Christian Lee Novetzke

DIVINING AN AUTHOR: THE IDEA OF AUTHORSHIP IN AN INDIAN RELIGIOUS TRADITION

If I am not I, who will be? (HENRY DAVID THOREAU)[1]

No one quite understands why Jeremy Bentham, the British radical philosopher and mentor to eminent Orientalist James Mill, would choose a closet in a hall of University College, London, to be his tomb. The spectacle of the "auto-icon," as he named the morbid installation prescribed in his will, puzzles almost anyone who sees it. His cadaver, as per his directions, was dissected and embalmed; his organs were donated to science. His vacated body was clad in his favorite suit and placed in a chair, with a wax replica of his head set atop his remains and finished with glass eyes. There is a legend that he carried those ocular marbles around with him in his pockets in the years before his death in 1832.[2] All that remains now of the auto-icon is Bentham's skeleton, padded with straw,

I would like to thank the following people for reading and critiquing versions of this essay: Joe Alter, Aditya Behl, Ajit Bond, Robert Bracey, Jeff Brackett, Winand Callewaert, Gayatri Chatterjee, Nick Dirks, Anne Feldhaus, Jack Hawley, Steven Lindquist, William Mazzarella, Rachel McDermott, Sheldon Pollock, Fran Pritchett, Andy Rotman, Adheesh Sathaye, Shana Sippy, Ananya Vajpeyi, Rupa Vishwanath, and Eleanor Zelliot; in particular, I want to thank my editor in chief, Sunila S. Kale.

[1] Henry David Thoreau, *The Writings of Henry David Thoreau* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1906), 1:163.

[2] All dates are in the (unfortunately named) common era, or C.E., format unless otherwise noted.

© 2003 by The University of Chicago. All rights reserved.
0018-2710/2003/4203-0002$10.00

seated beside his favorite writing table, and dressed to the nines. Accessorized with cane and hat, the bones of his lifeless hands rest lightly on his empty pant legs. It is said that from time to time Bentham's head is removed and soberly carted into the assembly of the College Council faculty, where his disembodied presence is dutifully noted in the meeting's minutes: "Jeremy Bentham—present, but not voting."[3]

The minutes also record the postmortem predicament of the author in late modernism: present in facsimile but powerless over the text and its unflappable reader. More than thirty years ago, Barthes diagnosed the author's mortality vis-à-vis the reception of the text, but like Mark Twain's premature eulogy, news of the author's death seemed greatly exaggerated. The author remains a mettlesome subject in late modernism, persisting in diverse areas of scholarship and confounding a simple definition of what it is to be an author.[4] The matter of what constitutes authorship is made more complex in the context of traditions not born of modernity yet fully present in the modern world.

The empirical anchor of this essay is the concept of authorship within the tradition that surrounds Namdev, whose remembered dates span 1270–1350 and who is an important figure of vernacular religious and literary expression in central and northern India from the fourteenth century to the present. Namdev is extraordinary among Indian personalities. He has been assimilated by several religious and literary traditions that believe he composed devotional songs in numerous languages—Marathi, Gujarati, Rajasthani, Hindi, Braj Bhasha, and Punjabi. He is remembered as one of the first voices in the nascent vernacular literatures of central and

[3] The relevant portion of Bentham's last will and testament reads, "My body I give to my dear friend Doctor Southwood Smith to be disposed of in a manner hereinafter mentioned, and I direct . . . he will take my body under his charge and take the requisite and appropriate measures for the disposal and preservation of the several parts of my bodily frame in the manner expressed in the paper annexed to this my will and at the top of which I have written Auto Icon. The skeleton he will cause to be put together in such a manner as that the whole figure may be seated in a chair usually occupied by me when living, in the attitude in which I am sitting when engaged in thought in the course of time employed in writing. I direct that the body thus prepared shall be transferred to my executor. He will cause the skeleton to be clad in one of the suits of black occasionally worn by me. The body so clothed, together with the chair and the staff in my later years bourne by me, he will take charge of and for containing the whole apparatus he will cause to be prepared an appropriate box or case and will cause to be engraved in conspicuous characters on a plate to be affixed thereon and also on the labels on the glass cases in which the preparations of the soft parts of my body shall be contained. . . . Queens Square Place, Westminster, Wednesday 30th May, 1832" (Charles F. A. Marmoy, "The 'Auto-Icon' of Jeremy Bentham at University College, London," *Medical History* 2, no. 2 [April 1958]: 81).

[4] For two snapshots of this theoretical moment, see Thomas Docherty, *On Modern Authority: The Theory and Condition of Writing, 1500 to the Present Day* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987); and Maurice Biriotti and Nicola Miller, eds., *What Is an Author?* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993).

northern India to endow creative literary expression with a humanitarian and egalitarian sentiment. As such an active figure, his life story is naturally a good one, good enough to deserve both biographies and autobiographies. Here is an autobiographical song attributed to him:[5]

> I was born into a tailor's family,
> But I had no patience for sewing.
> Shiva always distracted me.
> I would stitch by day,
> I would stitch by night,
> Yet I could not satisfy myself.
> Needle and thread,
> Scissors and measure,
> I set up my shop in Shiva's heart.
>
> Nama says,
> I'm stitching a shirt for Vithoba
> And the labor charms my life.

Like many figures of early religious vernacular literature in India, Namdev's biographical details are so insecurely corroborated by empirical and circumstantial evidence that the only fact we can assert with confidence is that he no longer lives in this world. His far-reaching influence on numerous traditions in western and northern India has generated multiple assertions about Namdev's biography: where and when he was born, how and to whom, where he traveled, what he believed, and where and when he died. The plethora of detail, contradictory though it often is, brings one's attention to the living legacy and patterns of authorial agency that surround Namdev's name, a tradition of literature, history, pilgrimage, practice, and performance that may be fragmentary but is anything but accidental.

The Marathi song translated above is among the most popular of Namdev's autobiographical verses. The theme of this song has been widely retold in Rajasthani, Hindi, and Punjabi, and paraphrased by biographers such as Rajab in the Sarvāṅgī (1620) and Dhana, whose work is anthologized in the *Guru Granth Sahib* (1604). The multilingual career of the song and its biographical and religious theme indicate the diversity of the tradition associated with Namdev, one that pervades Vārkarī belief in Maharashtra, the tradition surrounding Narsi Mehta in Gujarat, the Dādū Panth in Rajasthan, the Kabīr Panth and Nāth Panth in northern India,

[5] S. Babar et al., eds., *Śrī Nāmdev Gāthā* (Bombay: Maharashtra State Government Printing Press, 1970), song number 1232, p. 511. All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

and Sikhism in Punjab. This diversity also inspires the suspicion of some scholars that many singers using the name Namdev expanded the girth of the Namdev tradition in the course of centuries of mimesis.[6]

This song also indicates some traditional aspects of Namdev's character: he was born into a low caste in a village near Pandharpur; he was devoted to both Shiva and Vishnu (as Vitthal, Vithoba, Rama, and Krishna); he composed songs of praise that favored simple entertaining images and metaphors; and he had a good sense of humor—which is lost in my translation above. In the Marathi original, Namdev makes a pun on Shiva, the deity, and *śīv,* "to sew." The intermingling of Old Marathi and its modern kin also underscores the practice of updating, or we might say "modernizing," his songs to fit the times. The ideograph "Nama," which appears in the last verse, draws us to the individual, the solitary, inspired author, Namdev—a tailor, singer, performer, historian, social critic, autobiographer, biographer, and devotee.[7] In short, he was a *sant,* a term in Marathi, Hindi, and other South Asian languages that designates an exemplary spiritual individual, often a performer of religious songs, as well as an iconoclast and a social egalitarian, in the modern sense.

AUTHORIZING THE IDEA OF AUTHORSHIP

The questions of this article are, To what degree is Namdev an author? How was authorship conceived within the tradition that surrounds his name? How is this idea of authorship different from other ones? And what function did authorship serve in the Namdev tradition? Before discussing the particular idea of the author in the Namdev tradition, I would like to situate authorship within the ongoing, interactive history of the concept in both Europe and India. Many contemporary social critics have amply demonstrated that modern knowledge about the world is conjoined in mutually descriptive cultural fields. As scholars, we look to a world of diversity and find the "universals" of culture, humanity, society, the nation, and nature, for example. In this essay, I focus on two such universals—history and religion—as they reveal themselves through the subject of authorship, a site of contentions, reversals, and revivals in both Europe and India.

[6] See G. A. Deleury, *The Cult of Vithoba* (Pune: Deccan College, 1960); Charlotte Vaudeville, *A Weaver Named Kabir* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993); and S. Kulkarni, "Sant Nāmdevgāthyātīl Cār Nāmdev," *Yugavani* (July–August 1992): 6–10.

[7] I prefer the term ideograph to either "signature" or "autograph" for reasons that will fit with the arguments that I make below. Essentially, I follow J. S. Hawley's idea that the signature of a famous singer within a song is not indicative of authorship in the sense of ownership, copyright, or sole original composer. Instead, the name of the famous singer implies a genealogy or a tradition, and in that sense it functions as an ideograph, as a symbol that represents the idea of authorship within a particular tradition. See J. S. Hawley, "Author and Authority in the *Bhakti* Poetry of North India," *Journal of Asian Studies* 47, no. 2 (May 1988): 269–90.

