

Vaishnavism as Fine Literature

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Poetry As Vivid Remembering: Fine Literature in the Śrīvaiṣṇava Tradition

In Śrībhāṣya (“The Divine Commentary”), Rāmānuja (11th c.) makes the following claim about the freedom he desires and how to achieve it: “Steady remembering is a means of achieving freedom, and such remembering is of the same nature as seeing. ... And remembering comes to have the nature of seeing by a high intensity of the imagination.” As my paper will demonstrate, these sentences provide a key for understanding the role of “fine literature” (kāvyā) in Śrīvaiṣṇava writing. In the first part, I offer my own interpretation of these sentences in light of other passages in Rāmānuja. I then turn to the fascinating interpretation of them proposed by Vedāntadeśika (14th c.), who explicitly ties the cultivation of steady remembering to the practice of writing poetry. I shall conclude by exploring resemblances between the understanding of poetry that emerges in the Śrīvaiṣṇava texts I assemble and some modern theories of poetry.