Dear Voynovich Essay Committee,

I am delighted to submit my essay, "Love and The Reconciliation of Opposites: *A 'Coincidentia Oppositorum' in Hindu Depictions of Love"*, for consideration for the Slava Cica Voynovich memorial Scholarship in Religion. This essay was written in response to an assignment in a Kalamazoo College Religion course, titled "Love in a Dead Language," which asked us to develop an argument on a topic of our choice using at least two of the main primary sources of the course.

This essay is in compliance with the Kalamazoo College Honor System.

Thank you very much for your time and consideration,

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Love and The Reconciliation of Opposites

A "Coincidentia Oppositorum" in Hindu Depictions of Love

Voynovich Essay Competition

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The material and the immaterial, the worldly and the spiritual, the carnal and the abstemious are terms which are often called "opposites" and thus name conceptual spheres typically considered irreconcilable. The worldviews of two of the four Hindu ashramas, or "stages of life", the householder and the ascetic stages, are likewise defined by theoretically opposing terms: in the householder stage, an individual turns *toward* the world, pursuing the goals of duty (dharma), profit (artha), and pleasure (kama), while in the ascetic stage, the individual turns "away from" the world, practicing non-attachment to worldly objects and the conquering of one's sensory powers. That one must renounce the physical world and one's involvement in it in order to attain the realm of "*meta*physical" existence is a dictate known to Hindu scripture, non-Hindu religious texts, as well as human logic. However, within the conceptual realm of religion, and perhaps more distinctly within the conceptual realm of Hinduism, it is possible for "opposites," for spheres typically considered irreconcilable, to interact with each other, to exist harmoniously alongside one another, i.e., to be reconciled– even if difficult to conceive by human logic. The Vedanta philosophy of "inconceivable difference and non-difference" as a description of the relationship between creation and creator is a good example of this phenomenon. In Kalidasa's *Birth of Kumara* as well as selections of Jayadeva's *Gitagovinda* and Book X of the *Bhagavata Purana,* it appears that in, through, and by the vehicle of love, the opposing worldviews of the ascetic and the householder, the material and immaterial, worldly and spiritual, carnal and abstemious, are likewise reconciled.

The story of the love between the god Shiva and goddess Parvati as told in Kalidasa's *Birth of Kumara* is saturated with references to both the worldviews of the ascetic and the householder as well as the pairs of conceptual "opposites" contained within these spheres, but, instead of being presented as adverse to and fundamentally separate from one another, they are shown as existing in cooperation. On the level of plot, the world of the ascetic and the world of the householder in *The Birth of Kumara* do not exist divorced and far removed from one another but rather it is the intersection of and causal relationship between the two that functions as the driving narrative impetus. To be more specific, it may be said that

the first half of the action in the poem revolves around the attempt to rouse Shiva from his asceticism so that he may fall in love with Parvati and sire a son to defeat the demon Taraka (thus entering the realm of the householder), while the latter half of the poem is consumed by Parvati's taking up an ascetic life as a means to winning Shiva's love and partnership as a householder. Thus, not only does Kalidasa's narrative premise implicate the intersection of the spheres of the householder and the ascetic as necessary for the upholding of dharma on a cosmic scale (the defeating of the demon), but indeed it is Parvati's engaging in one of the "opposing" spheres that serves as the direct cause of the appearance of the other.

Canto five, aptly titled "Asceticism Bears Fruit"– the bearing of fruit being associated with the material, the worldly, and the carnal, and asceticism with "fruit denial"– outlines the precise moment when Parvati's austerities culminate in the promise of union in matrimony and in erotic, sexual love. Shiva swears to Parvati, "From today, my stooping lady,/ I am your slave,/ purchased by your austerities...she at once cast off/ the weariness of her exertions,/ for with the fruit/ exhaustion turns into freshness" (Smith 2005, 205). Kalidasa's language itself appears to be crafted in such a way that emphasizes the cooperation of the ascetic and householder worldviews. Shiva's opening statement, "I am your slave," carries with it the equivocation of the word "slave," which in one sense might connote self-sacrificing labor, a description of austerities, and in another sense, perhaps by a bit more distant inferencing, may be an erotic suggestion, alluding to the way in which two lovers might assume "submissive" or "dominant" roles in sex. Similarly, the phrase, "she once cast off the weariness of her exertions," calls to mind the way a lover might "cast off" their clothing prior to sex; at the same time, it is the physical exhaustion caused by the performance of ascetic austerities that serves as the garment whose casting off engenders such sexual arousal. The description of Shiva's marital/sexual partnership as being "purchased" by Parvati's austerities as well as of "exhaustion turning into freshness" likewise suggest that the spheres of the ascetic and the householder, the abstemious and the carnal, do not reside isolate and polar from one another but possess "boundaries" which are fluid and often immediately causally defined.