The genealogy of the author as a concept in Western critical theory forms a circle. Presaging Barthes's morbid perspective on the author, a twelfth-century Welsh scholar and satirist, Walter Map (c. 1140–1210), wrote of his authorial status and the condition of editing, "My only fault is that I am alive. . . . I have no intention, however, of correcting this fault."[8] Living, Walter Map still asserted control over his work, but he knew that in death, critics and editors would emend his writing, or as he put it, "Every defect in [my writing] will be remedied by my decease."[9] A fourteenth-century English grammarian, William of Wheteley (born circa 1309), wrote lectures on the standard mode of critical theory in medieval scholarship, a form of exegesis in which the author was the first or "efficient" cause of a text but not necessarily the key to understanding a work.[10] The identity of the author gave some indication of the category of the text and its genealogical environment, but not much more; instead, a composition floated in streams of discourse amid other texts, set adrift by authors and prodded downstream by critics and scholars. Walter Map took some ironic solace in knowing that with the passage of time his work, cut from its author by mortality, would grow in value in a very unmodern way because "then, as now, old copper will be preferred to new gold."[11]

Studies that point out the nature of scribal transmission in early European literature before the printing press compound the problems of modern authorship in Europe. Literate technologies involved "manuscripture"—the physical creation of manuscripts—as an iconographic tradition in which scribes became coauthors, adding their voices and artistry in the accretion of a text and the beauty of its physical presentation.[12] This idea of manuscripture implies the importance of artistic performance in that the manuscript itself is a work of art. The role of an intermediary "author," someone who is the author of a work's medium, is an idea that also emerges in musicology and discussions about the editing of musical scores from all periods. The performer of a musical score becomes an interpreter and transitory author between the composer and the audience, introducing a third axis and breaking the binary of author and audience. If the composer and the performer are not the same person,

[8] A. J. Minnis, *Medieval Theory of Authorship* (London: Scholar Press, 1984), pp. 11–12.

[9] Ibid.

[10] See William of Wheteley's commentary on the *De Disciplina Scolarium,* attributed to Boethius, in Harry Francis Sebastian, "William of Wheteley's (fl. 1309–1316) Commentary on the Pseudo-Boethius' Tractate: *De disciplina scolarium* and Medieval Grammar School Education" (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1970).

[11] Quoted in Minnis, p. 12.

[12] See Bernadette Masters, "The Distribution, Destruction and Dislocation of Authority in Medieval Literature and Its Modern Derivatives," *Romantic Review* 82, no. 3 (May 1991): 270–85.

is there any one person whom we can consider the sole author of the work?[13]

In the context of Sanskrit literature in premodern South Asia, the French philologist, Gerard Colas, has demonstrated how text editing proceeded along the lines of purifying texts, not according to an author's intentions but with regard to the logic of arguments and semantics.[14] Sheldon Pollock likewise has argued that theorizing about authorship in Sanskrit before the modern period eschewed temporality and remained unconcerned with the intentions of particular authors.[15] Discourse centered on arguments outside the context of historical situations. There was no need to credit an individual argument to so and so, barring exceptional circumstances. Debate continued across generations this way, linking genealogies of innovations in argument rather than lineages of authors in time.

The unsettled position of the author in European history was mirrored in South Asia Studies from the eighteenth century to the present. Among European Orientalists, William Jones (1746–94) inaugurated a century of text editing and philology that took as its epicenter the modern idea of authorship. The *Ordinances of Menu* [*sic*] is a prime example of Jones's endeavors to authorize the texts of a famous past author, in this case Manu, a project Jones completed while he was on his deathbed in Calcutta, succumbing to an engorged liver.[16] Among Indian Orientalists, classical philology provided a blueprint for the purification of ancient texts. S. M. Katre, in his *Introduction to Indian Textual Criticism,* provides a principal statement on the modern text-editing field in South Asia.[17] He describes the work of editing as "the skilled and methodical exercise of the human intellect on the settlement of a text with the sole object of restoring it . . . to its original form. . . . By 'original form' we understand the form intended by the author."[18] A modern editor had to use reason and probability to abrogate obvious scribal mistakes, or what Katre called "the pathology of texts."[19] The last step in the editing process involved tendering the restored text of the author unto higher criti-

[13] See James Grier, *The Critical Editing of Music: History, Method, and Practice* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

[14] Gerard Colas, "The Criticism and Transmission of Texts in Classical India," *Diogenes* 47, no. 2 (1998): 30–44.

[15] Sheldon Pollock, "New Intellectuals in Seventeenth-Century India," *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 38, no. 1 (2001): 7.

[16] William Jones, trans. and ed., *Institutes of Hindu law or, The Ordinances of Menu, According to the Gloss of Culluca Comprising the Indian System of Duties, Religious and Civil* (London: Sewell and J. Debret, 1796).

[17] S. M. Katre, *Introduction to Indian Textual Criticism* (Poona: Deccan College, 1954), p. 30.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Ibid., p. 22.

cism, an exploration of the author's relationship to the text that Barthes lamented as "tyrannically centered on the author, his person, his life."[20] The author became the solution to the miasma of multiple texts, the prime arbiter of meaning and verification.[21]

Conversely, in late modernism, the author is part and parcel of this miasma and its attendant interpretations, reflecting a return to something like a medieval European or Indian perspective of the author. In postmodernism, the author has either been effaced from the text (Barthes), has given up his or her proper name as a commodity or metaphor (Derrida), or has been dispersed into innumerable demand-driven functions (Foucault). Pierre Bourdieu has suggested that the modern author is a product of belief in the cultural field of art and literature; he or she is an author inasmuch as consumers believe in his or her status as an author. It is not enough to simply write and publish. The modern author must be produced and consumed as an "author."[22] Even in detective novels, where the author has traditionally been to the reader what the criminal was to the detective, writers such as Paul Auster have turned detectives into criminals and readers into authors.[23]

In the postmodern period, the author has come to resemble its venerable ancestor of the premodern world. Bruno Latour and Brian Trainor have both pointed out how premodern ideas are recycled in the context of postmodernism, what the latter calls a "post-modern medievalism."[24] Traces of William of Wheteley's theory of the author resurface in Foucault's eloquent summation of the author's function, "The author is the principle of thrift in the proliferation of meaning."[25] In what follows, I will take Foucault's statement as a point of departure and try to find the thrift of meaning in the authorial legacy of the Namdev tradition.

[20] Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in *Image, Music, Text,* trans. and ed. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill & Wang, 1977 [1968]), p. 143.

[21] See Peter L. Shillingsburg, "Editions Half Perceived, Half Created," *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 29, no. 2 (Fall 1996): 75–88. Shillingsburg also discusses alternatives to the dominance of authorial intention in the editing of texts. See also Judith L. Fisher, "Scholarly Editing, Textual Criticism, and Aesthetic Value: The Garland Thackeray Edition Project, a Case Study," *Studies in the Novel* 24, no. 3 (Fall 1992): 309–21. Fisher portrays the development of the scholarly editing profession as well.

[22] Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production,* ed. R. Johnson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p. 76. It is also interesting to note that for Bourdieu the artistic field and the religious field are intimately linked. See Bourdieu in Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc J. D. Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 86.

[23] Paul Auster, *New York Trilogy* (Los Angeles: Sun & Moon, 1994).

[24] Brian Trainor, *The Origin and End of Modernity: Reflections on the Meaning of Postmodernism* (Quebec: World Heritage, 1998); Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern,* trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Simon & Schuster, 1993).

[25] Michel Foucault, "What Is an Author?" in *The Foucault Reader,* ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon, 1984 [1969]), p. 118.

THE WORKING AUTHOR

The Namdev tradition in Maharashtra has been preserved for centuries through the intermixing of oral performance and written media. The performance tradition is the *kīrtan* conducted by a *kīrtankār.* The written medium is the practice of *kīrtankārs* transcribing songs into notebooks, the oldest of which date from the middle seventeenth century. Most, however, come from the eighteenth through nineteenth centuries. These notebooks were, and still are, a resource for *kīrtankārs.* Namdev's legacy has existed in the space created between the performance of *kīrtan* and the physical transcription of his songs by *kīrtan* performers over the centuries. In the following pages, I will first describe *kīrtan* in Maharashtra, its variations, and elements of authorship explicit in performance. Then I will turn to the notebooks that *kīrtankārs* created to aid their performance, where I will describe their contents and function. I will then bring these two elements together to discuss corporate authorship in the Namdev tradition.

A. THE KĪRTAN

The term *kīrtan* describes many kinds of performance in India. From *saṃkīrtan,* "collective performance," and *nāmakīrtan,* "performing the Name [of god]," in northern India to *harikathā,* "stories about Hari," and *kalākṣepam,* "performance art," in South India, *kīrtan* and similar genres form a heterogeneous practice. Dance, music, theatre, oration, audience participation, and moral narration mix to varying degrees in the different kinds of *kīrtan* in South Asia. *Kīrtan* is vital to Sikh religious practice, for example, where the songs of the gurus are sung with precision and reverence, accompanied by a set melody (*rāg*). However, the overlay of discourses amid the songs, extraneous musical embellishments, or any kind of dance is discouraged. In Kannada, *kīrtan* is simply a devotional song but is often surrounded by other elements of performance and audience participation. Versions of *kīrtan* like *nāmasaṃkīrtan,* "collectively performing the Name [of god]," or *akhaṇḍa kīrtan,* "endless performance," can last for days, led by a series of *kīrtankārs* in relay. Sufi *qawwālī* bears a relationship to *kīrtan,* mixing religious songs, adept musical performance, improvisation, and dance. *Kīrtan* inevitably has been incorporated into the new generation of hybrid spirituality available at yoga studios and meditation centers in the United States, Europe, and elsewhere, connoting singing or chanting devotional songs.

