1. The Problem of the *Aranyakāṇḍa*

Contemporary readers of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, when leaving behind “Ayodhyā” (Book Two) and entering the “Forest” (Book Three), are likely to have the impression that they have suddenly fallen down the rabbit hole into the world of Wonderland. Although this is not something traditional audiences seem to have felt (the commentators certainly give no hint of feeling discontinuity), from their first acquaintance with the *Rāmāyaṇa* westerners have always found something highly problematic about the transition between the two books and between the two major portions of the epic they represent.

We are certainly justified in believing that the perspective has changed dramatically and the emphasis shifted. The intensely didactic, even homiletic, discourse of the *Ayodhyākāṇḍa*—its almost obsessive concern with the foundations of correct sociopolitical behavior, with *dharma* (“righteousness”) as the necessary condition of communal life, and its recognition of the human predicament before *dharma*’s often conflicting and always imperious demands—has given way in the *Aranyakāṇḍa* to what seems the entertainment of a romance. In the “Forest” we no longer encounter the problems most humans must confront and solve, those so thoroughly explored in the prior book; we seem no longer to be in a human realm at all.

This may be overstating the case, for the *Aranyakāṇḍa* maintains an interest in many of the central concerns of the previous volume. Yet the problem of what unifies these two very different sections of the poem remains a challenging one. The epic genre, at least as far as we are able to characterize it on the basis of those examples preserved for us (the *Mahābhārata*, *Vessantarajātaka*, *Nalopākhyaṇa*, *Harivamsa*), seems to have required such a transitional episode within the social, political, and ethical problematic they all share. But most scholars have paid little attention to this convention of the epic and so have not moved very far beyond highly subjective first impressions. In the case of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, consequently, the view persists that the poem is a fusion or amalgamation of two very different and in fact unrelated stories.
This idea was first expressed with conviction and force by the great nineteenth-century Indologist Hermann Jacobi. "One can recognize at first glance," he tells us, "that [the saga of the Rāmāyana] is composed of two utterly different and distinct parts. [In the Ayodhyākānda] everything is human, natural, totally free from fantasy. . . . The case is quite otherwise in the second half of the saga, where everything is marvellous and 'fantastic.'" Since Jacobi had determined, with an a priori certitude that is arresting, that the epic is essentially the reworking of an ancient "nature" myth, it is not surprising that in his interpretation of the poem he was compelled to leave the first half of it entirely out of consideration.

Most discussions of the problem of Rāmāyana unity since Jacobi's time have taken as their point of departure what he had recognized "at first glance" and have only sought to provide additional evidence in support. A particularly tenacious argument of a literary-historical sort is that derived from the Dasaratha Jātaka. This text, found in the Pali collection of stories about the Buddha's former births, recounts a tale very similar to that of the Ayodhyākānda—and nothing further. By a mechanical logic it has come to be viewed as representing an archaic version of the poem, which accordingly "must have" ended, like the Buddhist text, with the prince's return directly from the forest and "must have" known nothing of the demon-king Rāvana and his abduction of Sītā. According to this analysis, the Aranyakānda stands revealed as exogenous to the "original" tale of Rāma.

How little cogency there is to this argument, which draws chronological inferences from what is merely thematic variation, should be apparent, although it has taken years for anyone to provide an adequate demonstration. Yet the dichotomous view of the structure of the Rāmāyana that is derived from arguments based on the Dasaratha Jātaka, along with highly subjective impressions of what counts as narrative coherence and a conviction that an archaic nature myth formed the original foundation, remains dominant in almost all critical discussion of Vālmiki's epic. The need to develop

1 Jacobi 1893, pp. 126–27.
2 Goldman 1984, pp. 32ff.; see also Gombrich 1985, who dismisses the notion that the Dasaratha Jātaka can be taken seriously as an early version of the Rāma legend.
a unitary understanding of the poem was eliminated by eliminat-
ing the perception of the poem as a unitary work.⁵

What is striking about this literary criticism, beyond the frailty of its arguments, is the cultural arrogance that underlies it. The presumption of the truth of a Western vision is coupled with an implicit dismissal of the entire tradition that produced and preserved the epic. What in this tradition has been considered the first and greatest poem, and venerated as such for two thousand years, is now declared to be, not a meaningful whole—as Indian audiences have invariably taken it to be—but a congeries of utterly dis-
tinct and unrelated materials.