Similar to the way in which Parvati's austerities might be seen as the source of her and Shiva's marital/sexual union, recurrent throughout Kalidasa's text is the notion that ascetic practices literally engender a kind of sexual potency or more general creative force. Indeed, at the outset of the poem, Kalidasa describes how Parvati herself was conceived and born out of yoga, which in the *Bhagavad Gita* Krishna asserts is both the same as renunciation and as "uniting oneself with the Supreme" (Telang 1882, 68–70). Kalidasa recounts how "Then pure Sati...driven by her father's contempt for her husband/ to abandon her body/ through yoga–/ entered the womb of the mountain's wife." (Smith 2005, 35). In a word, it is the renunciation of the physical or worldly that functions as the mechanism by which a very literally described insemination occurs. Kalidasa goes on to re-assert the intersection of and causal relation between procreation and the yoga of meditation (discipline, renunciation, or "non-creation") and provides an allegorical illustration of the mechanism of austerity-made creative potency: "That auspicious lady was begotten/ by the king of mountains on Mena,/ who was absorbed in meditation;/ just as in policy/ effective through proper application/ prosperity is produced/ by energetic action" (Smith 2005, 35). This particular analogy seems to suggest that on the most fundamental of levels, it is asceticism *as energetic action*, what one might imagine as the potent kind of energy produced during intense concentration, that brings about some kind of "fertile" product.

It may be significant to note the fact that the kind of creative product this metaphor implies, particularly in the word *prosperity*, is a positive one. In other words, according to this comparison, it is not that the performance of austerities simply *results* in the production of progeny or other creative product and that this process is assigned neither a positive or negative judgement; nor is it that the product of procreation is described as *bad*, which one may assume for a belief system whose spiritual telos is moksha and which might then be seen as a validation of the ascetic worldview but a reprobation of the householder's. Rather, the product is explicitly assigned a positive appraisal, thus confirming both spheres simultaneously. This process of ascetic creativity has indeed been given a name in the Hindu lexicon:

"tapas," translated from Sanskrit to mean "heat" or "ardour." Not only does the word "tapas" suggest the heat or creative energy that is supposed to be generated by the practicing of austerities as well as the austerities themselves, it also suggests a kind of explicitly *sexual* heat, in line with the connotation of passion in the latter translation, which Walter Kaelber specifies as the "heat of sexual yearning, the heat of sexual excitation, and the heat generated during intercourse" (Kaelber 1976, 343).

The image of fire shows up as a motif as Kalidasa narrates the journey of Shiva and Parvati's love, carrying with it similar intimations as the heat of tapas. In the canto in which Love's wife, Rati, grieves the death of her companion, Rati repeatedly describes a yearning to be cast into a fire as if she were an object of sacrifice or a body to be cremated on a funeral pyre (the two are in some sense synonymous, as the Hindu cremation rite is described as the "last sacrifice")– an act of ultimate worldly and bodily renunciation. In one instance, Rati implores, "Consign me,/ widow that I am,/ into the fire/ and send me to the presence/ of my husband" (Smith 2005, 145). However, at the same time that Rati desires to "consign" herself to the fire, or to give her whole self over to be consumed in flames, it is *passion* and *attachment* to the householder's role, as designated by Rati's request that she be "sent to the presence of her husband," that serves as the impetus, mechanism, and ultimate goal of her act of world and self denial. Thus, taken with the sexual potency produced by austerities detailed above, it may be said that Kalidasa's *The Birth of Kumara* is a story of love that depicts the spheres of the ascetic and the householder, the spiritual and the worldly, as cooperating in a cause-effect relationship that flows in both directions.