The performance of *kīrtan* in Maharashtra is a different species from those found in the rest of India. It is more complex in terms of narrative, musical, and theatrical elements, resembling a moral play of sorts. A *kīrtan* performance in Maharashtra involves a lead performer, a *kīrtankār,* who invokes one or two famous songs or stories and gives a narrative

philosophical interpretation of the selected texts. This is combined with music, dance, theatrical flourishes, and often a call and response with the audience. In the parlance of performance theory, *kīrtan* resembles music/text/dance theater, akin to Japanese *kabuki,* Iranian *ta'ziyeh,* or the Turkish *orta-oyunu.* The content could be classified as a "mixed form," in which some material is scripted or prepared and some is improvised within the performance. The *kīrtan* involves the audience both as participant—a key feature of ritual according to performance theory—and as evaluator, where the material presented is well known to the audience, who would look for virtuosity and novelty amid the familiar. The involvement of the audience, often through call and response, and highlighted at the end of a performance through donations of money and gifts, also invokes reception theory, a form of literary criticism that approaches a text from the readers' or, in this case, the listeners', point of view.[26]

In Namdev's songs, *kīrtan* performance has many names: *harikathā, harikīrtan, nāmakīrtan,* and *kīrtan* are the most common. One also finds *viṣṇukīrtan, kṛṣṇakīrtan, kṛṣṇakathā,* and other variations. Though in Namdev's songs *kīrtan* invariably refers to performance, in twelfth-century Marathi evident in stone inscriptions—dated from 1146 to 1289—*kīrtan* meant "temple" or "home" without the connotation of performance; the literal meaning was probably "glorious thing."[27] As we will see, this may indicate that the practice of performing *kīrtan* in or around temples was an old one. Perhaps *kīrtan* provided a surrogate "temple" for those positioned too low within the hierarchy of Brahminical orthodoxy to have access to Brahmin-controlled temples. But by the sixteenth century, and probably sooner, *kīrtan* in Marathi came to indicate a multifarious practice, interweaving narratives, songs, stories, lectures, anecdotes, current events, ethics, and/or politics; it did not, however, indicate a temple. To my knowledge, the word *kīrtan,* in modern Marathi, is no longer used to refer to temples either.[28]

A Marathi *kīrtan* can take a number of forms, from a line of devotees dancing and singing a song under the direction of a *kīrtankār* to an intricate scholarly treatise, a social commentary, or a philosophical/linguistic exposition. In general, *kīrtan* emphasizes narration, allegory, humor,

[26] Reception theory is very different from late modern theories of authorship in that the former invokes a particular hermeneutics in uncovering textual meaning, while the latter involves the ontology of the text itself and the power structures that buffet authorship and readership. However, the two are certainly related and profit from the other's investigations.

[27] S. G. Tulpule and Anne Feldhaus, *A Dictionary of Old Marathi* (Mumbai: Popular Prakashan, 1999), p. 160. Tulpule and Feldhaus list four inscriptions dated 1146, 1164, 1248, and 1289 as evidence. Of the four inscriptions—located in Bhandak, Savargav, Manur, and Rohilagadh, respectively—the one closest to Pandharpur is found in Savargav (Savargao), and the reference is to an Amba Devi temple, not to the Vitthal temple in Pandharpur. No inscriptions have been found in Pandharpur that use the word *kīrtan.*

[28] No dictionary of contemporary Marathi glosses *kīrtan* as "temple."

virtuosity, erudition, and entertainment, all brought together to assess the *raṅga* or "beauty" of the *kīrtan*. Therefore, the aesthetic of presentation and the musical mastery of a performer are of central importance to the success of a *kīrtan* performance.

Traditionally, the mythic sage Narada is considered the first *kīrtankār*. This detail is based on a reference to a verse from the Padma Purāṇa that describes a musical get-together with other mythic figures such as Prahlad and Uddhav.[29] As an archetypical *kīrtankār*, Narada is a musician and storyteller, a witness of events, and a traveler who carries news from other parts. He appears when something important happens, so that he can sing about it later. However, in Maharashtra, Narada shares the spotlight with Namdev, who is often called the first *kīrtankār* of Maharashtra and Marathi and was certainly the first to present explicit descriptions of *kīrtan* in his own songs and through his biography, as we will observe. Stories throughout Namdev's life history assert the centrality of *kīrtan* to his legacy of practice, as well as the effect a Namdev *kīrtan* can have on its listeners. In a famous story, a temple turned to face Namdev, who had been relegated to the back of the sacred complex by jealous Brahmins.[30] On another occasion, a man's severed hands grew anew during a Namdev *kīrtan* because of his irrepressible desire to clap and keep rhythm.[31] Namdev constantly sings about performing *kīrtans* and listening to the *kīrtans* of others, and his companions reiterate his association with *kīrtan*. Like Narada, Namdev is described as a traveler, a paradigm for the *kīrtankār* whose show was always on the road. During his famous travels around the subcontinent, Namdev is said to have observed the difference between Marathi *kīrtan* and the *kīrtan* practices of other traditions. In one of the earliest accounts of any song attributed to Namdev—an autobiographical version of the *Tīrthāvaḷī* (Travel story), dated to 1581—he recalls hearing *harikathā* in South India but not the commentarial *kīrtan* that he and his companions practiced.[32]

[29] See G. N. Koparkar *Pāyīk Nāradāṃce* (1997), p. 21, app. 4. It is interesting to note that Mahipati calls Namdev an incarnation of both Prahlad and Uddhav. See J. Abbott and N. Godbole, trans., *Stories of Indian Saints [Bhaktavijaya]* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1996 [1931]), p. 70, chap. 4, verse 172; see also p. 355, chap. 21, verse 199: "Dnyaneshwar said to Jani, 'Namdev has assumed four *avatars*: Pralhad [*sic*], Angad, and Uddhav, and made Krishna subservient to him.'"

[30] This is one of the oldest miracles retold in Namdev's pan-Indian biography. Narsi Mehta (c. 1423) recalls the story, as does Hariram Vyas (c. 1580), Anantadas (c. 1588), Nabhadas (c. 1600), Priyadas (c. 1712), Raghavadas (c. 1720), Mahipati (c. 1762), and Caturdas (c. 1800). Autobiographical songs attributed to Namdev recall the story in sources as early as the Fatehpur manuscript (c. 1588), and the *Guru Granth Sahib* (c. 1604). It appears in most modern studies and biographies as well. See song 10, attributed to Parasa Bhāgavata, in the *Śrī Nāmdev Gāthā* (n. 5 above), p. 879.

[31] See Mahipati's biography translated by Abbott and Godbole, sec. 17, pp. 191–205 [pp. 293–94].

[32] See *Śrī Nāmdev Gāthā*, song 923, verse 12, p. 350, and app. "Ka," pp. 1035–40.

The most common references to *kīrtan* in Namdev's songs appear in his accounts of the deaths and burials of his friends and fellow authors from the fourteenth century. These threnodies or *samādhi* songs are dedicated to Jnandev, Muktabai, Sopan, Nivritti, Chokhamela, and Cangadev, among others. Here, the actual death of an author provided an opportunity to celebrate the vivacity of authorship between Namdev and his contemporaries. These compositions are some of the most commonly found songs in the notebooks carried by *kīrtankārs* and the few well-kept manuscripts that hold Namdev's songs. The threnodies make up a significant portion of the oldest written sources available and are among the most popular songs used at the death memorials (*samādhi utsav*) of the *sants,* where they are ritually recited. This is especially common during the *samādhi* celebration for Jnandev in Alandi in the month of Kartik (usually November), when Namdev's palanquin (*pālkhī*) travels to Alandi from Pandharpur. As Namdev's songs tell it, Namdev and his group, with almost Gaelic zeal, engaged in a kind of before-and-after wake surrounding the deaths of their friends, mixing sorrow and celebration, combining joyous, raucous, intoxicating *kīrtans* with incapacitating grief and mournful tribute. In one of the most famous threnodies, that to Jnandev, the *kīrtans* have gone on for so long into the night that Namdev fears Jnandev will be too tired to carry out his own demise:

> They stuffed themselves with food
> until two o'clock in the afternoon,
> and then the *kīrtan* started up.
> The vibrant performance enthralled
> Govinda, [but still he thought:]
> "It's time for
> Jnandev's *samādhi.*" Nama says,
> "Dear Lord, if these celebrations go
> on much longer, Jnaneshwar will be
> too tired to leave us."[33]

The threnody *kīrtan* is filled with moments of simple solemnity, as when Namdev sings, "I cannot utter another word; my best friend is leaving me."[34] *Kīrtan* is further associated with curative powers, both physical and spiritual. In the miracle mentioned above, the audience member who finds his severed hands rejuvenated also discovers that his deceased daughter has been brought back to life. In Namdev's songs, *kīrtan* is called a "remedy" for bodily affliction (*tapatraya*) and the drudgery of life (*samsāra*) in which the prescription is simple: "Let the *kīrtan* pour

[33] Ibid., song 1074, verses 3–5.
[34] Ibid., song 1046, verse 4.

into your ears and you will be cooled inside."[35] Even death has a cure because "*harināmakīrtan* . . . can save everyone . . . [can] break the yoke of death . . . and cut the rope of the body."[36] Indeed, Namdev asserts that *kīrtan* can countermand both time and death. Against temporality, Namdev sings that *kīrtan* can "banish the ravages of time,"[37] and in the performance, "Time and Death are trampled under the rhythm of the dancing feet, stamped out in the ringing of the ankle bells,"[38] an illustration that conjures up an image of Shiva as the Dancing Lord, Nataraja, crushing underfoot the demon of ignorance, an ally to suffering and the phenomenal world.[39] The *kīrtan* is thus configured as a cure for the author's universal archrivals: time and death.

