Sceptical Devotion) and it deals with the difficulties of having faith in the existence of God.

The poem is slightly long and is divided into eighteen sections of varying length. But it is a long address to God who by definition has neither form nor language but only existence, an existence beyond time and an existence which is questioned by the poem. In spite of its atheistic stance the poem is not nihilistic, is not bothered by the absence of God, but is preoccupied by the difficulties of reaching God through hopelessly inadequate means. The first section puts the question succinctly. How can man whose weapon is only words can reach God who has no words and who is no words? The conclusion that the poem reaches is that all the efforts of saints and devotees down the ignorant centuries have been for the realisation of something which might be, at best, an illusion.

The poem is aware of the sincerity of the saint-poets who worshipped God, cried for Him, and sang His praises, in short, created a sensibility which is very difficult to get rid off. What is profoundly ironical in this context is that the poem pursues the same argument to prove the existence of God as an illusion which was used by the saints to prove this worldly existence as an illusion. What makes the poem
intensely religious is the fact that the poem has the same
spirit which the religious poetry has. Even the so called
absence of God becomes a vibrant presence. Craving for God
becomes an unavoidable habit of the soul like the memory of
the bitter taste of the mother's nipple at the time of weaning.

The poem philosophically is inconclusive, but it is
meaningful from other points of view. What I feel strongly is
that the poem gives a satisfactory explanation of Ramanujan's
nostalgic love for God, or his love for devotional poetry. The
poet believes that he has inherited the language of the ancient
poets and he is obliged to write in the same language. It is
this inherited language that shapes the destiny of the poet
of the present age. The conflict between the scepticism of
the modern poet and the belief in the language is never solved.
A poet's tongue is as mortal as the poet himself and the force
of the relative immortality of language might subdue the
personal voice of the poet. The poet's own doubt in spite of
its genuineness is haunted by the belief expressed in language,
which has a power of its own like the love for children that
are dead and like the mourning for the dead relatives in a
remote country whom you had never seen. The poem depicts the
predicament of the modern poet who inherits an ancient lan-
guage and is forced to express his own scepticism in that
language.
Sections III, IV and V of the poem vividly describe the life of an apple-tree, how it responds to the contact of the sun in March, how it blossoms and bears fruit, how it dies and how its skeleton bears the rings within rings indicating its age etc. The poem does not find the presence of God behind the phenomenon of this wonderful growth. But the very next section describes the sincere pining for such a God in spite of suffering through many ordeals. The poem realises that this pining for God is special to only human beings; the pet dog or the Michigun apple-tree are happily unaware of God's presence.

The greatness of the poem lies, it seems, in the rich tribute that it pays to the saint-poets, without the poet believing in the presence of God.
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