The fire motif, in the form of a funeral pyre, persists, as Rati requests that her friend assist her in constructing the pyre just as she is accustomed to assisting her in constructing her and her lover's place of erotic leisure: "Many a time, kind friend,/ you helped the two of us/ make our bed of flowers./ So now I beg you,/ folding my hands and bowing,/ be quick/ and make a pyre for me" (Smith 2005, 147). Rati's suggestion that a pyre might be constructed according to identical means as her bed of love-play indeed also suggests a parallel between the systems that function behind (i.e., the "construction" of) the ascetic

and the erotic spheres. Again employing the symbol of fire, Kalidasa articulates the fluidity between the ascetic and householder spheres in the ability of one of them to generate a product which normal logic might assign as the exclusive possession of the other: "self-controlled sages and rain clouds/ are the source of both fire and nectar" (Smith 2005, 151).

Not only do many of Kalidasa's illustrations and metaphors seem to *suggest* that these "opposing" spheres cooperate in a cause-effect relationship with each other, that they operate according to similar mechanisms, or that just one of the spheres might contain the potential to bring about some quality generally considered to belong exclusively to the other, *The Birth of Kumara* also more *explicitly asserts* the union of the two spheres through the marriage of Shiva and Parvati. In establishing this paradoxical union, Kalidasa employs the rhetorical device of asserting the ostensible irreconcilability of the two as opposites, which ultimately works in the reverse to underscore for the reader the gravity of their being reconciled. At the outset of Parvati's ascetic undertakings, her father declares what he considers the impossibility of Parvati's body, whose form appears so finely attuned to the pleasing of the senses, taking up the role of a body whose purpose ought to be sense-denial: "My dear child, how great/ is the difference between asceticism/ and this body of yours!/ The delicate shirisha flower can support/ the alighting of a bee/ but not of a bird" (Smith 2005, 157). Similarly, Kalidasa utilizes archetypical imagery of the ascetic and the householder's roles in a statement that resembles a rhetorical question, the eventual answer to which again is intended to underscore the "impossible" reconciliation of two logically antithetical ideas: "Just work it out for yourself,/ whether these two could ever/ be worthy of union:/ the bride's fine linen robe/ adorned with geese/ and the elephant's hide/ dripping blood" (Smith 2005, 193). Kalidasa's language, particularly the paired phrases "fine linen" and "elephant hide," "adorned" and "dripping," "geese" and "blood," as well as the white and red imagery associated with each description, likewise works to further the intensity of the contrast imagined in the reader's mind.

Ultimately, however, the ostensibly impossible to reconcile *are* reconciled, the logically antithetical seems to defy logic; Parvati's sensually-attuned body *does in fact* take up the role of a body of sense-denial, and quite successfully at that, and the linen robe of the bride and the elephant hide of the ascetic *do in fact* prove to be "worthy of union" through Shiva and Parvati's marriage, their consummation, and the certainly worthy birth of the child who will come to save the world. In Canto 5, the "certain ascetic with matted locks" who "seems to shine with the radiance of Brahma," explicitly asserts the ability of the antipodal realms of the material and the spiritual, of the carnal and the abstemious, to exist in harmonious union with each other: "O Parvati, the saying that/ beauty does not lead to sinful behavior/ is not wide of the mark./ For, O lady of noble vision, your behavior/ has become a model for ascetics" (Smith 2005, 175). Indeed, not only are the antipodal realms simply reconciled and assigned no positive or negative judgement, but, just as in the comparison of tapas to the prosperity that results from the proper application of policy, a body in comportment with the sensual realm reconciles itself with the realm of the "anti-sensual" to the extent that it itself *becomes an ideal for* the members of the latter realm. Kalidasa again illustrates the logic-defying compatibility of the ascetic and householder spheres as he describes the ease with which Parvati appears to be glorified in either role: "Just as her face looked sweet/ with her coiffured hair,/ so too did it with her matted locks./ The lotus is resplendent/ not only with rows of bees/ but also when waterweed clings to it" (Smith 2005, 161).