B. TWO TYPES OF MARATHI KĪRTAN PERFORMANCE: *Nāradīya* AND *Vārkarī*

In Maharashtra, there are two general types of *kīrtan:* Nāradīya, which looks to both the sage Narada and Namdev as points of origin and style, and Vārkarī, which takes as its subject songs from the five principal *sants* of the Vārkarī faith: Namdev, Jnandev, Eknath, Turkaram, and Niloba. As we will see, the two types demonstrate significant differences in terms of style and content. They also exhibit decidedly different sociocultural convictions. However, there are many points of concurrence, and the two categories are sometimes elided in practice, where *kīrtan* performers use whatever means are at their disposal to construct a good performance, especially for a vivacious audience. I will describe both forms of Marathi *kīrtan* in order to demonstrate how Namdev's authorial legacy has permeated these two different forms and how authorship functions in their particular environments, both important in the assessment of authorship in the Namdev tradition.

Nāradīya Kīrtan. A Nāradīya *kīrtan* usually begins with the *kīrtankār* offering praise (*naman*) first to the deity of the temple, then to Saraswati and Ganesh—the deities of learning and the arts, respectively, to the *kīrtankār*'s own private deity (*kuladevatā*), and finally to his guru. Often the performer also honors an image of Narada. The gathered audience is segregated by gender and seated opposite one another to form a thin aisle between the two groups. At one end of the aisle is the *kīrtankār,* who faces the temple deity at the other end. The performance begins with short songs of praise (*jayajayakār*) that are usually followed by various epithets for god (*bhajan*).

[35] Ibid., song 423, verse 5.
[36] Ibid., song 1466, verses 1–2.
[37] Ibid., song 369, verse 3.
[38] Ibid., song 408, verse 4.
[39] This connection is perhaps indicative of the *śaiva* artifacts present in the Vārkarī tradition, particularly at its earliest stages with figures such as Namdev and Jnandev.

The Nāradīya *kirtan* proceeds in two parts, the "initial discourse" (*pūrvaraṅga*) and the "discourse in response" (*uttararaṅga*). In the initial discourse, the performer presents the *kīrtan*'s theme by singing a particular song attributed to a famous singer, such as Namdev.[40] The song is sung in full, performed with extensive musical accompaniment provided by percussion instruments, harmonium, and other singers; often the audience also joins in. The performer will then turn to an explanation (*nirupan*) of the song's meaning through references to other kinds of compositions: epics, popular literature, songs of other *sants*, current events, or any other cleverly utilized allusion. Often, a Nāradīya *kīrtankār* will demonstrate his or her erudition by quoting from Sanskrit sources, especially from philosophical and ethical texts.

The singing of more praises and epithets for god separates the first and second parts. Again, the audience often joins the *kīrtankār* and *kīrtan* musicians in singing these songs. This is also a time when the *kīrtankār* is formally honored and garlanded by a member of the audience, whom the *kīrtankār* garlands in response. *Kīrtankārs* will often display their musical prowess during this space between the two parts of the *kīrtan*, taking up a particular song for vocal-musical improvisation.

In the remainder of the "discourse in response," the performer will tell a grand story (*kathā*) that sheds light on the song chosen from the initial discourse and that extracts from the first song its essential ethical or philosophical elements. The theatrical and musical energy put into this part of the performance is emphasized by the *kīrtankār* when he or she ties up any loose portion of the dhoti or sari at his or her waist, as if the action to follow requires that everything be well secured. This portion of the *kīrtan* is aptly called "the famous part" (*ākhyān*) because in it the *kīrtankār* retells well-known stories and invokes illustrious personalities; but it is also here that the performance is judged a success or not. All the performer's energy is poured into this section of the *kīrtan*, and, thus, the *kīrtankār*'s own fame is or is not made here. If the initial discourse highlighted the performer's erudition, the "discourse in response" is a theatrical rejoinder. In all, a Nāradīya *kīrtan* is almost entirely dependent upon the learning and performative virtuosity of its *kīrtankār*.

The *kīrtan* ends as the performer leads the audience in a final round of singing epithets and praises to god. Usually a tray is passed around to collect donations for the performer, or donations are given after the entire performance ends. The *kīrtankār* then solemnly pays homage to the temple deity by prostrating himself or herself on the ground before the idol. In the concluding act, the *kīrtankār* receives audience members who honor (*darśan*) him or her as the one who occupies the "seat of the sage

[40] The most popular *sant* for selection in a Nāradiya *kīrtan* is Tukaram (seventeenth century).

Narada."[41] This is very important for understanding the role of the *kīrtankār* as an author. Throughout the *kīrtan*, the *kīrtankār* has dressed like, and in some sense, acted the part of Narada. The performer is thus engaged in mimesis of the great sage, a kind of imitation that nonetheless requires the *kīrtankār* to also be spontaneous and inventive in the performance itself.

The performers of Nāradīya *kīrtan* are almost always Brahmins, and usually male, although it is not uncommon—and is becoming more common—for Brahmin women to perform *kīrtans*. The audience of a Nāradīya *kīrtan* is usually composed of a variety of castes and an equal number of men and women. Often audience members can be seen taking notes on the discourses. In the summer of 2000 in Pune, after observing a *kīrtan*, I inquired about the note taking and was told that many of the audience members—more women than men—were themselves studying to perform *kīrtans*.

Vārkarī Kīrtan. Vārkarī *kīrtan* takes its name from the Vārkarī community of the Marathi-speaking region. The Vārkarīs form the largest devotional (bhakti) tradition in Maharashtra, and one of the oldest as well. Vārkarīs worship Vitthal, a deity associated with Krishna and his mythology, whose main temple is in the Maharashtrian town of Pandharpur.[42] A central feature of the Vārkarī tradition is two yearly pilgrimages to Pandharpur, the most famous occurring on the eleventh day (*ekādaśi*) of the month of Ashadh during the monsoon.[43] The Vārkarī tradition is often called "syncretistic" in that it has absorbed elements of Shaiva Natha practice, Buddhism, Jainism, Islam, and Christianity over the last one thousand years, though its *sants* have always espoused an explicit association with the worship of Vishnu, or vaiṣṇava practice.[44] Particularly through Namdev—a foundational figure in the Vārkarī faith—and later through other famous *sants*, especially Tukaram, the Vārkarīs have emphasized egalitarian access to religious practice, temple worship, pilgrimage, and other aspects of devotionalism, a perspective often heard in the songs of Namdev and other Vārkarī *sants*. It is important to note that all performers of Vārkarī *kīrtan* are themselves Vārkarī adherents. However, Vārkarī adherents—especially Brahmin ones—also perform Nāradīya *kīrtan*. The two kinds of *kīrtan* are not mutually exclusive, and popular *kīrtankārs* are often adept at both forms.

[41] Personal communication from Graham Ajit Bond, August 2001: "Oral conversation with (as far as my memory serves me) Shrikant Khadilkar (strongly associated with Narad Mandir—his wife is a *kīrtankār* and we had quite a few conversations about Nāradīya *kīrtan*). It would have been early in my time there—around May, 1998." Quoted with permission.

[42] See Deleury (n. 6 above).

[43] See D. B. Mokashi, *Palkhi: An Indian Pilgrimage* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987).

[44] See C. Vaudeville, *Myths, Saints, and Legends in Medieval India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996).

A Vārkarī *kīrtan* is more narrowly circumscribed in narrative and polemical scope, as well as musical and theatrical range, than a Nāradīya *kīrtan*. Furthermore, a Vārkarī *kīrtan* relies on communal, interactive participation with an audience more so than does Nāradīya *kīrtan*. A Vārkarī *kīrtankār* uses only the songs of the five principal *sants* of the Vārkarī tradition—Namdev, Jnandev (fourteenth century), Eknath (sixteenth century) , Tukaram (seventeenth century), and Niloba (eighteenth century). As in a Nāradīya *kīrtan,* a Vārkarī *kīrtankār* will give a discourse on a chosen song, but this discourse will be purposefully simple and brief. Instead of highlighting musical and scholarly virtuosity, a Vārkarī *kīrtan* accents religious ecstasy and dance, accompanied by cymbals (*tāl*), drums, and clapping. The second phase of the Vārkarī *kīrtan* also involves the further explication of the selected song, but with more explicit ethical and religious content rather than materials meant to entertain. Though there is one lead *kīrtankār,* he or she is accompanied by many other *kīrtankārs,* often standing in a line (*raṅgaṇ*) and dancing in synchronicity. A refrain (*dhrupad*) in the song is enjoined by the audience and all the *kīrtan* members.

A Vārkarī *kīrtan* is less a stage for a skillful *kīrtankār* and more a social gathering, a point made explicitly in the songs of Namdev and other Vārkarī *sants*. It is a place for the "orphaned" (*anāth*), "uneducated" (*ajñān*), and "powerless" (*aśakta*), as Namdev's songs often assert, which points to an important social difference between the two forms. A Vārkarī *kīrtankār* can be from any caste and is often of a low caste, reflecting the social teachings of most Vārkarī *sants,* whatever their caste. One Namdev song plainly puts it:[45]

> Ritual baths and chanting mantras,
> While hording gifts and ignoring
> Hari's stories (*harikathā*):
> You should know this is bad,
> A terrible misdeed of the wicked.
>
> Give up Brahmin-ness (*brāhmaṇapaṇ*)
> And give up casteism (*śudrariti*).
> The distress these things bring
> Can only result in calamity.

This kind of explicit critique of caste in the performance of a Vārkarī *kīrtan* would be very uncommon in a Nāradīya *kīrtan,* for the obvious reasons mentioned above.