Suppose we were to take seriously what generations of perform-
ers and audiences have felt, not to speak of the composer, that the monumental poem is not made up of two heterogeneous and un-
combinable narratives, but forms a meaningful whole? One of our principal critical tasks would then be to ponder how the work func-
tions as a unit, how its parts fit together to establish a large and coherent pattern of signification. A provisional readiness to posit meaningful unity of the work is at the very least a hermeneutical necessity. If we begin with the hypothesis of meaningless, irration-
al disunity, we cannot ask meaningful and rational questions. But we face more than a necessity. We face also a postulate authorized by the tradition itself, which has always regarded the poem as of a piece.

Another way to think of this shift in critical perspective is to dis-
tinguish between two kinds of history of the poem. If earlier criti-
cism concentrated on the epic’s “genetic history” and dismembered the work in the search for its primal components, we might now want to take its “receptive history” more centrally into consider-
ation: Approaching the epic as a whole, in conformity with the tra-

⁵ See for example Keith, who speaks of the Rāmāyaṇa as “the blending together of two distinct legends, the court intrigues of Ayodhyā and the legend of Rāma’s war on Rāvana for the rape of Sītā—in ultimate origin a nature myth.” By an almost perversely ing, Keith then argues that the very skill with which the poet has blended together the two heterogeneous parts is evidence of his aesthetic genius (Keith 1920, p. 43). The opinion continues to be transmitted with vigor, by Miller (1974, pp. 132–33), Warder (1975, p. 176), and most recently Smith, who shows how far Rāmāyaṇa scholarship continues to be bedeviled by the Dasaratha Jātaka (Smith 1980, pp. 62, 73, 76 note 7).
ditional mode of reception, and seeing how it works as a whole can reveal a dimension of the poem's meaning easily as significant as any derived from considering the elements of its genesis. For understanding the work includes, and maybe principally so, understanding what it may have meant in Indian social, intellectual, and cultural history.⁴

⁴ For one helpful statement on the distinction between genetic and receptive history (Entstehungsgeschichte and Wirkungsgeschichte) see Weimann 1978.
2. Summary of the *Aranyakāṇḍa*

Soon after entering Daṇḍaka wilderness, Rāma is welcomed by the sages living in the forest. They entertain him and ask that, as king, he fulfill his obligation of ensuring their safety. Rāma pushes on deeper into the forest, on the way encountering and killing the monster Virādha, who had tried to abduct Sītā. He then makes his way to the sage Śarabhaṅga. The holy man directs Rāma to the sage Sutikṣṇa, and before the prince sets out, he watches as Śarabhaṅga immolates himself in a ritual fire and thereupon attains the world of Brahmā. Rāma is then visited by a throng of ascetics, who again beg his protection against injury at the hands of the rākṣasas. After seeking out Sutikṣṇa, Rāma visits the ashrams of the different sages who had been accompanying him and thus passes the first ten years of his fourteen-year forest exile (sargas 1–10).

Rāma then returns to Sutikṣṇa and is directed by that sage to the ashram of the great seer Agastya. The prince is heartily welcomed by Agastya, who provides him with magical weapons and directs him to the lovely region of Pañcavaṭī, where he is advised to establish his ashram and live out the remaining years of banishment. En route to their new home, they encounter an old acquaintance of Rāma’s father, Daśaratha, the vulture-king Jaṭāyus, and he is invited to come live in Pañcavaṭī as well (sargas 10–14).

One day, while Rāma, Lakṣmaṇa, and Sītā are living peacefully in Pañcavaṭī, they are approached by a rākṣasa woman named Śūrpanakhā, the sister of Rāvaṇa, king of rākṣasas. Śūrpanakhā is attracted to Rāma, who jokingly directs her to his brother, and he back to Rāma. Eventually, the rākṣasa woman becomes enraged and attacks Sītā. Rāma orders Lakṣmaṇa to cut off Śūrpanakhā’s ears and nose as punishment. Seeking vengeance, Śūrpanakhā hastens to her brother Khara, who dispatches fourteen rākṣasa warriors against Rāma. After these are slain in combat, Khara himself leads an army of fourteen thousand to do battle. Rāma annihilates the entire demon force, Khara and his generals included (sargas 15–29).

Śūrpanakhā in despair makes her way to Laṅkā, the island-fortress of her brother Rāvaṇa. She first reproaches him for his dis-