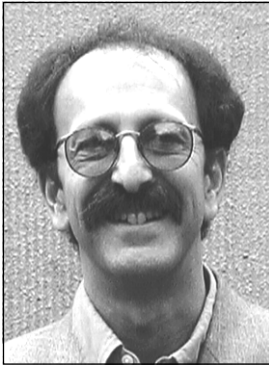


David Shulman

Higher than Heaven



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There is space for sorcery at the Wissenschaftskolleg. Was it set up to allow for occult epistemic praxis, in the Faustian mode? This is the question to which I am driven, despite certain inherited prejudices, by the sheer force of empirical evidence. For if I look back over the six months I spent in Berlin – from October to February and then a month at the end, in July – what I recall are scenes and images such as the following: the many midnights in the *Kneipen* in Kreuzberg, the world outside frozen obsidian; *Pierrot Lunaire* at the Philharmonie, possibly the most lyrical concert I have heard; a blur of elegant receptions at the Kolleg with many new faces, much Riesling, and one unforgettable talk, again at midnight, and possible only in German, on the nature of objects resting in space; the ping-pong table, with its recurrent defeats and rare victories; the ever-starker, Rilkean branches of the great tree outside the window of the Villa Jaffé as afternoon turned to evening in German class, week after

week; the *Faschingsfest*, when truth emerged from its brittle chrysalides; long happy tours of Prenzlauer Berg or the Nicolai Viertel (under the generous guidance of our Indological colleague Harry Falk); the mythic intensity of late dinners at the Weiße Villa, prepared mostly by Sanjay Subrahmanyam and Partha Chatterjee and often culminating in a Berlin-Delhi version of Chicago Blues; Eva Hund reciting the “Todesfuge” one eery sunny morning (more magic); walking through the fallen leaves of the Grunewald in November or through shimmering snow on Ku’damm in February; Ruth Hachohen’s lecture on Schönberg at the Einstein Forum, conjoined with *Moses und Aaron* at the Deutsche Oper; fiery discussions at Claudio Lange’s atelier; rather a lot of happy parties, invariably with metaphysical overtones; mornings on the Maybachufer. And so on. Berlin, for me, is mostly tactile memory or musical texture, often incongruously combined with traces of the not-so-distant, indeed all-too-present, catastrophic past. Such textures have depth and fascination, and I spent these months mostly being fascinated.

Yet somehow – I can’t quite remember having a part in it – I am returning to Jerusalem with several books completed, a handful of finished articles and essays, even some new poems. Like the brooms and buckets of the sorcerer’s apprentice, the reverse flow of proofs and copy-edited manuscripts threatens to overwhelm all the members of the South Indian *Schwerpunkt*.

Probably it is the merit of my partners in most of these enterprises that has brought about this result. Sanjay Subrahmanyam, Velcheru Narayana Rao, and I completed the long-standing project for which, ostensibly at least, we were invited to Berlin – an argumentative book on South Indian historiography aimed at reversing the regnant prejudice that denies the very existence of such a literature in pre-modern India. *Textures of Time* will be published in the fall in Paris (Seuil) and New Delhi (Permanent Black). In the course of the time at the Kolleg, the three of us lectured about this material, as a flying three-man Indological circus, in several arenas: first at Wiko in December; then at the Südasien-Institut at the Ruprecht-Karls-Universität in Heidelberg, the Freie Universität, and St. Antony’s in Oxford. We found that our thesis aroused opposition on both ends of the spectrum: some colleagues remained incredulous at the very idea that India had a long-standing historical awareness; others insisted on *not* being surprised by our argument since, in their view, *any* narrative about the past counts as history, and India tells many tales about its various pasts. Once in a while, we were successful in dislodging such notions and establishing the existence of a distinc-

tion, internal to the conceptual system of South Indian genres, between factual and non-factual narratives – and, within the former category, of a distinction between historical and non-historical modes.

Velcheru Narayana Rao and I also completed the translation of a sixteenth-century Telugu *kavya*, the *Kalapurnodayamu* of Pingali Suranna, perhaps the first Indian novel (in some ways akin to its contemporary masterpiece in the West, the *Quixote*). We wrote two introductions to this translation, one for the start of the book and one at its end (an “Introduction to a Second Reading”, since this intricate work has to be read more than once). We argue for the existence of a new analytic genre akin to the novel, with distinctive features, in sixteenth-century South India; and we speak of notions of time within this form as comprising, at the least, the interpenetration of two vectors, one moving from the past toward the future, a second moving irresistibly from the future toward the past.

In July we were nearly able to complete a draft of another volume, a translation of some 100 poems by the great fifteenth-century Annamacarya of Tirupati – perhaps the most accessible and universal of Telugu poets. There was a reading of these poems in February at the American Academy in Berlin to an audience that included many of our Wiko friends. No description can convey anything of Annamayya’s power, so I offer a short example that seems cast in the Wallotstraße mold:

Life day after day is a game.
To find what you cannot see
is truth.

Coming is real. Going is real.
What happens in between is a game.
Right in front of you
lies the endless world.
At the very end
is truth.

We eat food. We wear clothes.
It’s all part of this passing game.
The past clings to our body.
When we cross the doorway,
there is truth.

Badness never ends,
and there's never enough good.
In the end, time is a game.
High on the mountain, God is king.
Higher than heaven
is truth.

Narayana Rao and I also read or sang South Indian poems at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt. And while Berlin was the center, I also traveled, lectured, and met friends, colleagues, and (too rarely) my wife, Eileen, in Stuttgart, Cologne, Hamburg, Leipzig, Amsterdam, and Prague.

It was a splendid, happy time, marred only by the disturbing news from Jerusalem. At times I felt torn between the strong urge to live a life in German, immersing myself in German literature and the intellectual and artistic life of the city, and an equally strong need to take advantage of every moment in the rather self-contained South Indian bubble that existed this year at the Kolleg and that included, besides the three of us, Muzaffar Alam, Partha Chatterjee, and honorary members from the Life Sciences (Raghavendra Gadagkar, Amitabh Joshi, and Somdatta Sinha) and Economics (Ashok Valji Desai). So Tamil, Telugu, Urdu-Hindi, and Bengali tended to mingle with English and German, to say nothing of the dizzying polyglossia that always surrounds Sanjay Subrahmanyam. Postmodernists beware: this was the real thing. Mauricio Tenorio Trillo, Philippe Burrin, and Navid Kermani added constant doses of Spanish, French, and Persian to this volatile mix. After several months of this, I am not certain I can speak any language at all in a coherent fashion and may resort to humming Hindustani rags.

Perhaps it was all magic. I am grateful to all those who worked the charm – to the remarkable staff (too numerous to name, each with his or her own unmistakable gift), to Professor Lepenies, Dr. Nettelbeck, Christine von Arnim, Andrea Friedrich, Barbara Sanders (who can solve all problems), and Eva Hund, the true heroine of so many Wiko dramas; grateful also to my fellow Fellows, some now fast friends, who have enriched my world with their wit and grace.

But possibly most magical of all was the play of light, almost tangible in its density and and liquid clarity, pouring each day, as if straight from the forest, through my windows in the Neubau, room 230.