[45] *Śrī Nāmdev Gāthā* (n. 5 above), song 1783, verses 3–4.

Inherent in this caste-based critique is a devaluation of individual fame and the emphasis of communal solidarity. This characteristic of a Vārkarī *kīrtan,* as opposed to a Nāradīya *kīrtan,* brings out particular aspects of authorship. Though a Vārkarī *kīrtan* has a lead *kīrtankār,* the community symbolically grants him temporary authorial status when the *vīṇā* player hands him the *vīṇā*—a stringed instrument that appears regularly in accounts of *kīrtans* in Namdev's songs. There is also some symbolic association between the *kīrtankār* and Vitthal at the beginning of the *kīrtan.* A Vārkarī *kīrtan* starts with songs (*rūpāce abhaṅga*) that describe Vitthal's physical form, most famously, as standing on a brick with his arms bowed at his sides. The series of descriptive songs ends with the line, "Fix your attention on the beautiful one who stands on the brick." At that point, the *kīrtankār* rises to accept the *vīṇā* from the *vīṇā* player and officiate the *kīrtan.* At the conclusion of the *kīrtan,* the *kīrtankār* returns the *vīṇā,* which signals the end of her or his authorial moment.

A distinction may be evident in Namdev's songs between Nāradīya and Vārkarī *kīrtan,* though the words "*nāradiyā*" and "*vārkarī*" are not used to distinguish the two forms. In Namdev's verses, when Narada appears, an audience gathers, usually under an awning (*maṇḍap*) and is seated (*baisale*) before Narada to listen to his kīrtan.[46] Like a contemporary Nāradīya *kīrtan,* the audience is by-and-large physically passive during Narada's *kīrtan* performance—they listen and respond verbally but do not rise up to dance and join the *kīrtankār* in the *kīrtan.* We may have here a description of the archetypical Nāradīya *kīrtan.*

When Namdev or others perform *kīrtan* in Namdev's songs—as opposed to Narada performing the *kīrtan*—it is usually amid many others, and both audience and performers dance and sing together.[47] No one sits still. This is a form of *kīrtan* that more aptly reflects the contemporary practice of Vārkarī performers and audiences than of Nāradīya *kīrtan.* However, both styles of kīrtan as we know them today probably took on their present forms and distinctions over the course of several centuries. Nāradīya *kīrtan,* on the one hand, was probably the form of *kīrtan* Eknath (c. 1548–99) and Ramdas (c. 1608–81) practiced in their time, though they too do not use the terms "*nāradiyā*" or "*vārkarī*" to specify what sort of *kīrtan* they practiced; they are merely performing "*kīrtans.*" Vārkarī *kīrtan,* on the other hand, most likely developed as a distinct form in the middle of the nineteenth century under the guidance of famous *kīrtankārs* such as Bhausaheb Katkar (1813–78) and Vishnu Jog (1867–1920).[48] The notebooks that house the written archive of songs used in *kīrtan* are mostly from the late seventeenth and early eighteenth

[46] See ibid., songs 1140, p. 478, or song 1187, p. 496, for examples.
[47] See ibid., song 108, p. 908, by Gonda, or song 311, p. 960, by Jani.
[48] A. Ranade, *On Music and Musicians of Hindoostan* (New Delhi: Promilla Press, 1984), p. 122.

centuries. Different types of *kīrtan* are not explicitly enumerated in these texts. Instead, we find mere hints and inference without a direct statement about various types of *kīrtan*.

One interesting offshoot of both forms of *kīrtan* is a brand of nationalist or *rāṣṭrīya kīrtan* developed in the late nineteenth century as a vehicle for anticolonial rhetoric.[49] The British in India took little notice of *kīrtan* in Maharashtra, not even of the *rāṣṭrīya kīrtans* that were explicitly used to organize resistance to colonial occupation, which was an otherwise outlawed activity.[50] The British apparently considered *kīrtan* an innocuous, folk religious practice, below the threshold of colonial curiosity.[51] However, when a gathering would turn from the exotic to a more mundane and recognizable form of mischief, such as an impromptu march, the British were quick to impose discipline.[52]

Though *kīrtan* may not have appeared on the British surveillance radar, it was nevertheless both important and widespread during the British period. From at least the eighteenth century onward, we have court records of royal patronage of skillful Nāradīya *kīrtankārs* by the Holkar princes, as well as the rulers of Gwalior, Thanjavur, and Nepal.[53] To my knowledge, the first brick and mortar school of *kīrtan*—as opposed to the more common guru-teacher transmission of *kīrtan* practice—was established in 1883 in the Sadashiv Peth neighborhood of Pune, a city that had been firmly under British control since 1817 as the monsoon capital of the Bombay Presidency. The school was called the Shree Hari Kirtanottejak Sabha or, more colloquially, the Narad Mandir.[54] From the eighteenth century to the present, *kīrtan* has remained a prominent social, religious, political, communal, and artistic phenomenon, sometimes mobilized against colonialism by such leaders as Bal Gangadhar Tilak (1856–1920) and Mahadeo Govind Ranade (1842–1909) and, at other times, employed to impart moral and social lessons about everything from tea drinking to birth control.[55] If Namdev's songs are to be taken as evidence of the resilience of *kīrtan*, we can assume the performance art

[49] Ad hoc councils composed of prominent *kīrtankārs* in Maharashtra met in the early twentieth century on several occasions to debate the appropriateness of addressing India's anticolonial struggle in the *kīrtan* form. Some argued that the venue was inappropriate for political discourse, while others, influenced by Tilak and Ranade, felt compelled to use their visibility for political ends.

[50] See Anna Schultz, "*Rashtriya Kirtankars* of Maharashtra: Musical Fragments of Nationalist Politics" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, forthcoming).

[51] See William Crooke, *The Tribes and Castes of the North-Western Provinces and Oudh* (Calcutta: Office of the Superintendent of Printing, 1896).

[52] V. D. Divekar, "*Rashtreeya Kirtankars* in Maharashtra: Their Role in the Indian National Movement," in *Regional Roots of Indian Nationalism: Gujarat, Maharashtra and Rajasthan*, ed. Markand Mehta (New Delhi: Criterion Publications, 1990), pp. 214–32, 224.

[53] See Ranade, p. 132; and Divekar, p. 214.

[54] Divekar, p. 216.

[55] Ibid., p. 220.

has been vital to Maharashtrian cultural life since the sixteenth century onward, if not earlier.

C. THE KIRTANKĀR NOTEBOOKS

The only written source of Namdev songs in Marathi before the modern period are notebooks (*bāḍa* or *vahī*), compiled and carried by *kīrtankārs* from at least the sixteenth century onward.[56] Collections of these notebooks are scattered throughout Maharashtra in private and temple archives, and in a few libraries such as the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute and the Thanjavur Saraswati Mahal Library in Tamil Nadu. Few if any *bāḍas* have been cataloged or preserved under the auspices of colonial-sponsored archives, another indication of British indifference to the performance practice and its literary remnant.[57] However, we find that the vast bulk of Namdev's written legacy is preserved in the medium of the *bāḍa,* and it is within this informal, largely unstructured archive, scattered throughout Maharashtra, that the modern printed editions of Namdev's work find their source.

The term *bāḍa* designates a wide range of manuscripts that share a few physical and cultural characteristics. The notebooks generally have stitched spines that allow their pages to fold and form a "book"; text runs left to right, but the orientation of a *bāḍa* can be either vertical or horizontal, and sometimes a mix of these two in a single notebook. The *bāḍas* are dressed in a thick cloth cover usually pasted or stitched around the outermost page. They range in size and shape from as small as 2 inches × 2 inches when folded to 8.5 inches tall and 6 inches wide when folded. The majority of the *bāḍas* that I have examined open vertically like a parking policeperson's ticket book. These notebooks are distinct from manuscripts from medieval European and the so-called medieval Indian

[56] The word *bāḍa,* to my knowledge, does not appear in Namdev's work. The word *vahī* does, however. In general, the word *bāḍa* is a recent addition to the Marathi language and specifically refers to a notebook (*vahī*) that has been stitched at some median place to form a spine. *Bāḍa* may be the word for "line," of Persian origin, probably corresponding to the lines often drawn in notebooks to help with transcription, or maybe for the stitch sewn to make a spine. The word suggests a cognate with the English word "bard," particularly via the connection with poetry, singing, and traveling. Though this is a tantalizing route, I think a more likely connection (if there is one at all) to English comes through the Arabic word, *al-bāḍa'ah,* a saddle used on a mule or horse, which gives us the second, less common, definition of the word "bard," protective armor for the flanks of a war horse. This sense of the word does not make it into Marathi, Urdu, or any other language in South Asia, except for Persian, as far as I know. The former meaning however—*al-bāḍa'ah* as a bag used for travel on a horse—may have some association with the pockets or bags the notebooks were kept in, as well as some association with travel in general. See the *Oxford English Dictionary* (1988); and Y. R. Date and C. G. Karve, eds., *Maharashtra Shabdakosh,* vol. 5, Pa-bha, 2243–2244 (Pune: Varada, 1995 [1936]).