Just as Parvati's figure seems to be a place where the markings of an ascetic are just as agreeable as the markings of her previous sense-indulgent form, Shiva himself undergoes a seamless transformation from the appearance of an ascetic to an appearance that is sensually-indulgent and complicit with his new role as a householder. In preparation for his and Parvati's wedding, Kalidasa relates how "His ashes indeed became/ white unguent on his body,/ the skull a sparkling crown,/ the elephant hide the quality/ of a silken robe/ with a yellow design on its borders" (Smith 2005, 266). It is worthy to note here that the specific language Kalidasa employs directly echoes the language used in crafting the images of

"impossible" union of the fine linen robe and the bloody elephant hide, again working to underscore the assertion that these two in fact *can be* unified. What's more, in Shiva's case, it is not simply that his figure is portrayed as equally agreeable in the markings of both an ascetic and a householder or that the two can be set down and taken up without conflict, it is that the markings of his asceticism (his ashes, the skull, the elephant hide) literally *change their form* and *turn into* ("became") the markings of a householder. In both Shiva and Parvati's transformations, it is *love* or the desire for union (Parvati taking up the qualities of the ascetic as a means of winning Shiva's love; Shiva taking up the qualities of the householder in his desire to be united with Parvati in marriage) that functions as the transformation's primary impetus, mechanism, and goal.

The reconciliation of the opposing worldviews of the ascetic and the householder, the material and immaterial, worldly and spiritual, carnal and abstemious also appears to be a prominent theme in selections of Jayadeva's *Gitagovinda* and in Book X of the *Bhagavata Purana*, both of which are considered as literature of devotion ("bhakti") or "love for the divine". Many of the same ideas that were present in *The Birth of Kumara* appear in Jayadeva's *Gitagovinda*, a song of praise for and devotion to the god Krishna. Take, for example, the sentiment evoked in the phrase, "Lonely travelers–/ Somehow they survive these days/ By tasting the mood of lovers' union/ In climaxing moments of meditation" (Miller 1977, 75). Just as Kalidasa was seen to suggest the fluidity between the ascetic and householder spheres in the ability of one of them to generate a product which logic might assign as the exclusive possession of the other, in this description, Jayadeva asserts, perhaps more directly than Kalidasa, that the mood (or "rasa") of erotic union can be experienced through the ascetic practice of meditation. The description of this phenomenon as occurring in the "climaxing*"* moments of meditation might suggest that the peak intensity of world-denying meditation shares the same qualities as a sensual "peak" in sex.

Just as the image of fire appeared as a motif in Kalidasa's work and carried with it the dual implication of eroticism and asceticism, of the spheres of attachment and nonattachment, the concept of the

"lifebreath" appears in Jayadeva's *Gitagovinda* and is assigned an almost identical function. The offering up of one's lifebreaths, i.e. intentionally controlled breathing, has long been established as a desirable practice of self-restraint in a number of Hindu texts, including the *Bhagavad Gita*. Again invoking the imagery of a fire, the *Bhagavad Gita* relates how some Krishna devotees offer up as a sacrifice "all the operations of the senses and the operations of the life-breaths into the fire of devotion by self-restraint" (Telang 1882, 61). Worthy to note is the assertion that follows the enumeration of the various means of sacrifice of the self or of the world to Brahman, "Those who eat the nectar-like leavings of the sacrifice repair to the eternal Brahman. This world is not for those who perform no sacrifice..." (Telang 1882, 62). Here, Krishna himself articulates the intersection of the world-renouncing and worldly spheres not simply as an "impossible possibility" but indeed as a positive *necessity* for the success of humankind. During the time of her separation from her lover, Krishna, Radha implores, "Take my lifebreath with arrows, Love!...Let my body's burning be quenched!" (Miller 1977, 105). Parallel to Parvati's love-driven desire to be cast into the flames of a sacrificial or funereal pyre, Radha is impelled by passion to offer up her lifebreath, an ascetic practice of turning "away from" the world. Even more layered is the exhortation, "Let my body's burning be quenched," which carries with it the motivation of passion and attachment, the objective of complete bodily renunciation and detachment from the world, and the reverse application of the word "quench" (which typically connotes the fulfillment of a thirst for something carnal) to mean the abandonment of the body.