[57] V. L. Manjul, former head librarian of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, has begun the work of creating a catalog of all old Marathi manuscripts and other materials throughout India.

periods that reflect the visual art of manuscript construction. Rather, these *bāḍas* were meant to hold the notes and jottings of *kīrtankārs* for only a short time—at most for a generation. Everything about *bāḍas* reveals a utility and an economic status far different from the carefully copied manuscripts of medieval Europe or of Sanskrit and Pali literature. The manner in which these notebooks are preserved today in centers such as the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute differs from the careful attention given to other manuscripts, as different in accommodation as the five-star Taj Hotel is from the Bombay YWCA just down the street. Sanskrit manuscripts, for example, are kept in glass cases, in teakwood cabinets, carefully arranged and cataloged; *bāḍas* are piled in closets or stacked in attic storage spaces, haphazardly stowed without any kind of order.[58] The different valuation of the two kinds of manuscripts is also apparent when *bāḍas* and Sanskrit documents are referred to in English: a Sanskrit document is always rendered with the English word "manuscript," which carries a weighted importance among types of writing, whereas a *bāḍa* is designated with the English word "notebook," a second-class citizen in the world of paper records.

The songs in the *bāḍas* that I have examined are often organized in a sequence reflecting performance, where loose themes generally bind a small group of songs together. The notebooks mirror an idiosyncratic accretion over time, a stockpiling of useful songs, variations of songs, corrections of verses, and notes on performance. In rare circumstances, a *bāḍa* will show a high degree of organization and forethought, and invariably this structure mirrors a particular *kīrtan* performance, as if it were a transcript of an especially successful show, as well as an aid to continued practice.

In the main, however, most notebooks are an omnium-gatherum of information far beyond the enumeration of songs attributed to famous *sant*-singers. While some *bāḍas*—perhaps a tenth of all the *bāḍas* that I have examined in my research—do contain only songs, a majority of the notebooks are populated by an array of information, and this various content says a lot about the professional lives of the former owners of *bāḍas*. The *bāḍas* contain all kinds of seemingly mundane information: astrological charts; records of births and deaths; notes on crop prices, geography, and weather conditions; surveys of general news; and even bawdy songs, similar to the Marathi *lāvaṇī* genre. This material suggests the diverse applications of the *kīrtan* profession, where traveling *kīrtankārs* also carried information about neighboring villages, or entirely different regions of

[58] The staff of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute faithfully endeavors to preserve all of its materials as well as possible. I do not mean to critique their practices or priorities; indeed, I am grateful that such an institution exists. I am also grateful to its staff for their generosity, both personal and professional, over the last ten years, especially Satish G. Sangale.

the subcontinent. Most *bāḍas* are from the eighteenth century onward, a period in the history of the Marathi-speaking area of relentless warring among landed families, the lineages of Maratha royalty, Moghul expansion expeditions, and the southern kingdoms of Golconda and Bijapur.[59] In this era, *kīrtankārs* kept track of births and deaths, changes in commerce and politics, and the lives of famous personalities. A *kīrtankār* was part journalist, part foreign correspondent, part actor, part scholar, and part religious commentator, all in the context of the *kīrtan* performance. Records of royal patronage paid to *kīrtankārs* make clear that monetary rewards reflected the entertainment value of a performance.[60] The *kīrtankār* had to sing for his supper. However, the terrain of the *kīrtankār* was not the politics of the Maratha court or Moghul succession but the mundane village networks and holy pilgrimage sites where they performed the sacred stories, biographies, and songs of those figures who ascended from ordinary life to hagiographical stardom.

The locations of significant collections of *bāḍas* might be an indication of the networks of performance that *kīrtankārs* maintained. Some very old collections of handwritten songs are housed in Pandharpur at the Namdev Mandir and in Dhule at the Samartha Vagdevata Mandir and the Rajvade Samshodhan Mandal. The Pandharpur manuscript collection, in particular, served as the largest source for the government of India's anthology of Namdev's songs, and a single voluminous manuscript housed in Dhule, with a date of 1631, provides the oldest strata of Namdev's songs.[61] It is not hard to imagine that both the Pandharpur and the Dhule manuscripts served as resources for *kīrtankārs* passing through those regions. In a recent visit to Pandharpur, however, I found the flow of information also ran in the opposite direction. In an interview with P. D. Nikte, the director of the Namdev Sevak Mandir in Pandharpur and an educator in Namdev Studies, I asked him about the manuscripts that his organization had preserved. He mentioned the Pandharpur manuscript collection and informed me, "When we hear a new song, or a new version of a song, we write it down in the book."[62] This has apparently always been the practice.

We can see some aspects of the much earlier practice of recording songs in notebooks in the activities of contemporary *kīrtankārs*. They

[59] See Stewart Gordon, *The Marathas, 1600–1818* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

[60] Ranade (n. 48 above), p. 132. For more on the connection between patronage and written historical narratives, see D. E. Brown, *Hierarchy, History, and Human Nature* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1988), pp. 323, 325.

[61] Introduction to *Śrī Nāmdev Gāthā*.

[62] Personal communication, Pandharpur, July 1998. Furthermore, in 2001, Prashant Nikte completed a new anthology of Namdev's songs using the Pandharpur manuscripts, and other manuscripts, as a primary resource.

often use notebooks to help them recall verses and plan performances.[63] Of course, they also use the large published anthologies of the works of Vārkarī *sants,* such as the *Sakaḷa Santa Gāthā* or the various state-funded critical editions. However, these anthologies are themselves culled from the notebooks of earlier *kīrtankārs.* The Vārkarī *kīrtankār,* V. Jog, mentioned earlier, produced one of the first and most influential anthologies of Namdev's verses, published posthumously in 1925. He is one of several well-established *kīrtankārs* who edited the works of Marathi *sants.* The modern printed edition is the genealogical successor of the handwritten notebook tradition of *kīrtankārs;* the transition from one to the other is mirrored in the adaptations and perpetuations of *kīrtan* itself. The songs in the old notebooks rarely exhibit the kind of musical association under melody (*rāg*) that was otherwise a common organizational principle in old vernacular written records, such as the *Guru Granth Sahib.* Instead, the *bāḍas* are each unique: there appears to be no tradition of copying *bāḍas,* as there is with manuscripts.[64] Songs do appear in multiple notebooks, and often word for word, but there is no indication that the songs contained in one notebook were copied from another. However, it is possible that the songs were copied from a central collection, such as the Pandharpur or Dhule archives.

How the tongue makes a good book. The Marathi Vārkarī tradition, of which Namdev is a principal part, has an unambivalent relationship to writing and literacy. According to tradition, all the great *sants* could write—except for Namdev. The thirteenth-century Brahmin *sant* Jnandev (also called Jnaneshwar) is said to have written down his own compositions, such as the famous *Jñāneśvarī.* The sixteenth-century sant, Eknath—a Brahmin whose guru, Janardan, was a member of a Sufi order, the Sijrā-i-kādrī[65]—not only wrote but also edited, collated, and anthologized the work of earlier *sants.* The seventeenth-century low caste *sant* Tukaram is remembered to have written down his own verses, an anthology of songs that he was made to immerse in the local river in his hometown of Dehu by jealous Brahmins. The book is said to have resurfaced

[63] It is important to note that *kīrtankārs* often will not use a notebook in an actual performance but rather as a tool to prepare for the performance. However, I have seen several very well regarded *kīrtankārs* keep a notebook open during a performance and refer to it from time to time. As far as I can tell, there is no hard-and-fast rule about the use of notebooks in the *kīrtan* performance.

[64] See the introduction to *Śrī Nāmdev Gāthā* (n. 5 above). The only exception to this observation is found in the recording of Namdev's three principal biographies/autobiographies: the *Ādi, Tīrthāvaḷī,* and *Samādhi* (ibid., p. ii). These three compositions appear in eight of the thirty manuscripts consulted by the *Śrī Nāmdev Gāthā* scholarship committee. They described those eight manuscripts as the "chief manuscripts" (*pramukha prata*) (ibid., p. v). I do think that early *kīrtankārs* compared notebooks and shared verses, but this is not a scribal tradition.

[65] S. G. Tulpule, *Classical Marathi Literature* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1979), p. 353.

miraculously thirteen days later and is today on display in a glass case in Dehu. Tukaram even had a scribe travel with him, the *sant* Jaganade, whose position in the hagiographical firmament is entirely because of his ability to write. A copy of Jaganade's manuscript exists, with a colophon placing it in the *śaka* year 1653, or 1731.[66] Mahipati, the eighteenth-century Brahmin biographer of the Vārkarī *sants,* was a writer by profession, having served as the scribe to a Moghul landlord and to the village of Taharabad near Nasik in Maharashtra.

Despite this impressive literacy rate among the Marathi *sants,* Namdev's songs never describe him as writing anything, nor do the songs of his companions suggest that he wrote down his verses. When the verb "to write" appears in songs attributed to Namdev, it usually refers to the "writing of fate," the life divinely prescribed for a person.[67] Rather than writing, what is far more common in the songs of Namdev and his compeers is speaking and listening to the speech of others. As for books, Namdev has nothing kind to say.[68] He suggests that "the tongue makes a good book (*pothī*)"[69] and states in a song's refrain:

> I don't know Veda or Purāṇa.
> I've ignored paper and books.
> Without verses like pearl-white clouds
> I have only the spotless gem of the mind.[70]

In the Sikh scripture, the *Guru Granth Sahib,* where Namdev is remembered as a Sikh *bhagat*—a predecessor to the devotionalism of the Sikh tradition—we have other such pronouncements about orality, in this case, with reference to the need to repeat the Name of God endlessly:

> Hey tongue![71] Say "Śrī Gobind"
> Or I will slice you into a hundred slivers.
> Hey tongue! Paint yourself in a new shade: Hari!

[66] I am indebted to V. L. Manjul for sharing his copy of this manuscript with me in Pune in the winter of 1998.

[67] *Śrī Nāmdev Gāthā,* songs 507, 1304, 1570, 1719, 1916, song 441 by Jani, song 1 by Visoba Khecar.

[68] There is at least one mention of Namdev having written a *grantha,* which in old Marathi can mean either a "poetical composition" or a "scripture." The reference appears at the end of the biographical *Tīrthāvaḷī* (961:16). However, in the oldest version of this text, from Dhule, the *grantha* is attributed to Jnandev, who indeed is associated with physical books or scriptures. The ideograph seems to have been changed later. As I argue elsewhere, the biographical *Tīrthāvaḷī* seems to be a compilation of songs by various *sants,* perhaps organized by Namdev (or *a* Namdev), and other songs attributed to Namdev or Jnandev. In any case, the Vārkarī tradition remembers Namdev as the author of the biographical *Tīrthāvaḷī,* as well as the autobiographical one. See Christian Lee Novetzke in *Alternative Krishnas,* ed. Guy Beck (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003).

[69] *Śrī Nāmdev Gāthā,* song 519 from the unpublished Marathi *abhaṅgas.*

[70] Ibid., song 2218, in the Hindi section.

[71] *Jihabā.*

Hari! Hari! Relish that vibrant color.
Any other use of you is a mere waste.[72]

And, later, Namdev is remembered to have asserted:

I don't chit-chat with anyone.
My tongue laps up the name "Ram."[73]

A song attributed to Janabai (or Jani), Namdev's fourteenth-century disciple, describes the power of Namdev's speech:

How many *sants* of the past
Could speak (*bolaṇe*) the way Namdev does?
Nama went to the temple,
And God spoke to him eagerly.
Just to tell you about this miracle,
Jani the disciple [of Namdev] writes (*lihiṇe*)[74] this verse (*pad*).[75]

In another song attributed to Jani, we see many of the mutual companions of Namdev and Jani explicitly mentioned in scribal partnerships, but Namdev is conspicuously truant:

Cidananda Baba wrote down the words
Of the verses Jnaneshwar spoke.
Sopan wrote the words of Nivritti,
And Jnandev wrote the sayings of Muktai.[76]
The one who wrote for Canga
Was Sham the smith,
And Khecar would write the words

[72] *Rāg* Bhairav, song 1, lines 1 and 2, p. 1163; my translation. This song uses synesthesia to mix color and taste.

[73] Ibid., song 4, line 2, p. 1164.

[74] According to Molesworth, this verb means, "to write; to draw, delineate, or trace" (p. 720, col. 2). In modern spoken Marathi, the word means both to physically write something and to trace something, but it also indicates the act of composing literature. Thus, one often hears in Marathi that Namdev "wrote" songs, though the meaning is not literally that he physically wrote down his songs (see J. Molesworth, *Marathi-English Dictionary* (1831; 4th reprint, Pune: Shubhada-Saraswat Prakashan, 1991). According to Tulpule and Feldhaus (n. 27 above), in old Marathi the meaning was the same as Molesworth asserts (p. 610). Though the editors give the gloss "to record," the sense of the usage is to record a written text, i.e., to copy a text and not to record in general. As the verb appears in old Marathi that I have read—and in particular in colophons to old manuscripts—the verb *lihiṇe* means to physically write down something. In distinction, Namdev (like many other *sants,* though they may also physically write their songs) is said to "speak," referring to the verb *mhaṇaṇe*, as in "*Nāma mhaṇe*" or "Namdev says."

[75] *Śrī Nāmdev Gāthā* (n. 5 above), app. A, *Jānābāice Abhaṅga* section, song 419, verses 1–3.

[76] Muktabai.

Of Paramananda.
What Purnananda said, Paramananda wrote.
He found God when he met
The Anandadas and Ramananda.
The one to write for Savata the gardener
Was Kashiba Gurav.
Vasudev was the scribe (*kāit*) of Kurma.
Ananta Bhatt [was a scribe for] Cokhamela's songs,
And at last Pandurang [became a scribe for]
Nama's Jani.[77]

I think there is an argument in silence made in this song by Jani. Namdev is absent from the roster because he does not require the medium of writing to ensure that his songs will endure. In the place of writing, he has initiated the medium of *kīrtan*. In a different song by Janabai we see that Namdev and his companion Nivritti (the brother of Jnandev) are attributed different modes of religious expression: "Nivritti wrote the words that Vitthal placed on his tongue . . . and Namdev expanded the practice of *nāmsaṃkīrtan*."[78] Whereas Nivritti writes down his songs, Namdev sings and performs his verses in the musical and theatrical tradition of *kīrtan*, a performance art thoroughly associated with Namdev's life: as I mentioned earlier, in Maharashtra, Namdev is considered the first and archetypical *kīrtan* performer.

It is here, in speech and performance, not in literate practices, that Namdev's songs endure as Namdev himself becomes an "author." Namdev was renowned for his oral performance whereas Jnandev, Nivritti, Muktabai, Chokhamela, Jani, and the other *sants* within the Vārkarī tradition were famous for their other accomplishments and motivations, and many were associated with actual, physical writing—such as Jnandev, Eknath, and Tukaram. Thus, even in an explicitly written tradition, the preservation of Namdev's legacy through *kīrtan*, through oral performance outside of available written resources, is acknowledged and celebrated.[79]

[77] *Śrī Nāmdev Gāthā*, app. A, *Jānābāīce Abhaṅga* section, song 408. The apparatus in this section indicates that the song appears in a manuscript from Pandharpur and another from Shiraval, both with no date given. The Pandharpur manuscript is one of several others, and one of those manuscripts bears a colophon that gives the date *śaka* 1657, or 1735. However, the editors of the anthology estimate the age of most of the manuscripts from Pandharpur to be around 250 years old, or from around 1700. I would press the date back another fifty years, but not earlier than 1635. That the same song—word for word—appears in two separate manuscripts suggests the song in oral form is at least fifty years older than its earliest written record.

[78] Ibid., song 1240, verses 4 and 6.

[79] Mahipati tells another story, in the context of Tukaram's biography, in which Vitthal does become a scribe for Namdev (pp. 205–7, chap. 48, verses 55–75). However, this song is obviously set within a constructed frame story to give a context to a song by Tukaram, in

This is a curious phenomenon from the perspective of Western theories about literacy, authorship, and history. For example, in the works of scholars such as Jack Goody, Walter Ong, and Marshall McLuhan, society in general is described as following trajectories from orality/illiteracy to visuality/literacy.[80] Especially for Jack Goody and Ian Watt, a culture that shifts from oral/illiterate to literate is characterized as passing from "simple" to "complex," from a society that has a sense only of the culture of the present to one that has the power of "history," a concept linked to individuality and the power and accountability of the individual author.[81] These epochal arguments do not have purchase on the Namdev tradition, however. In this tradition, literate and illiterate are synchronic, not diachronic; that is, we see no teleology of development from orality to writing but rather a system where orality conditions and trumps writing. We have a figure actively presented as illiterate—Namdev—set amid a decidedly literate (and scholarly) community, sharing the same space, time, geography, and cognition as his literate fellows. Here an intracultural paradigm upsets the intercultural paradigm proposed by Goody and Watt.[82] The oral performative elements of the Namdev tradition are in some sense exerting control over literacy, a relationship between literate and illiterate that is often deleted from the historical record of both Western and former colonial societies, which are portrayed as caught up in the tidal wave of forceful cognitive change brought about by new technologies of preservation, such as writing or, more contemporarily, electronic media. These new technologies, some argue, bring a sea change in epochs, marking the end of the "traditional" and the beginning of the "modern" in many cases, or the emergence of the "individual" amid the

---

which he recalls how Namdev appeared in a dream to him and requested that he continue the work of composing songs to Vitthal. See *Śrī Tukarām Gāthā* in the *Sakaḷa Santa Gāthā* (Pune: Varada Books, 1990 [1908]), p. 571, verses 3597 and 3598. It is interesting to note that only after this dream, according to Mahipati, did Tukaram begin *kīrtans* in which "he uttered words full of pathos and love" (verse 79).

[80] J. Goody, *The Domestication of the Savage Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977); M. McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (Toronto: New American Library of Canada, 1962), *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: New American Library, 1964); W. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (New York: Methuen, 1982).

[81] J. Goody and Ian Watt, "The Consequences of Literacy," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 5, no. 3 (April 1963): 310, 345. Goody and Watt have proposed a fascinating, yet problematic, paradigm of scholarship wherein the sociologist should study literate, developed societies, which are those that have history; whereas the job of the anthropologist should be to study oral, illiterate, and underdeveloped societies that have no sense of history but merely of present culture (p. 343).

[82] Of course, the topic of print is vital in the works of Ong (who sees print as the cause of less "face-to-face" social interaction) and especially McLuhan (who saw the rise of print occasion individualism, democracy, Protestantism, capitalism, and nationalism). However, their general insistence on epochal rubrics tends to make their ideas unwieldy for the "smaller" details of a particular tradition.

"communal," and hence the birth of the concept of the individual author. Here, however, we see the technology of writing eschewed in the Namdev tradition; it is neither a marker of oral performance as a lesser medium nor a medium devoid of historical aptitude but rather just the opposite—orality is the medium of historical remembrance, yet it is centered around an individual author, perpetuated by networks of performing authors, and attributed, ultimately, to the author of the form of performance itself.