In consideration of the type of love that is bhakti and how the reconciliation of contrasting spheres functions within this type of literature, establishing a bit of a theoretical framework may be constructive. One of the most striking characteristics of Krishna as he is depicted in the *Gitagovinda* and Book X of the *Bhagavata Purana*, where he is the object of devotional love, is his ability to exist wholly within the world and at the same time wholly apart from or above it. In one very important scene in the *Bhagavata Purana*, Krishna is described as "passing urine and other things" and eating mud in the gopis'

houses–what one might see as the epitome of carnal or worldly action–but in the next scene, when Krishna's mother interrogates his literal consumption of earth, Krishna opens his mouth to reveal the entire universe of "moving and non-moving things" (Bryant 2003, 43). In his analysis of Jayadeva's characterizations of Krishna in the *Gitagovinda,* Siegal identifies this same kind of "metaphysical paradox": "In one compact couplet he is both liberation from the world and has a lovely lotus-petal eye...the particular, the delicate, evocative of the erotic sentiment, is immediately juxtaposed to the universal, beyond time and space, beyond all quality, all sentiment" (Lee Siegal 1978, 90). The deity's paradoxical nature is highlighted at repeated points in the text of the *Bhagavata Purana,* as in the adulation, "Reverence again and again to you who are...activity and inactivity" (Bryant 2003, 86) and in the comparison of the way in which "Indra's bow [the rainbow], which is without qualities, appears in the sky, which possesses qualities, just like the supreme being, who is without gunas, appears in the manifest world, which consists of a mixture of gunas" (Bryant 2003, 97).

According to Graham Schweig, the teachers of the Chaitanya school, or Krishna bhakti, describe their relationship with God as "rasa" (Schweig 2003, 99). Translating to "essence," "sap," or "juice", and calling to mind the image of nectar recurrent throughout Kalidasa's text, in the view of the bhakti school, "God *is* rasa, God supremely *enjoys* rasa, and God is the *ultimate object of* rasa" (Schweig 2003, 99, italics mine). Ultimately, according to the Chaitanya school, not only is Krishna rasa, but the "general connotative meaning" of the various translations of rasa is "the directly experienced intimate relationship with the divinity" (Schweig 2003, 99). By transitive relation, then, if Krishna is also the impossible simultaneous embodiment of the worldly and the world-denying, of the householder's attachment and the ascetic's renunciation, it follows that rasa, or the experience of one's intimate relationship with the divine, is also defined by the impossible embodiment of these ostensibly opposing spheres. In describing the effects of meditating on the Rasa Lila, Schweig asserts the experience of simultaneously being-in and being-beyond the world through the experience of devotional love: "The desire to please the deity lifts the

devotee from the world, even while living in it...In bhakti...it is clear that love is stronger than death, as it carries the soul beyond death, even while the soul is in the embodied state prior to death" (Schwieg 2003, 157).

Both Schweig and Siegel relate the notion that "devotional love" or "love for the divine" may be viewed as the same type of love experienced in human to human relationships. Indeed, in Schweig's description of shringara-rasa, or "passionate love for the deity", the type of total self-surrender experienced by human lovers in both an "exclusive passionate union" and a "conjugal, premarital, or extramarital relationship" is taken as the model for the "highest intensity of love" for the divine (Schweig 2003, 101). Again, by transitive relation, it is not just love directed toward the divine that encompasses the reconciliation of opposites, but any type of love involving an experience of self-surrender that carries this paradoxical quality. Ultimately, that the cooperation of opposing spheres underscored in the story of Shiva and Parvati appears in, through, and by the vehicle of love, and is not simply its own theme that happens to appear in a story of lovers, is verified by the logic of the Chaitanya school.

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