D. THE AUTHOR INCORPORATED

If we look at *kīrtan* and the notebooks kept by *kīrtankārs,* we can see layers of authorship emerging in performance. Immediately manifest in a performance or a notebook's record of a song is the famous *sant* whose song is either to be performed and elaborated upon in the *kīrtan,* or recorded for the sake of performance in a notebook. In a performance, when a *kīrtankār* invokes the songs, lines, or legends of a famous figure—a *sant* or character from history—the authority of that figure lends legitimacy to the *kīrtan* and guarantees the authenticity of the performance. A *kīrtan* would not be a *kīrtan* without that central song or story, which anchors the performance's meaning and provides material for the play of language, music, and narration. The practice is something similar to what William of Wheteley described in his fourteenth-century commentary, where invoking an author's name marked the text as authoritative. A *kīrtan* could be said to be an exploration of the intentions of the principal song's author. Certainly, at the center of the performance is the famous author. At this level, authorship is based on the work of a single, famous singer that I would describe as genealogical. Vārkarī *kīrtan* especially follows a strict genealogy as songs are chosen from only one of the five most revered *sants* of the Vārkarī tradition. Nāradīya *kīrtan,* however, is more free to respond to the desires and expectations of a particular cultural field—urban, rural, southern, eastern, and so on; yet, here too, there is a genealogy of fame and popularity where Namdev, for example, is still considered the doyen of the *kīrtan* form and Tukaram is remembered as the most adept of the *sant* poets.

At a second level, we have seen that a skillful *kīrtankār,* especially a Nāradīya one, must mix popular, expected material—such as stories from myth or the lives of famous figures—with spontaneous, extemporary oratory and verse. Here the genius of an individual as the originator of a text is represented in the authorial, creative status of the *kīrtankār* in the performance of *kīrtan*. The *kīrtankār* becomes the *kīrtan*'s composer or author, quoting from various sources, creatively altering and melding narratives, engaging the material with his or her unique artistic abilities,

and stamping the performance as an original composition in total. However, this aspect of authorship ends with the *kīrtan*'s conclusion and would need to be reestablished repeatedly through performance. This is the kind of author that Bourdieu has referred to as "the apparent producer," the one who sees to the connection between production and consumption, the one who presents and represents the work.[83] This kind of authorship is transient since the *kīrtankār* is only the author of that particular performance for that particular period of time.

A third level of authorship involves the origins of the *kīrtan* performance art itself. In most cases, this is an authoritative seal attached to the name of Narada, the eponymous originator of Nāradīya *kīrtan;* likewise, we have Eknath and Ramdas at the root of Eknāthī and Rāmdāsī *kīrtan,* respectively. Like the use of songs and invocation of famous names, the moniker "Narada" authorizes the *kīrtan*'s form, tracing the invention of the style to the famous sage. We have seen this connection made explicit in Nāradīya *kīrtan* through mimesis. In the case of *kīrtan* in Maharashtra in general, Namdev shares some of Narada's glory, as Namdev is said to have popularized *kīrtan* in the Marathi-speaking world. At this level, authorship is eponymous.

Given the variety of authorship modes at work in *kīrtan*, it seems probable that much of the diversity of text in the form of variations on songs, anachronistic references, changes in language and style, addition of verses, and change of verse order—in short, Katre's "pathology of texts"—were sanctioned by performance. Essentially, preservation necessitated modification and adaptation but within prescribed, distinct systems. The *bāḍas* available to us today—as well as the example of the living *kīrtan* tradition—record both the preservation and manipulation of the text as part of the role of authorship. In Pune in the summer of 2000, I asked a *kīrtankār* if it was commonplace for performers to write their own material. He said it was so rare that it almost never occurred. But he added, "We will sometimes change a line so that it makes better sense."[84] This process of change in the performance itself has no doubt made its way into the written record, not as a malevolent pathology but as a cure for stagnation.

FAMOUS LAST WORDS

The events surrounding the last *kīrtan* of Gadge Maharaj, a famous *kīrtankār* of the twentieth century, offer us a portrait of corporate authorship at

[83] Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production* (n. 22 above), p. 76. See also Bourdieu, "Sociology as Socioanalysis," in Bourdieu and Wacquant, pp. 62–74.

[84] Personal communication from Vaman Kolatkar, Pune, summer 2000.

work in a performance in the modern period. Gadge Maharaj, named Deboo at birth, was born in 1876 into a mostly illiterate and impoverished caste of clothes washers or *parits* in the Amravati district of preindependence Maharashtra. He became a professional *kīrtankār* in 1905, taking a new name along with his new profession. As a symbol of his renunciation and dedication to the itinerant life of a *kīrtankār,* Deboo carried with him an empty clay pot (*gaḍgā/gaḍge*), which, as a symbol of asceticism, of the body as an empty vessel, and of the unfinished nature of human beings, became the inspiration for his new given name.[85] He became famous for his *kīrtans,* including nationalist ones, and his advocacy of education, as well as for his frank diatribes against greed, gluttony, and sloth, and surrendering to the allure of modern European culture. Only a few months before his death in 1956, Gadge Maharaj found himself surrounded by police from the Bandra Railway Police Station. They had learned that he was staying nearby and came to plead with Gadge to perform a *kīrtan* in front of their offices. Though he was gravely ill, he acquiesced to their demands. Since independence, Gadge's *kīrtans* had prescribed that one should live an ethical, balanced life as a contribution to the nascent Indian nation. In this particular *kīrtan,* the last of his life, Gadge Maharaj invoked the verses of Tukaram, interspersed among his own comments and moral prescriptions; he also recalled songs by Jnandev and Kabir and quoted the sayings of Gandhi. Furthermore, Gadge Maharaj's style—like that of many other Vārkarī *kīrtankārs*—involved eliciting responses from the audience in the call-and-answer mode reminiscent of a Baptist preacher. In this particular *kīrtan* Gadge Maharaj did not disappoint. He artfully interwove Tukaram's verses with his own eloquent words and drew out of the audience their voices, often eliciting a simple cry of "yes!" or "no!" The performance was recorded with an audio device by a member of the audience, transcribed and reprinted in 1976 by G. N. Dandekar, and translated by Zelliot and Bernsten in 1988.[86]

Imagine that this *kīrtan,* rather than being fifty years old, was 250 years old, and that its content had been recorded, but in writing of course, by a scribe who noted his name and the date of writing in a col-

[85] The latter symbolic connection is evident in a story from Namdev's biography. As a young *bhakta,* Namdev's spiritual development was tested by Gora the potter. Gora invited Namdev, Jnandev, Muktabai, Nivritti, Sopan, and others to dinner. During the meal, Gora rapped each *sant* on the head with a hard wooden ladle to see if they would make a ringing sound, just as a finished, uncracked pot would. Unlike the others, Namdev's head did not ring after he was struck and thus Gora determined that he was an "unfinished pot" and required a guru, Visoba Khecar, to complete his spiritual awakening.

[86] Eleanor Zelliot and Maxine Berntsen, *The Experience of Hinduism: Essays on Religion in Maharashtra* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1988).

ophon. How would we parse from its text a single author? We have Tukaram and other figures, whose names and verses appear throughout the transcript. We have Gadge Maharaj, who brings the words to life and surrounds them with his own narration at the behest of an insistent cadre of police. We have a recorder of the *kīrtan,* a transcriber, and, eventually, a printer, a publisher, an editor, a translator into English, and an interactive audience. We have the *kīrtan* tradition itself, its form and function with a history stretched over 700 years behind Gadge Maharaj. Without this modern collective authorship of all these players, this *kīrtan* of Gadge Maharaj before the Bandra Railway Police Station in 1956 would never have reached the present in its multiple forms. Gadge as an author, and as an authority, has outlived his own mortality because of the corporate nature of authorship. Elizabeth Eisenstein has suggested that in early modern Europe, the rise of the printing press created the idea of the modern author as a solitary creative agent, and it is upon this creation that postmodern critics of authorship orient their arguments.[87] But as we have seen, the idea of authorship in the Namdev tradition has not taken as its central concept the sovereign, creative author. Instead, the tradition has kept at its core a corporate model of authorship. Through the medium of print, as well as through the medium of performance, this corporate configuration has shifted and expanded but has not transformed itself into a mirror image of the modern Western author that Eisenstein, for example, sees produced through the world of print.

One might guess that Jeremy Bentham purposely left his modern mummy at University College to supervise the editing, collating, and transcribing of the thousands of unpublished manuscripts and fragments of writing that he left behind, an auto-icon stationed as a sentinel. Jnandev, Namdev's faithful companion, is said to still be alive, 700 years after his voluntary entombment in Alandi, near Pune, seated before his own famous manuscript, the *Jñāneśvarī* breathing one shallow breath every year. Jnanadev's miraculous preservation is something of a metaphor for the Vārkarī tradition itself where every year followers reenact meetings of their *sants* in Pandharpur. In terms of preservation over the last 700 years, the Namdev tradition has engineered a corporate concept of authorship fashioned in identity and maintained amid a plurality of personalities and historical contexts, intended for change not inertia, for adaptation not fossilization, where the practice of *kīrtan* invigorates the tradition through each performance.

[87] Elizabeth L. Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change: Communications and Cultural Transformations in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

For the last word on the subject of the author, I borrow a phrase from the greatest prognosticator of late modernism, Friedrich Nietzsche. In 1878, Nietzsche found himself defending his own authorial intentions from fierce criticism by Robert Wagner and others; mortally, he was wracked by a life-threatening disease, had collapsed in public several times, and was nearly blind. The crisis of facing the demise of his physical body and attacks against his intellectual corpus may have impelled him to address authorial intentions and the function of authorship when he wrote in his memoirs, "The author ought to shut his mouth when his work starts to speak."[88]

University of Pennsylvania

[88] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Sämtliche Werke: Kritische Studienausgabe*, ed. G. Colli and M. Montinari (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1980 [1878]), 2:140.

Copyright © 2003 EBSCO Publishing